The Answer (Warm Bodies: Awakening III)

by wilkwo

Summary

Lost and hurt, Julie and R fight to hold onto hope, and each other, in the midst of humanity gone wrong.

'R smirked, stepping over a downed tree where the wood underneath was slowly rotting away, riddled with beetles and ants. What did it leave him with? With everything leaking out like this, and steadily getting worse? With Perry apparently sharing his mind? Where was he in all this? Who was he in the end?'

Rated M for language/violence, and a *little* lovemaking. ;)

(The conclusion of my Warm Bodies trilogy. Originally posted on Fanfiction.net)
Hi everyone! :) Woot! What an amazing trip. This is the third in my Warm Bodies series, and won't make any sense if you don't read the other two first ;) This story actually gets darker than my previous story (Little Brown Bear), if you can believe, but there are some interesting and beautiful moments in here, including some Marcus moments (and memories, with a take on how he and R met) that are worth taking a peek at ;) Regardless, I hope you'll share your thoughts with a review, as they are always welcome and spur my writing. (Oh, and totally forgot to say that the Warm Bodies universe is not mine, of course, it's Isaac Marion's... but, you knew that right? ;) Guessing that's why you're here?)

"I don't know Jules," Rowan said, his voice carrying tinnily over the pilot's headset. "I really don't think it's a good idea."

Gazing over the instrument panel of the Cessna, he gave a little satisfied nod. Everything looked steady - they were cruising at just over eleven thousand feet, a little higher than normal due to the mountains in their path, they had plenty of fuel in the tank, and the controls were responsive and clean. Nowhere near as good as the jet of course, and he missed that, but the Colonel had confiscated it for deeper runs west where they needed the increased range and speed, leaving him with a choice between a newer Bonanza with minor rudder issues or an older Cessna 206, which his inner pilot had jumped at for some reason.

The west pulled at him though. He wanted to explore, to see just what was left of humanity out there, and he volunteered for those missions any time they came up. But the Colonel always declined, keeping him instead on the small supply hops to known contacts in friendly territories, like the one they were on now to the Davis Outpost up north.

Rowan didn't take it personally - he knew John's decision had more to do with Julie's insistence on joining him in the cockpit than the man's lack of faith in his borrowed flying ability. Many of the runs west, and further south, were first contact situations and always went with increased military guard. Dale and Ed, the Colonel's two military pilots, had returned from a few of these trips with stories of rushed evacuations under fire, and random pot shots taken at them in the air. It was some scary shit. Rowan had seen the bullet holes himself, and marveled at some of the close calls, and wondered how the hell they'd handled it.

The experience he was drawing on to fly came from a guy who'd done sedate charter runs just outside the city, and some basic instruction on the side - he'd never seen any action and sure as hell hadn't been fired at. A couple of close calls with a few of his students, sure, followed by stiff drinks in the airport bar, but that'd been it.

"What did you just say?" Julie's voice carried back through the headset, interrupting his thoughts.

Rowan glanced over at her. She was frowning at him from the co-pilots seat, a map folded in her lap, dressed in a light blue top and canvas jacket and jeans. The headset looked goofily large over her wild mass of blonde hair.

"I said I don't think it's a good idea," he answered, and his gaze returned to the heavy, angry clouds directly ahead, part of a wide storm front that was getting worse as he watched. They'd known they were going to get some weather today, they just hadn't figured on it coming this far south. Looked like things were going to get a little crazy.
Julie shook her head, "No, before that."

Rowan broke from his inspection of the clouds to peer over at her. "Uh... I said 'I don't know'?"

Julie smirked. "You said 'Jules'."

"And?" Arching a questioning eyebrow at her, Rowan glanced down at the map she was holding in her lap, quickly tracing the route over again. How in the heck were they going to get around this front?

"You've just never said that before, that's all," Julie answered, looking out over the storm. "Jesus, that looks bad."

"Yeah," he agreed. "And it's just getting worse. And what do you mean, I've never said it before? I've said it loads of times."

Julie's stare turned as cold as stone.

Rowan stared back. "What?"

"Name one time when you've said it," she said, crossing her arms. Then she nodded out to the dark wall of thunderclouds. "We'll have to go around it R, they're counting on these medical supplies today."

Rowan frowned. Why was she being so sensitive about this? He adjusted the mic at his mouth, "Going around will throw us at least a hundred miles off course Julie, and there's no guarantee something else won't develop along the way. It's not a good idea." He started a gradual bank to the left, feeling out the wind impacts from the storm they were getting even this far out. Then he smirked as he remembered something specific about her nickname.

"Okay, that time we were at Burt's," he said, grinning her way, as he negotiated a small pocket of light turbulence while the plane rattled around them. "We were playing a game he'd just got on a raid, and you called me a cheat, and I said "You're a sore loser, Jules." He laughed then and shook his head. "You really were. You don't like losing at anything."

As he glanced over at her, the smile fell from his face. Julie was sitting completely still, watching him with eyes lined in pain.

"What?" he asked, surprised. Had he hurt her? "I wasn't trying to be mean Jules, I just-"

"Stop calling me Jules," she snapped back. "Just stop."

Before he could ask why, a sudden burst of turbulence hit them hard, and R's stomach leapt to his mouth as they dropped like a leaden stone through the air. Julie let out a panicked yelp, flailing for the map and supplies as they shot to the ceiling of the cabin, and he wrestled to level them off again, finally regaining control as the stick shook in his hand.

"Quit it!" he growled at the yoke, and pushed it and the throttle forward as he banked left again. They were now running parallel to the storm, and the plane was being buffeted by heavy crosswinds.

"Are you okay?" he called over to Julie, above the wind, and she nodded back to him, biting her bottom lip.
He smiled back. He couldn't blame her for being a little freaked. They'd experience turbulence on a few of these flights before, but nothing that bad. They must have dropped, what? A hundred feet? At least?

"Well that was nasty," he said, wincing over at her. "Sorry."

"That's okay..." she whispered into the mic. "But... yeah, maybe we should go back."

With a crooked smirk, he nodded back at her, but as he focused on keeping them level it became obvious real quick that they'd missed their chance. As he turned to race from the dark grey wall behind them, he realized another cell was building in front of them, effectively boxing them in. Punching through would only get them into trouble. The best bet was to return to their parallel course, push the engine and hopefully shoot into the clear between the two fronts before it got too insane.

With his heart starting a drumline in his chest, Rowan pushed the throttle wide open as he banked back to the parallel course. Glancing over at Julie, he tried to give her an encouraging smile.

"Secure what you can okay? Things are about to get rough."

"About to get rough?" Julie yelped, as the plane started to shudder around them again. "I thought we were going to go back?!

Rowan shook his head, glancing past her at the angry mass of the advancing storm, before pointing over his own shoulder. "Got another cell developing, I'll have to squeeze between them."

"Oh shit," Julie mumbled, and quickly gathered the map and the food and other supplies that'd been tossed around the cabin in the previous drop, stuffing them into the duffel wedged under her legs.

Without warning, the plane was suddenly slammed sideways, as if some giant creature had tried to bat them out of the sky, and Julie shrieked as she was thrown hard against the passenger door. Reaching for her, wanting to make sure she was okay, and they dropped like a stone again, pitching forward into a bank of clouds that had developed underneath the plane.

"Jesus!" he yelled, and pulled the yoke back hard, leveling them off in a world of grey, filled with the roar of wild winds and the hammering of heavy rain against the thin skin of the aircraft. "Julie, you okay?!!"

"Yeah..." Her voice was thin over the mic, and he turned to look at her, worried.

"I'm okay," she said again, and he caught her eye as she gave a weak smile. "Just make sure we're okay." Her hands were locked tightly over the arm rest set in the door, her knuckles white.

Rowan wrestled with the yoke as the plane rocked violently, pitching them back and forth in their seats, and he swore as he glanced at the altimeter. They'd lost almost a thousand feet in the space of minutes. They couldn't afford too many more like that, not over the mountain range they were heading through.

*I have to get out of these clouds.*

"Doing my best," he muttered, and pulled the yoke back, trying to regain the altitude they'd lost. If they could just get above this bank, he'd be able to see again, find the gap. As it was, without GPS or weather satellite feed, he had no idea where he was pointed, though he was pretty sure they hadn't done a 180.
The altimeter spun wildly as they rose, buffeted by severe crosswinds that threatened to roll the plane, but finally the grey lightened, and a layer of clouds fell away beneath them as they shot up, bobbing wildly.

"Shit," he hissed.

The gap had disappeared. They’d surfaced into a pocket surrounded by heavy clouds, the darkest to their right, in the depths of which he could see the bloom of lightning. Rain splattered the windscreen, and the Cessna shuddered again under his hands.

The best he could do now was aim for the lightest clouds he could see, and hope the plane could withstand the winds that were threatening to rip them apart.

Rowan took a deep breath. What he was about to do was going to scare the crap out of Julie. Negotiating another jarring round of turbulence, he flicked the radio to send and adjusted the mic over his mouth again. Glancing over at Julie, he gave her a small smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Mayday, mayday! Cessna Seven Five Six Papa Yankee, caught in heavy storm, severe crosswinds, flying blind west of route, somewhere in the Adirondacks... exact location unknown, emergency landing necessary!"

"R?!" Julie squeaked, panic rising in her voice.

"Cessna Six Papa Yankee to Home Tower, please respond!"

With a deafening crack, the world flashed brilliant white in the space between breaths, and the yoke lurched violently in his hands as his headset went dead with a sputter of wild static. Julie screamed, and momentarily blinded, he fought to steady the plane, trying to find some calm in the ripping crosswinds.

"Just lightning, it's okay!" he yelled, as his vision slowly returned and he leveled them off again in deep cloud cover.

"JUST lightning?!" Julie screeched. She twisted in her seat to look out over the plane. "Did it hit us?!!"

"Yeah," he yelled back, "but it can't hurt us Jules, we're not grounded!" Disturbed by the lack of anything through the headset, he flicked through the channels on the radio, but the unit was unresponsive.

The lightning had fried the goddamn radio.

"Fuuuck," he growled, ripping his headset off. Then he punched the dash, as the plane shook like an old washing machine around him. "Ancient piece of crap!"

"What?!" Julie cried, pulling her own headset off, "What happened?! We lose the radio?"

Nodding sharply, he stared out over the nose of the plane, through a windscreen sluiced in rain, and struggled to counter every attempt by the craft to roll. He couldn't stop the sliding, and the sudden updrafts and downdrafts that were throwing them through wild altitude loses and gains. They'd dropped another thousand feet, and trying to keep them steady was wearing him out.
Nothing but grey everywhere now, with sudden brilliant blooms of lightning flashing to their right and above.

They were deep in the storm, and he had no idea whether he was on his way out, or just flying toward its heart.

As the plane was swatted violently again, pitching down and rolling to the right, Rowan felt as if he was watching himself from the outside. Watching hands, that were surely his, darting back and forth between the throttle and the yoke, watching his feet dancing between rudder pedals, controlling this machine that he hadn't a clue how to fly up until six months ago. And yet he was doing it, drawing on knowledge and experience he'd ripped from someone else's head.

It was so incredibly strange at that moment, so surreal, that as the wind howled around them in the small cockpit of the plane, his mind seemed to suddenly empty, and he was left holding something in his hands that squirmed and bucked like a living thing, that he had no understanding of...

...with no idea what to do next.

Oh shit.

"Rowan?" Julie's voice shook over the angry roar of the wind.

Swallowing hard, Rowan gripped the thing in his hands tight and look over at her, his eyes wide. The language was gone. He was faced with a wall of switches and dials and buttons, that his hands had passed over effortlessly moments ago, but meant nothing to him now.

Nonono... oh fuck...

"What's wrong?!"

His mouth dry, Rowan stared at the panel, at the instrument right in front of him with a blue and brown ball inside, jittering wildly. Now, he knew what that one was. The brown was the ground, the blue was the sky, and the line in between was the horizon. Okay, he had that.

The horizon line was high above the little orange thing in the middle. That meant...

We're heading into the ground...

"Rowan!"

Pull up? Pull up, right?!

Without answering her, he yanked back hard on the stick in his hands, pulling it towards him as far as it would go, and was immediately crushed into his seat as the plane's nose arched up into the grey. Julie groaned beside him, pressed down by the same heavy force, and his eyes sought the instrument again. There, they were above the line now, that was good, right?

Way above it.

Jesus Christ, why was the thing shaking in his hands now?!

"R!" Julie yelled.

Wild eyed, he looked at her, feeling a boulder of dread in his gut.

"What are you doing?!" she yelled, arms jutting out to stabilize herself against the cabin ceiling and
door.

"I don't know!" he roared back.

Just then a strange beeping sounded in the cockpit, and a red light flickered on the dash. Illuminated within, was a single word.

STALL.

But, that didn't make any sense? The engine was still running?

And then the world turned upside down, and the fear he'd been fighting hard to hold in swallowed him whole.

As they fell in a spiral from the sky.
Julie’s mouth fell open in shock at Rowan’s words, barely heard over the roar of the wind and rain, as she struggled to hold herself up against the force of their ascent.

What did he mean, he didn't know?!

The look he'd given her... holy shit, he'd looked terrified, completely and utterly lost... had he forgotten how to fly the plane?

_Oh my god..._

Just as she was about to scream back at him, something started beeping, and the urgent sound filled the cockpit, terrifyingly persistent.

Before she could ask what it was, everything went hideously, horribly wrong. Without warning, her body was thrown hard to the left, the straps of her seatbelt cutting painfully, as the plane rolled to the right and down, and started to spin out of control.

There was no time to scream, or react, as bags and packages and papers flew wildly around the cockpit, and she slammed back and forth against her harness in every direction as the plane tumbled over and over.

Then it hit her - they were falling out of the sky.

_Oh god... help!_

Some strange equilibrium was reached then, some terminal force that pressed them back into their seats as they began a spiraling nosedive. Some small part of Julie, over the gut twisting terror that finally wrenched a scream from her mouth, remembered the motion from a rollercoaster ride called the Twister at her favorite park back home. God, she'd loved that place. As soon as they’d put the new ride in she'd tried to get her friends to go with her, but they'd totally chickened out. So she'd gone alone anyway, and screamed the whole way down, a wild grin on her face. Just like she was screaming now.

Only she wasn't grinning.

_Jesus, this is not a fucking ride! We're going to CRASH!_

Through the spinning chaos, she struggled to reach the yoke. Her arms flailed, thrown wildly up and down by the forces exerted by the spin, but she finally managed to latch on and tried to pull the stick towards her as her eyes sought Rowan.

He was crumpled forward in his seat, hands knuckle-white on the yoke, his dark hair hanging lankly over eyes squeezed tightly shut, his teeth clenched, his lips pulled back in a grimace of anger, fear or pain - she couldn't tell.

But his nose was starting to bleed, the thin line of red tracing back across his cheek towards his ear.

_Did something hit him? Why is he bleeding?_

"R!" she cried out to him, wrestling still to bring the yoke back, "We're going to crash! Please!"
At that very moment, something changed in his expression, something she only caught a glimpse of as she turned to try and drag the yoke back again. But she'd seen his expression slacken, emptying of emotion, as if he'd lost consciousness.

And that's when she figured they were dead.

She did what she could anyway, as she'd always been hopeful, always believed that they could find a way to survive anything. There was always a way. Crying out, her eyes squeezed shut, she strained against the stick and managed to pull it towards herself a little, enough to get her hope up some more, that she could do this. That maybe she could save them both.

Then a warm hand grabbed her own, and wrenched her away.

"Stop that lady, you're going to get us killed!"

Shocked, her eyes shot open and she stared at Rowan, as his hands darted to the throttle and back, and his feet hit the pedals below the dash.

Lady?

God, his voice... it was Rowan's voice, but the cadence was weird. Slow, with the vowels bending funny, not like Rowan's way of speaking at all. And he was moving with ease now, the fear and terror no longer etching lines around his eyes.

"Aaaaand, right there!" he said, in the same drawl, as he pushed the yoke forward, then back slowly, easing off the pedals. "That's how it's done!"

As she stared at him, her jaw hanging open, those eyes turned to meet hers, vividly blue, framed by eyebrows arched mischievously, and he did something she'd never seen him do before. Something that made her mind stutter as the world slowed around them, and the plane's nose started to rise, and the clutter plastered to the ceiling, the doors, the dash, remembered gravity again and slid to the floor.

Rowan winked.

"Too easy," he said with a smug grin, and turned back to the instrument panel, flicking his finger against the altimeter as he leveled the plane off again. "Just in time too." Frowning, he peered out over the dash. "What the hell were you doing, flying in a storm anyway? Can't see a damn thing!"

Julie opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't think of anything to say.

He'd done it again. Taken a back seat in his own head and let someone else drive. It'd been happening more and more lately. Usually it was only pieces of people, strange moments, that he'd quickly come up out of, apologizing as he'd reach for a painkiller for the headache they left him with.

It hadn't been this complete... since the hospital.

Since Jack.

The memory of that time hit her hard, and her eyes started to tear up, before she had a chance to realize what she was doing.

God, don't dredge that up again. Leave it be.
Rowan had picked up the headset, and was trying switches on the radio, muttering under his breath. Jesus, he was even holding himself different, his head tilted forward, shoulders rolled in, a thin smirk playing at his lips as he glanced at her.

What the hell was she supposed to do now? Her instinct was to try and bring Rowan back, but... whoever this was, he was flying the plane, and making him go away seemed like a really, really bad idea.

"Radio's busted," he said, dropping the headset. Turning to look at her, his gaze drifted lazily up and down her body as his smirk grew wider.

The look made her skin crawl.

"What's your name?" she asked quickly, pulling his eyes back to her face. *That's right buddy, focus up here.*

He smiled and straightened in his seat. "Brett! What's yours?"

The question made her heart fall. Even if it wasn't quite Rowan... how could he not know her name?

"Wait, it's... Julie isn't it?" he said suddenly, and something uncertain crossed his face, a heavy confusion that didn't fit him.

"Yeah Brett, that's right," she said quickly, not liking that look, wanting him to stay stable, stay Brett. Keep flying the plane.

It lurched under them again, sideways, the winds threatening to roll the craft, but Brett pulled them back, leveling them off again with an annoyed grunt. "Shouldn't be flying in this weather Julie. Where the hell are we anyway? I don't remember real good..."

The frown returned, and Julie started to panic as the plane shuddered around them again.

"We're in the Adirondacks somewhere, Brett," she yelled over the sound of creaking metal, "We got lost in the storm, lost control... you just saved us!"

The frown turned into a grin. "Damn right I did!" He sat up again, his chest puffing out.

Julie almost laughed, it struck her so comically. Whoever Brett had been, he couldn't have been all that old.

There was a sudden, terrifying sound, of metal tearing from metal that tore across her nerves just as sharply, then a scraping, hammering noise as the yoke jerked and shook against the dash. Rocking wildly, the plane started to slide, the nose turning against the direction of travel.

The cocky ease fell away from Rowan in an instant as he looked out of his window at the wing.

"Oh *crap!*"

"What?! What happened?!!" Julie yelled, her heart starting to race again.

"Aileron's gone!" he shouted back, then waved his hand in frustration, as he apparently realized she didn't know what that was, and pointed over his shoulder. "Wing's breaking!"

"WHAT?!" she screeched, and dug into the armrest again.

"Gotta land, right now!" he yelled, and started working the pedals to straighten them up again,
before pushing the yoke forward. "Hold onto anything loose, it's gunna be rough!"

Terrified, Julie grabbed everything within reach, and shoved it frantically back into the duffle at her feet. As she worked, her stomach rolling with the sharp, sliding dive they were making, her eyes caught a strange flicker of movement out of Rowan's window. What she saw made her heart hammer.

A piece of the wing, one of the outside flaps, had ripped off and was still trailing from the gap by a thin cable. As the flap jerked around in the crosswinds, the cable ripped back and forth against the edge of the tear.

"It's-" she started to say, and just at that moment, the cable snapped with a sound like a gunshot and the flap shot backwards.

Straight through the tail of the plane.

"What the?!!" Rowan cried, as the yoke jerked out of his grip and the plane pitched forward and to the right. "What the heck just happened!??"

Julie couldn't speak as she stared back at the tail, at the clean slice the flap had made right through the middle.

The top of the tail was gone.

"Crap!" Rowan yelled, and she looked over to catch him turning back to the dash, furiously pumping the rudder pedals. "SHIT! The rudder's borked!"

Julie stared out over the nose of the plane, suddenly able to see, and her heart almost leapt from her chest. They were dropping out of the clouds, and the windscreen was filled with trees and the gentle slope of a mountain, rushing up to meet them.

Her mouth turned dry. Oh god.

Rowan roared, pulling the yoke back again, his right hand darting between a small lever on the dash marked 'flaps' and a wheel set in between their legs. "Come on you piece of junk!"

Julie couldn't watch. As the plane shuddered around her, and she felt the nose lift, then drop, then lift again, she placed a trembling hand over her belly, and held there gently.

"Gunna hit hard! Brace yourself!"

Her eyes snapped open at Rowan's voice, and she curled forward, wrapping an arm around her stomach, the other over her head. As her eyes sought the windscreen again, her mouth opened in a wild scream.

Too fast, too steep! Oh god!

They hit.

The gear struck the ground first and crumpled beneath the plane, driving the nose forward into the dirt, and the windscreen shattered inwards as the plane flipped, something tearing away from the fuselage with the scream of tortured metal.

They tumbled, bounced, slid, the impact throwing up great gouges of earth, and mud, glass and cargo flew about the cabin as it was compacted around them. Something hit her hard in the side,
one of a thousand thousand sensations flooding her brain as the world hammered at her from every
direction, and her harness dug into her skin like a whip with every jarring jerk.

Finally, they stopped, the plane rocking back onto its roof with a tired groan. Slowly, the sound of
rain pattering against the skin of the downed craft filled the air around them.

Julie hung from the straps around her chest and waist, and tried to remember how to breathe. Her
body wasn't talking to her just yet, though she could feel the trickle of something warm and wet
running down her right arm, and the side of her face.

**Blood.**

Rowan groaned next to her and shifted slightly. At the sound, her eyes flicked open, and she pulled
in a sharp breath.

It *hurt*. She squirmed away from the pain, closing her eyes quickly, but it came with her, wrapping
itself around her and squeezing tight. Something hurt *inside*, making it hard to breathe.

With a muffled curse, Rowan shifted again, and Julie felt a wet hand gently grasp her arm and
squeeze.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked, and his voice drifted over her, sharply rushed and panicked.

Brett. He was still Brett. She coughed and gasped in another painful breath, her head throbbing, the
blood rushing to follow gravity.

"Hurts..." she mumbled.

"Hold on, let me..." He shifted again, there was a loud click in the small space, and a sudden
jarring tremor as he fell and landed on the crumpled roof beneath them. "Ow.. owwww.. crap..."

Julie opened her eyes again, struggling to breathe without pain, and watched as Rowan swiveled
awkwardly in the small space, until he was directly under her. Her door was gone... ripped off
during the crash, though she couldn't remember when that happened. Rowan scanned the outside
quickly then ducked his head back in.

Wincing, he straightened until he was sitting up, and his face was inches from her own, covered in
cuts and spattered in mud. A deep gash traveled down his cheek, bleeding profusely, and his hand
and thigh were covered in blood.

"Okay," he said softly, his eyes meeting hers for a moment before tracing the straps of her seatbelt.
"Gunna get you down..."

Reaching up, he supported her shoulders with his arm, and unclicked her harness.

The pain flared sharply as she slid from the straps, and she cried out without meaning to, then bit
down hard, whimpering as he pressed against her, trying to support her body with his own, trying to
lower her gently.

There was no way to do it gently though, and her legs fell free, landing hard against the glass
strewn floor below. Pain stabbed through her side with the sudden twisting, and she cried out
abruptly again, squirming, trying to stop the pain, to ease it somehow.

Rowan froze against her.
"Where's it hurt!"

"Side... my arm..." she breathed, squeezing her eyes shut.

"Can you feel your legs?" he asked urgently, "Your back?"

Julie nodded, and Rowan shifted then, reaching down to loop his arms under her own. The pressure there, on her right arm, brought a sudden flash of bright agony, and she jerked, trying to pull away.

"Nono don't, something's wrong with my arm," she said in a panicked rush, and grabbed at his shoulder with her left hand, squeezing hard there as she focused on breathing through the pain.

"Lady, I have to move you," he said quietly, "I can't leave you in the plane."

"Rowan..." she hissed, "Bring Rowan back, please..."

"The radio's busted Julie, I don't think we'll be able to get anyon-"

"Rowan!" she snapped over him, "Stop it! I know you're there!" Her voice broke then, the absolute terror of their flight and crash catching up to her, the fear of her injuries penetrating the comforting numbness of shock. She hated it, she didn't want to be this fragile, but she needed him. Why couldn't he see that?

"Geez lady," Rowan muttered over her, and she felt him shift his grasp, releasing her right arm to move under her back. "Gunna get you out, then get Rowan, okay? How's that sound?"

Julie's throat caught, and she shook her head, "No, it's not... you're not Brett, Rowan, you're not Brett, please..." And her voice fell away to tears, as she looked up at him, desperate to see the man she loved looking back.

But he wasn't home. Brett gave her a quick, uncertain smile, and pulled.

And the pain spiked, racing through her nerves in fiery agony, her side, her arm screaming, and it was too much, way too much after everything.

Her mind closed up shop, and she fell away from the world to blissful silence.

__Rowan's stolen memories are playing a big part in this story. I found the emergence of Jack in the previous story fascinating, and the extent of Perry's influence on Rowan is still an unanswered question. The story has gone in some interesting directions, hopefully you'll follow it to the end. Comments are always welcome, and thanks for reading. :D__
Second-hand Dreams

Brett pulled the girl out of the wreck, into the pouring rain. The water hit cold and heavy over his head and back and he quickly saw why her arm had been hurting so bad - it was broken, a weird kink in the upper arm where there shouldn't ever be one. Wincing at it, he looked down at her face, about to let her know, but her eyes were closed, her features slack and still.

She was out.

Damn it.

The water spattering her face was turning red, and he realized with a start that it was his blood, falling from his face, mixing with the rain. His hand rose and he hissed as he touched the gash in his cheek.

"Ow," he whined, as he pressed at it experimentally. Damn thing was deep.

As he dropped his hand again, he noticed something on his forearm he'd missed before, something that didn't make any sense. A scar over a depression, dotted with old suture marks like railroad tracks. Looked kinda mean, like he'd been caught in a thresher or something, but he had no idea where the heck it'd come from. It was old too, well healed.

Made no sense.

But he had bigger things to worry about.

He glanced up at the wreckage, as he pulled the girl further away, wanting to be clear of the cabin in case a fire started. He'd seen way too many charred wrecks of planes to stay in one, even if it was raining.

What he saw made him fall on his knees.

Holy crap!

If he hadn't just pulled her out of it, he'd never have thought anyone'd survive a wreck like that. The cabin was a shattered, compacted mess, laying upside down in a deep rut of mud and flattened grass. There didn't seem to be enough room for one person inside, let alone two. The propeller was gone, the engine torn open and smoking. Staring back up the slope, he could see pieces of the airplane lying up to a football field away. Most of the tail, the other wing, a bunch of crates and papers. All lying in tall yellow grass under a dark grey sky. At least he'd brought them down in an open meadow. Probably be dead now if they'd dropped through the trees.

There was her door, embedded in the dirt. That was a worry. Something must have hit her through the doorway to break her arm like that. Maybe broke some ribs too.

His eyes fell to her pale, still face, drenched in rain, and something clenched painfully inside.

Julie?

Brett stared down at her, feeling a deep yawning fear that made his eyes water. Not understanding the strength of the reaction, he took some deep breaths and tried to shake it off, it wasn't helping right now anyway.
They needed shelter. Plane parts would do just fine. There was a line of trees not too far distant, where the forest began again. There'd be wood there, some hopefully not too drenched.

Start a fire, get warm, good plan.

Brett stood up quickly, and promptly fell over on his ass as a wave of dizziness washed over him.

"Wuff," he mumbled, and tried again, slowly rising this time, cautiously feeling out his ability to handle it. Everything felt odd, like he was miles up in the air still, as if the plane was still shaking around him, and he was getting some weird vertigo after affects he didn't understand at all. Everything felt further away as he stood up straight. Almost as if he'd gained height, and that made absolutely no sense.

After making sure he was stable, and wasn't planning on keeling over again any time soon, Brett crouched down, and gently picked the girl up, being careful not to jostle her arm any more than he had to. Wet from the rain, her blonde hair stuck against his shirt as he held her close and walked away from the wreckage to the cover of a nearby pine.

With tender care he laid her down on a dense mat of brown pine needles, and nodded to himself as he saw the area didn't get much rain at all. She'd be good here while he worked.

And that was real good.

Reaching out, he gently stroked a wet wavy strand of her hair from her temple, and felt that strange feeling again.

He really liked this girl, and didn't even know why. He wasn't even sure how he knew her, and more than that, he couldn't remember what they were doing together, where they were going on this trip, and how the heck he'd got in the plane in the first place.

Trying to remember made his head hurt, so he stopped, and focused on what needed to happen right now.

No radio, so no way to tell people they'd crashed. They were out in the open, so that was something at least, but he didn't even know how long it'd be till they were missed? Did he get a mayday out before they went down?

Can't.. remember...

His head started to pound, and something in his thigh stung mightily, as his body started speaking to him properly, alerting him to aches and bruises and cuts all over. Grunting, he rose to his feet and looked back at the wreckage. It was smoking quietly in the field, and the storm was turning a darker grey as the day moved on. He needed to get things organized before his body seized up.

It took almost an hour, but he pulled together some of the broad pieces of plane, including a part of the wing, and improvised a rough shelter that'd keep them dry and protected from the wind, which was starting to pick up again.

He managed to salvage most of the cargo too, and it was great stuff - medical supplies, some canned food, a couple of gallons of water. He left some crates where they'd fallen - filled with sealed tubes of a clear fluid, unlabeled, he had no idea what they were anyway.

Bringing all of the food, the water, and the kit of emergency supplies to the shelter, he started a fire with some slightly damp logs and kindling he'd scrounged up and doused with a little lighter fluid. It burned good and hot and he set some more logs up to dry nearby before going back to get the
She hadn't moved, and looked real pale, which he didn't like at all. A small voice inside said it was shock, and he figured that was true, though he didn't quite know what it meant. He was going to have to splint her arm soon, he knew that, but he wanted to search the medical supplies for something proper before he got too carried away improvising. His dad always said he had a knack for this stuff, it was kinda cool to put it into action for real.

Thinking about his dad made him feel funny. Made his hands clammy and his heart start going, and he couldn't quite remember... why.

Pressing the heel of his hand against the headache at his temple, he left the girl by the fire and went to get the two crates of medical supplies. By the time he'd returned with the last crate, the light was fading, the forest was deeply dark, and the girl was watching him from where he'd left her, resting up against a couple of duffel bags stuffed with clothes and blankets.

Smiling at her, he dumped the second crate against the far wall of the shelter - a part of the wing emblazoned with the call sign of the plane - and brought over a plastic cup he'd set aside to gather rainwater. No use tapping supplies when there was plenty of good stuff falling from the sky.

Supporting her head, he helped her take a drink, then left the cup near her good hand, and returned to the crates, opening one to sift through.

"Are?" the girl said, her voice rough.

Brett looked over at her and waited, expecting the rest of the question, but it never came. The girl stared at him a moment more, then sighed, resting her head back, and winced sharply right after. The deep breath must have hurt.

"Try to stay still," he said quickly, "I'm looking for a splint."

He could feel her watching him as he scrounged, pulling up bandages, syringes, drugs, and some bags labelled saline. It surprised him. What the heck were they running all this stuff around for?

"Sure." Her voice was flat and tired. When he glanced over, he caught her looking around the shelter he'd built, at the fire, then the wreckage of the plane smoking in the meadow beyond. The white fuselage stood out like a beacon against the brown and grey landscape.

"Jesus," she said quietly.

"Yeah," he agreed, and gave up on the first crate, moving to the second.

"Brett?"

"Yeah?" he answered, looked over at her again. She was squirming against the bags, her face tight with pain, as she reached out for the cup.

"Here, let me." Moving over to her side again, he lifted the cup so she could take another drink. Flopping her head back against the bags when she was done, she gave him a small smile. "Thank you."

He nodded with a smile of his own. "Sure."

"Thank you for all of it," she continued. "The plane, this..." Her eyes drifted around the shelter.
"Sure," he said again, and returned the cup by her hand when she shook her head to a second drink.

She surprised him then, by reaching to enfold his hand with her own. The movement cost her, and her eyes pinched in pain, but the girl focused on him, her stare intent and full of something he couldn't quite name.

And he was drawn in. The feel of her skin against his, even though her hand was a little too cool and a little too damp, felt incredibly good. And those eyes... for a moment, the briefest moment, the world ceased to exist around them, and he knew he loved her truer and deeper than anyone, ever.

"Rowan?" she said, staring up at him hopefully.

The moment was shattered. Frowning, he pulled away, and took the cup to gather rain again just outside the lip of the shelter.

That had stung. They were having this amazing moment, the most amazing moment he'd ever had with a girl, and she'd gone and called him someone else's name. What the heck?

With an aggravated noise, Julie stared up at the bent piece of fuselage above her head, her mouth twisted in irritation and worry.

Brett decided the girl was either a little nuts, or had hit her head in the crash. Perhaps talking to her right now was a bad idea. He returned to the crate and started digging.

"So Brett..." her voice drifted sharply to him over the crackle of the fire, and the patter of rain on the metal roof. "Where'd you learn to fly?"

Brett paused in his search to look over at her.

"My dad taught me." He returned to the crate then, and smiled as he pulled up a bright orange roll.

"Cool." A little more rummaging and he found a wide piece of fabric that'd work for a sling.

"Your dad, huh?" she said. "He was a pilot?"

Grabbing the roll of tape and bandages he'd set aside, he shrugged. "Farmer. We had a farm, lots of land, he did some crop dusting. For us and the neighbors. Taught me early and I took over." He grinned. "Used to fly that plane all the time, any chance I got. Nothing like being up in the air. Kind of pushed it too, did some rolls I wasn't supposed to do. Almost crashed." He glanced at her. "Dad was mighty rageful." The memory made him laugh.

Julie gave a little giggle herself, and it turned into a low moan. "Owwwowow..."

Frowning, he quickly returned to their emergency kit. "Hold on, think I've got some pills that'll help."

She had her eyes closed and was taking deliberate slow breaths when he came back with the pills and water. Swallowing them gratefully, she rested her head back and looked at him again.

"Living on a farm sounds fun," she said quietly. She looked away to stare through the curtain of rain spilling over the shelter roof. "Peaceful."

Brett smirked and gave a little shrug. "It's fun if you like getting up before dawn, eating dinner just before midnight, and busting your ass in between. Hard work, but... yeah, there's some peace to it. World gets quiet at night, stars are real bright, and the air smells good." He smiled with the memory and set to shaping the splint for her arm.
"Sounds wonderful," she breathed, then stared up at him again, watching as he worked. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"Your farm?"

Brett sighed. "Oh, we don't have it anymore. Couple of droughts and bad seasons hit us hard. And when mom left dad... he just..." Frowning, not sure why he shared that, he shrugged again. "We moved to the city, dad had a friend who got him a job, wasn't too bad."

He didn't want to tell her it wasn't too great either. It was harsh, leaving so much land behind, and trying to live in a tiny one bedroom apartment sleeping on a couch. And there were so many people. Everywhere. Couldn't get away from them.

Something stirred in his gut then, something heavy and dreadful. Holding the splint up to her arm, to judge the shape he'd made, he took a deep breath to calm the nerves that were starting to jump under his skin.

They hadn't been in the city long, maybe six months, when... when...

Brett blinked, and stared at Julie.

"Geez, did you see those things? Those people?" The memories rushed over him all of a sudden, riding a weird wave of panic - strange reports on the TV, of folks who looked dead, but were moving around... attacking people... eating people...

Something shuddered inside, and he sat back on his legs, the splint forgotten in his hands.

"God, those things... they were everywhere..." He looked at her again for a moment, then spun suddenly in place, feeling this strange ghosting terror that they were here - they were going to try and get them! He and his dad had done okay living off of salvaged crap for a while, but-

"Brett," Julie said quickly, "let's talk about something else okay?"

He spun back to her, his eyes wide and desperate. "Did we escape together? Is that why we were... we got out? 'Cause they were coming, they were breaking in... god... dad..." His voice dwindled to a whisper, as the memory rushed him hard, slamming into his heart like a sledgehammer.

His father was shouting at him, by the door, shouting at him to run, but the door crashed in, and something... dragged him out. And he was screaming, SCREAMING!

"DAD!" he screamed, spinning in place again. Where'd they go? Where'd the room go? They took his dad!

"Oh god... Brett, no... look at me, we escaped!" Julie's cries reached him, then fell away as he turned back to look at her.

Tears were falling from her eyes. "Oh Brett..."

"You saved me?" he asked, disbelief twisted with the fear in his voice.

Julie nodded, but her face was falling into despair, "You're okay Brett, you're... oh god..." The words dwindled to nothing, and he looked past her.
"No..." he whispered. Because he remembered. The tall one, with pale eyes, mouth smeared with
dried blood, coming for him. Oh crap... "It was right there, I tried to hit it, but it... it... grabbed
me... it was... tearing me apart..."

Hands shaking now, his mouth flooding with the bitter taste of vomit and fear, he stared at his left
arm. And looked beyond it, lost deep in memory, lost in pain and terror, and the fading sparks of
his mind.

"My arm... was over there," he mumbled in a voice that grew very small, "Why is it here..?"
Trembling, he grasped the shoulder that had been torn open. How? How? "It was... I was... my
head. Oh god... m-my head... hurts."

"Brett..." Julie sobbed. "No..."

Crumpling forward, hands wrapped desperately about his skull, Brett groaned as the sparks of his
memory flashed painfully bright, then faded to nothing, moment after moment dying in the dark,
until there was nothing left of the boy named Brett at all. Just a crushing pain, and the memories of
a corpse eating, drifting in second-hand dreams of flying, soaring fast and free. The memory of
how good it was to feel everything the boy had done, everything he'd been...

To feel... human.
A choked noise left Rowan's throat, as the pain caved in his skull, and the kid's lingering terror drenched his body. He... he'd crushed that kid's head, in the small back room of the dad's apartment. Took his time... eating too... and the boy's memories were so good he'd taken everything.

Something trickled down his face, warm and wet. Salty against the soft skin of his lips.

Blood.

The kid's?

He licked his lips and shuddered. No.

Nonono... Jesus... no.. my blood.

The pain pushed in again, and sounds from the outside pushed in with it. The drumroll of heavy rain against a metal roof, of water pouring and splashing in deep puddles.

Crying.

Eyes dim with pain, Rowan lifted his head, and the world slowly opened up to him again. But it didn't make sense. He was in a metal cave, lit by fire, Julie was lying in front of him... Julie was crying... she was hurt...

"Julie?!"

He reached for her instinctively, but froze as she jerked away with a little cry, her face twisted in pain and wet with tears.

She's so pale... blood on her face? Jesus, what...

"Don't touch me don't," she breathed in frantic grasps. As her eyes met his, her face collapsed in grief again. Shaking her head, she closed her eyes, the tears falling to the coarse canvas of the duffel below.

Rowan stared at her, stunned, his mind a fragmented, jumbled mess.

What happened? How'd I get here?

He'd been eating, right? It'd been so good... devouring a life spent on rich land and in the blue sky, the smell of tended earth, the warmth of sunshine on his back, the rush of flying, he'd wallowed in it as the kid's lifeblood gushed from the jagged hole of his shoulder, spreading into the carpet. Hadn't meant to rip the kid's arm off, but it'd stopped the fight quick... maybe he should do that from now on...

Rowan winced, and pressed a shaking hand to his temple.

No... stop that, that's old...

He focused again, trying to draw the scattered pieces together, and grunted at the crushing pain that spiked with the effort.

Flying... they'd been flying. Delivering supplies to the Davis Outpost. Laughing... arguing... and
then, the storm. He'd blanked, couldn't fly anymore, didn't have the language... and he'd dug deep for someone who did and...

Slowly, Rowan turned to look out of the cave, his eyes seeking the starkly white remnants of the plane in the field beyond.

*Holy shit.*

They'd crashed. He remembered now, the kid he'd found inside. Remembered bringing them down hard... but alive. Images flashed behind his eyes in rapid succession - the violent impact, glass and mud flying. Coming finally to rest and freeing Julie...

Rowan's heart clenched tight, and he turned back to her in a panic, his eyes scanning her quickly. Broken arm, possible broken ribs, or something worse? Jesus, he'd made her pass out!

"Julie... I'm so sorry," he rasped, and reached for her again. The sight of his hand made him stop. Bloody, the creases of his knuckles lined in red, diluted by rain, and a jagged gash in his palm was seeping still. Now recognized, it started to hurt, stinging sharply as he watched the edges of the wound pull apart and close as he flexed his fingers.

"Brett was a good guy..."

He looked up at her. Julie's eyes were filled with tears as she spoke, fixing him with a sharp stare. "He saved us."

The words were filled with sadness, shock, and more than a little anger. He knew why. Brett had come to an end right in front of her - she'd seen his panic, his terror as he'd died.

And she knew Rowan had killed him.

"I know," he said simply, and dropped his gaze.

Didn't matter that it was years ago. Didn't matter that Brett hadn't really been here, that he was just an echo who'd taken over for a little while. Didn't matter, and he understood and accepted that.

Sighing heavily, he picked up the splint that Brett had been shaping. It was covered in his own bloody handprints. *Great.* Bleeding all over Julie wasn't going to help her any. With an aggravated sound, he returned to the crate and found a patch of gauze and some saline. He pulled some painkillers out of the kit as well and swallowed them dry. Hopefully they'd hit the headache soon.

"How old was he?" Julie asked.

He glanced up at her as he flushed the wound in his palm with saline. She was staring out of the shelter, through the curtain of rain to the meadow beyond.

*Too pale. She's in shock.*

Rowan quickly secured the gauze across the wound in his palm with tape and shuffled back to her side, lifting the splint again to check the shape and size.

Julie frowned at him. "How old, Rowan?"

Rowan looked at her for a moment before shrugging. "I don't know."

"How could you not know?" Julie asked, and he could hear the lingering anger in her voice. "You were just him. You knew everything about him."
He met her gaze. "The memories aren't files Julie, I have to remember a birthday party, or remember him thinking about his birthday, or filling out a stupid form or something... it's not just right there."

Her lips thinned. "Then remember it." The words came out sharp, but she couldn't hold it for long, and her eyes slowly softened as she looked down. "Please. I need to know."

"What good is knowing his age going to do, Julie?" he asked her quietly. "I killed him. He was young. Too young to die, but so's anybody who dies like that."

Julie's eyes grew wet again as she looked away towards the fire, and she didn't say anything more.

Gently, Rowan reached out and wrapped his hand around hers. Her fingers were too cool in his, and he squeezed them, trying to give some of his warmth.

The touch triggered more tears, and her face crumpled as she turned back towards him. He pulled in close, staying clear of her broken arm, and brushed his hand against the cool skin of her cheek as he kissed her forehead. Wanting so much to hold her, but knowing he shouldn't.

"I'm sorry Julie... I'm sorry."

Julie nodded against him, leaning into his touch. Trying to lift her good arm to hold him, she jerked back with a cry.

"R," she breathed, her eyes squeezed tightly shut, "Something really hurts... inside."

"I know," he said, as calmly as he could, though he was feeling anything but calm. "I think you've got a broken rib, maybe a couple. Your arm's broken too."

Julie released a slow breath, and looked down at her right arm, giving a slight nod. "Thought so."

She pinched her fingers together. "Doesn't hurt as much as it did, which might be the pills you- I mean Brett, gave me. But my hand's going numb."

Rowan winced. "That's not good. The break's probably pinching a nerve." Squeezing her good hand, he caught and held her eye. "Julie... I need to pull your arm straight before I set the splint... it's going to hurt."

Julie's mouth grew thin again, but she nodded. "Do whatever you need to do."

He nodded towards the crate against the wing. "We've got some morphine here, I could-"

"No, no heavy stuff," she said quickly, and winced as she shifted her hand to her stomach.

Rowan caught the motion and raised an eyebrow. "Are you feeling sick?"

Jesus, that could mean so much more - internal bleeding, an infection... his mind, drawing from the stolen memories of a medic, raced over a list of similar symptoms and causes and grew more alarmed as the list grew.

Shaking her head, Julie looked out of the shelter again, absentmindedly rubbing her hand over her belly. "No, not sick. A bit weak... tired. In a lot of pain." Then she gave him a small smile. "But alive."

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth in answer. "Yeah." He brushed his fingers through her hair. "They'll send help soon, we'll be okay."
Her blue eyes flicked back and forth between his own, and she nodded again. "I know."

Drawn into those eyes, Rowan leaned over and kissed her gently. When he pulled away, his face was serious.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Julie released a shaky breath and nodded, pressing her head back into the duffel as she looked up at the ceiling.

"Okay," he said with a heavy breath, and gently cupped his right hand under her elbow, as his left hand dug into the duffel to support the fracture site. "I'll do this as gently as I can."

Julie hissed sharply with the contact and gave a quick nod. "I know."

Rowan felt around the fracture tentatively, watching Julie's face closely to monitor her pain level. There was a great deal of swelling, which didn't help, but he had a good idea of where the ends were sitting, and they were definitely pressing against the radial nerve.

"Okay," he breathed again, dreading what he was about to do. It was essential to help the bone heal right, but the idea of causing Julie pain was screwing him up inside.

Gently, he pulled Julie's elbow down, to correct the overlap and bring the ends together properly, and her reaction twisted his stomach. She gave a sharp cry at first, and jerked without meaning to, but he held on, steadily righting the fracture and easing pressure off the nerve. Her cries quickly grew louder, mixing with sobs he knew she hated making.

Finally, he was done, and he secured the splint, taking care to pad it at the elbow and underarm. Grabbing the sheet, he fashioned a sling from it, and carefully secured her arm in place across her chest.

Julie stiffened against the duffel, a fine sheen of sweat on her forehead, her skin and lips pale with pain.

"R... think... going to..." she whispered hoarsely, and her eyes grew glazed.

Rowan held her good hand, knowing exactly what she was about to do, and hating that he'd caused her so much pain.

"I'm here," he said through a tight throat, "I'll watch over you."

Her features slackened and her body relaxed back against the canvas as she passed out.

Rowan's face crumpled. It was horrible, knowing he'd done this to her, but he didn't waste any time. He had no idea how long she'd be out, and he had an opportunity to check for other injuries without causing her any more pain.

Lifting her gently, he pulled the duffel bags away and laid her slowly on the ground, then searched for any bruising or bleeding he'd missed. There was a cut on her scalp that wasn't deep, but was dirty. He quickly flushed it clean and left it to heal. Then he found the bruising around her broken ribs, as well as some heavy bruising on her leg, all on the same side as her broken arm.

Something had hit her very hard during the crash, probably through the open doorway and he was terrified it'd done further internal damage he couldn't see. If she was bleeding inside, there was no real way of knowing, at least, not immediately. She wasn't coughing up blood though, and the
breathing issues seemed related to the ribs. The best he could do was keep her blood volume up with a drip and keep the painkillers coming so she could breathe as deeply as she could handle.

And hope rescue came soon.

Rowan stared out through the storm to the plane in the meadow beyond. They'd received his message back in the city, right? They must have. The Adirondacks weren't exactly small, or close, so he figured it might take a day to locate them. As long as the clouds let up.

But what if they hadn't received the message?

Davis would have checked in to say they hadn't arrived. That would do it. The Colonel would flip out and send someone immediately.

Rowan's heart fell. But they wouldn't know where they were. At all. He knew they'd gone off course, and with the strength of the storm it's possible they'd gone a hundred miles west of the flight path... how the hell would they know where to look?

His gaze returned to Julie's still face.

Shit.

He couldn't worry about that now. They had food, water, shelter, and medical supplies he could do anything shy of brain surgery with. They were okay.

And they'd just survived a plane crash.

*We're more than okay. We're fucking miraculous.*

Rowan tenderly wiped the blood from Julie's face and shoulder, drew a small bag under her head as a pillow and covered her with woolen blankets from the duffel. Worried about shock, he found and secured an IV feed into the back of her hand, hanging the bag from a jagged corner of fuselage propped up above their heads.

Then he sat back, and finally allowed himself to feel.

His hand spoke to him first, complaining mightily about the gash sliced through his palm, then his cheek started to pulse, and he had no idea why, until he reached up with his wounded hand to feel the gash. Hissing, he jerked back, and that's when his thigh started to burn, and it finally occurred to him that his jeanleg was soaked with blood.

Was that why he felt a little lightheaded? God, he could kick himself. With a muttered curse Rowan located the slit straight through through his jeans, a couple of inches long on the side of his thigh.

And straight into his leg.

"Owowow," he hissed as he carefully peeled his jeans off, exposing the gaping cut. Open like a mouth and still bleeding. He could see the layer of fatty tissue just under the skin. If he didn't have a medic's life worth of experience in his head, he probably would have thrown up.

At least it hadn't hit an artery. He'd be dead by now.

Grabbing the spare saline, and some more supplies from the back crate, Rowan flushed the wound thoroughly, then threaded a curved suture needle and started to sew himself up. It hurt like hell, but
he worked quickly, and downed an antibiotic before revisiting his hand and face. A couple of butterfly bandages on his palm and cheek, and he was good. Throwing a few more branches on the fire, he wrapped himself up in a spare blanket and settled against the wall of the shelter, watching over Julie. Occasionally he glanced out over the meadow, when the rain thundering against the shelter roof ebbed to a light patter, or grew again as the storm raged.

He turned back to look at Julie, worried. If she didn't come to soon he'd have to wake her up. Hopefully he'd be able to.

As the color gradually returned to her face, and her breathing grew slow and even, his fears eased. She looked peaceful, comfortable, and the relief the sight brought him was quickly followed by complete exhaustion. The stress of the crash, of reliving Brett's death, and worry over Julie's injuries was finally taking its toll.

Despite his need to keep watch, to look out for any possible predators approaching camp - animal, human or rogue dead, Rowan's eyes drooped shut in the warm flickering light from the fire. To the sound of rain, wind and crackling wood, he fell into a dark, mindless sleep.
Rowan sat on the soft warm sand, looking out over an ocean washing constant against the shore, the sunlight from the sinking sun bathing him in gold. The air was salty and fresh, bringing with it the soft cries of seagulls and the spray of tumbling waves, as he squirmed his toes in the sand, enjoying the silky feel of it against his skin.

"Hey," came a soft voice behind him, as warm as the sun lowering in the sky.

Turning his head, he grinned over his shoulder as Julie walked up beside him and slowly sank to the sand, her loose shirt drifting lazily in the breeze. Her hair danced about her shoulders too, shimmering gold in the sunset light, and the same light turned her eyes green as she smiled brightly at him, drawing her arm through his to rest her head against his shoulder.

"Hey," he answered, smiling as he gazed back over the waves, at the ever undulating crests glinting like scattered crystals in the light.

Slowly, his hand sought hers and he weaved his fingers through her own, enjoying the heated touch of her soft skin, the tickle of her hair cascading over his shoulder, the warmth of her body at his side.

Desire rose in him, and he looked down at her, at her long lashes as she looked out over the ocean, the soft pink of her lips curled in a gentle smile. The now green pools of her eyes lifted to him as she looked up from his shoulder.

"I love you," he said quietly, suddenly, as the moment demanded the words from him and he gave them willingly. His hand, crusted in soft sand, rose and brushed her drifting hair back behind her ear, and he leaned forward, engulfing her soft lips in a kiss.

As she pressed eagerly back, and their lips danced softly, wetly, his arms encircled her and pulled her over him. His hands delved under her shirt as she straddled him, wandering along the supple skin of her back, kneading upwards to grasp her shoulders and press her closer still. Her fingers worked through his hair, and down the bare skin of his chest, and the touch was delicious and maddening. His mind taking a backseat to lust, he rolled her shirt up to her shoulders and his mouth roamed the quivering skin of her breasts, his breath coming hot and quick.

Julie moaned over him, her hand cradling his face as he teased her hardening nipple with his tongue, and his fingers lowered, seeking the warm wet space below her belly.

"Can you hear that?" she said, a small little crease above her eyebrow.

Tilting his head, he listened, but heard only the rush of foamy wave over sand, and felt the aroused pulse of his own heartbeat.

"No," he answered and shrugged apologetically. "What do you hear?"
Not waiting to hear her reply, as her closeness made his heart thrum with need, his hands encircled the small of her back and drifted down, under the elastic of her underwear.

"A plane," she said simply, and she lowered to gather his lips hungrily in her own.

The words tickled his mind, even as he sought the heat of her again, and she worked frantically to pull his pants free of his skin.

A plane. Like... a Cessna? Like... the plane that... he groaned as she encircled him with her body, driving him deep inside. And even as their rhythm grew frantic, skin slapping against skin, he suddenly realized with a terrible dread he didn't understand, that he could hear it too.

A plane... searching...

With a wild gasp, Rowan jerked up.

The beach was gone, Julie was no longer above him. He was in the makeshift shelter, saturated with passion and confusion and pain as his body, stiff in more ways that one, protested the sudden motion.

_Cold_. God, it was so cold. Shaking, disoriented, Rowan blinked against the strange dim light entering the shelter from the just dawning day outside. Strangely diffuse, and coldly damp.

_Julie?_

Swiveling, he saw her, lying where he'd left her. Her face was turned from him, but otherwise she hadn't moved. God, was she okay?

The sound drifted over him again, the sound of a plane, that had leached into his dream. Not a Cessna... a jet. High. Searching?

_Oh shit!_

Grunting with pain as he pushed his way out of the shelter and up on a leg as stiff as a log beneath him, Rowan hobbled his way out into the meadow. The chill was worse here, seeping up from the ground through the soles of his shoes, and as he turned around he saw why, his heart plummeting with the sight.

A thick fog hung low over the field and the forest, blanketing everything in a pale grey light. He had no idea where the plane was, and worse still, there was no way they'd be able to see them in this.

"Shit!" he yelled at the sky, and spun a few times, trying to think of some way to get their attention.

Did they have flares?

Staggering back to the shelter, he dove into the emergency kit and pawed through the gear, finally locating a couple of red tubes. _Road flares?!_ Well that was fucking irritating, he had no way of launching them!

A big signal was what he needed. Looking over his shoulder, his eyes caught the wreckage.

_Can I burn the plane?_

Why not? Wasn't like they were going to fly it out of here anyway.

But if he started that big a fire, would it spread? Would the grass go up? The trees?
He ran out into the field, his leg finally easing up a bit, to check the site. The cockpit was in a small crater, the grass was spare and covered with mud. The wind was non-existent. He'd have to chance it.

Ducking his head into the cabin to make sure they hadn't left anything behind, he grabbed another bag, then spied the crates of serum in the cargo hold.

*Can't let that go up!*

Working hard, he dragged the crates away from the site, dumped the last bag in the shelter, then ran back to the plane. He couldn't hear the jet anymore, and the realization made his gut curl in dread. It didn't matter though. The search party might do another sweep, and then they'd *have* to see a signal fire.

Digging with a piece of fuselage, he cleared enough space to reach under the wing attached to the plane, and groped until he found the fuel cap. With a quick twist, he freed it and jerked back, not quite missing the stream of gas that gurgled from the tank.

Scowling, he wiped his hand as best he could in the dirt, then stumbled away, readying one of the road flares.

Okay, so all he had to do was light the fuel, and they'd get a big fire. Hopefully a contained fire that burned bright enough to signal a jet cruising at 15,000 feet through thick cloud.

He winced. *This is hopeless.*

Shaking his against the thought, he held the flare out from his body, inverted the cap and brought it hard against the end.

The flare sputtered lamely and went out.

"What?!" he yelled, and threw his head back. "Oh, COME ON!"

He tried it again, but the damn thing was a dud and refused to do anything but smoke and stink.

Tossing it aside with a growl, he tried again with the second, and this one burst into brilliant, satisfying life in his hands. With a loud whoop, he aimed for the growing pool of fuel, and tossed it over.

Two things happened very quickly.

As the flare landed exactly where he'd planned, the pool burst into a fiery sea, spreading swiftly to engulf the engine, and trace the fuel greedily back to the tank in the wing.

And then it exploded.

Rowan had a moment to register the beginning of the sound, impossibly loud, and the bloom of heat and light in his face before suddenly finding himself flying backwards through the air in utter silence.

Landing in the same silence, all of the air in his body was driven from his chest as he hit the ground hard, his legs almost folding over himself. He came to rest spread-eagled, staring blankly, stunned, up at the dim sky.

Some space of time passed as he lay there, staring in dazed fascination at the subtle shifting
textures of the clouds above him, until something obscured his view. A person, far above him, with wildly wavy hair, moving, touching him, his chest, his shoulder, his face.

Frowning, he shifted his head slightly and blinked again. His mind started moving with the new input, and slowly he realized he was staring at Julie.

Julie?

He thought he spoke the word, but there was no sound. Come to think of it, he could see her mouth moving, her head shifting with the effort, as if she was yelling. But he couldn't hear her voice.

For some reason that made him laugh. Then he shook his head slightly.

I can't hear you.

No sound. Still funny. At least she wasn't yelling anymore.

I had a good dream about you, he thought he said, and smiled, lifting his dirt smeared hand to stroke her cheek. His fingers came away wet and he frowned up at her, not understanding.

Then the tears focused his mind, and he suddenly remembered why he was lying on the ground.

*Jesus.. the plane exploded.*

Eyes widening, he tried to sit up, but his brain decided up was actually down, and he fell back, confused and suddenly wanting to throw up.

Need a minute, he said silently, frowning up at her. Then he gestured to the side of his head, as she nodded above him.

Screwed up my ears. He sighed. That was dumb, huh?

He tilted his head up at Julie. She looked terrible. Pale, her blue eyes pinched in pain. Her hair hung in limp strands about her face.

*Jesus, she shouldn't be up.*

We need to get you back to the shelter.

She nodded to that as well.

Taking things slower, he rolled to his side, got his hands under him, and sat himself up. Everything spun stupidly and he closed his eyes for a minute, breathing steadily through lungs that felt strained, as if he'd been screaming non-stop for an hour.

Opening his eyes finally, he glanced back at the wreckage, and his jaw fell. It was a massive blaze, the flames billowing twice as tall as he was, spewing a thick, black smoke into the grey ceiling above them.

The sight made him grin. This was perfect. Even if they couldn't see the flames, the darker clouds would get their attention. Perfect!

Something trickled down his chin, and he wiped at it, and found the source. Blood, seeping from his left ear.

Fuuuck.
Did he say that out loud or...? Looking back at Julie, his heart quickened. She'd crumpled forward, her head bowed in pain. Abruptly, he stood up. Too abruptly - he stumbled over immediately, landing on his shoulder. Damn balance was completely off.

Idiot. I am an idiot.

Slowly this time, he stood again, and managed to hold himself up. Then he bent over, and very, very carefully, gathered Julie up. Her hand clenched against his shoulder as he did so, and she jerked and stiffened, and he knew she'd cried out, even though he hadn't heard it.

Frantically, she shook her head, and held his eyes until he finally caught was she was trying to say - let me walk.

You sure?

Nodding, gritting her teeth, she dug her fingernails into his shoulder until he lowered her to the ground.

And together, a rather mangled pair, they made their slow way back to the shelter.

Helping her sit back against a couple of stuffed bags, he felt her pulse and her temperature. She'd pulled the IV out, so he quickly swabbed the area and covered it with a bandaid, then smiled as he grabbed some painkillers for her.

You're doing better, he said, or hoped he said. Think you might be out of shock.

She returned his smile weakly, and nodded. Then she said something he couldn't quite read, so he asked her to speak slowly and exaggerate the words.

Y-o-u-r-e y-e-l-l-i-n-g, she finally mouthed.

Oh shit, he tried to whisper. Sorry. Can't hear anything.

Moving her good hand slowly, she pointed to her ear and frowned, then gestured to him.

B-l-e-e-d-i-n-g, he read her say.

With a sigh he couldn't hear, Rowan nodded.

"I was stupid," he said. "Shouldn't have been so close. Tore something."

Shivering, he realized he needed to get the fire going again, the damp and cold were starting to get to him. As he reached for a nearby log, something warm trickled from his nose. Quickly swiping at it, his hand came away bloody.

The hell?

The headache hit hard then, and he hissed soundlessly, grasping at his temples to try and smother it with pressure. Painkillers would help, but he didn't want to take any more that Julie might need, so he cradled his head for a moment, then pushed through, desperate still to get a fire going.

It was hard, and he had to fight the nausea the headache was bringing him. Eventually though he managed to start one, and the warmth filled the shelter quickly, reflected back by the fuselage around them. Made his headache feel a little better too.

Julie was looking at him sadly. He wasn't quite sure why. The bloody nose? Was weird how that
happened, and it scared him a little. The explosion might've done more damage than he thought."

"Good news is," he said with a smile, wanting to keep upbeat, "We've got a great signal fire going now. If they pass by again, they'll see it."

Julie frowned at him, and shook her head. The reaction confused him. Didn't she think they'd see it?

"They will Julie," he said emphatically, "Even with the cloud cover, they'll have to see the smoke."

Jesus, his nose was being stupid, and the headache was pounding. Grabbing a nearby bandage he held it against his face, then looked at Julie again, his eyes tight with pain.

She was making a writing motion with her hand, staring intently at him. She wanted to write something? Wasn't a bad idea actually - might be a little easier.

Fumbling in the bag he was sitting against, he finally pulled out a golf pencil and their flight plan. Folding it over for the unprinted side, he handed it to Julie.

Scribbling for a moment, awkwardly so because she was using her left hand and couldn't keep the paper steady, she wrote a quick note and held it out with her good arm, as much as her ribs would allow.

Leaning over, he grabbed it and had to take a minute to decipher the jagged lettering.

*Can't understand you. You're using sign language.*

Rowan looked up at her, startled. She simply nodded back at him, looking sad again, then gestured that he should keep reading.

Confused and a little stunned, he returned to the note, not really seeing it at first, his mind stumbling over the fact that he was signing? What the hell? He didn't know sign language? Hadn't even been aware he'd been doing it?

No, wait... hadn't he? His mind offered up some memories, and he sifted through them, remembering. Hadn't he known sign language since he was seven? Ever since that time in the hospital when he got that infection, and he'd lost all of his hearing.

His mother had been there... and...

*Wait... Jesus, that's not...*

His eyes fell to Julie's note again.

*Think you're using someone's memories to do it, that's why your nose is bleeding. Take painkiller and rest?*

Rowan squeezed his eyes shut and crumpled over his hand as the headache flared wildly and new memories saturated him.

The hospital... mom had been at the hospital, and brought her a doll. Her favorite doll.

She didn't understand what had happened to her hearing. Her mom just looked at her sadly and kissed her forehead, trying to smile before breaking down.

She had to be strong then, for her mom, for herself, but God, she was bitter. Not at first, because she didn't understand what was happening, but later, when she knew her hearing was never coming
back, not ever. And it was because of this stupid disease they should have caught in time, but didn't. Her grandma told her that someone had laid a curse on her, that someone was trying to hurt their family from their old home. When her mom found out, she was pulled aside and told that grandma was a little loose in the head, that nobody did such a thing.

That it was just bad luck.

*So bitter.* They tried to get her the cochlear implant everyone was talking about, but the disease made her ineligible. Made her wish she'd never heard of the damn thing.

God, why did she always dwell on this? It always hit her at the wrong time. Any time her emotions were up, she'd take a nose dive through her own sorrow.

Damn head was thundering something fierce too. Just lovely.

Slowly, she raised her head and opened her eyes, and found herself in the strangest place, with a fire, wreckage propped all around, and opposite, a girl. Just a young thing, bandaged up, arm in a sling, looking right at her.

What in God's name was she doing here?

"Where am I?" she signed quickly. "How did I get here?"

The girl's mouth moved. She lipread the words easily.

'Oh no,'

Did she know this girl? There was something about her, something she felt an odd fondness for...

"Child, what happened to your arm?" she asked in sign.

The girl sighed, a motion she recognized, even if she couldn't hear the sound. Then a stream of swear words spilled from the girl's mouth, until finally she gathered herself, and looked up.

'What's your name?" the girl asked, stretching the vowels out.

She quickly signed it in answer, but the blonde girl shook her head.

'I can't read sign language, sorry," the girl mouthed, then scribbled in the air. 'Write?' She gestured to her lap.

Following the hint, she looked down, and couldn't understand what she was looking at. Bloody jeans, legs way, *way* too thin, and her hands...

Stunned, and feeling suddenly sick, she moved her fingers, and the hands that couldn't possibly be hers moved as she'd meant them to.

But... these weren't her hands. They couldn't be her hands...

... they were white...

Feeling herself slipping, her thoughts fragmenting and tumbling into silence, she looked back up to the girl, the girl she knew.

A girl named Julie.
And Julie spoke, and she suddenly heard the girl. The sounds came to her as her mind fell to nothing, and they were the most wonderful, beautiful sounds, and the words were just perfect...

"I'm so sorry."

Confused? :) Rowan was lost in the memories of a woman he'd killed, and while the she's and hers got a little much at the end, I hope it wasn't too hard to follow. Let me know what you think of the story so far with a comment, if you're able, and as always, thanks for reading. :)
When he started signing to her, Julie was confused. Impressed, but confused. She was going to tell him that while it was great he knew how to do that, she couldn't, but his nose started bleeding and he grabbed his head, and dread seized her hard.

She knew exactly what was happening.

He was using someone else's memories again. Only, it didn't seem to be on purpose this time. Not like on the plane, or when he worked at the hospital... this was more like the time he'd woken up a few weeks ago, smiling at her, his eyes soft and full of love, and spoke to her in Russian.

Not Russian... it just sounded Russian, what had he said it was? Serbian? She'd just stared at him, dumbfounded, at first thinking he was playing some kind of stupid joke... but he didn't stop, and seemed genuinely confused when she started yelling back. Then the headache hit him hard, and she realized he wasn't pretending.

She realized that something was really wrong. Something had been wrong for a while now, and it just seemed to be getting worse.

When he kept signing, she finally wrote him a note, and the look he gave her when he read it... she could tell he'd had no idea what he was doing.

And then... after he'd doubled over, and that brilliant azure gaze of his rose to meet hers again, Julie knew he wasn't himself anymore. Someone else was looking out through his eyes.

And he kept signing, only it was different this time. He was different. His body language had changed - he sat up straighter, tilted his head in a way she'd never seen before. Julie had just started swearing, because it'd happened again and she had no fucking idea what to do next.

Because what if he ran off? She couldn't keep up with him, not in the shape she was in!

So she tried a simple question, wanting to start a conversation, keep whoever he was talking. But he kept signing, so they weren't getting anywhere. It was so frustrating. She fell back on the writing, but when Rowan looked down at the paper in his lap, his eyes grew enormous. Something about his hands was shocking him utterly, she could see that clearly as he twisted them in front of his face, and looked back up at her.

All Julie could say was sorry. What else could she possibly say?

Oddly enough, it seemed to make some kind of difference to whoever he was. Those eyes grew wide again, but with wonder, and she could have sworn he was on the verge of smiling.

But he didn't. She watched in horror as his eyes rolled up, and with a strange grunt, he collapsed, knocking over a stack of wood he'd set aside for the fire.

"Rowan!" she cried, but he didn't move, didn't budge, just lay there, utterly still, his hand hanging limply over the side of the emergency kit.

"R!" she yelled, gasping as she got to her knees, and shuffled to his side, her ribs flaring in a familiar agony.

He was completely out, his head lying awkwardly in a mess of branches. Wincing with the pain of
movement, she leaned over him, and brushed her hand against his forehead, his cheek.

"R! R, god... baby? Wake up!"

He didn't stir. Jesus, was his nose still bleeding?!

"R!" she cried desperately, and tried the last thing she could think of, something he always seemed to respond to. "I need you!"

Rowan's eyes flicked open, bloodshot and dim with pain, and he struggled to move, to respond to her call, his limbs tangling in branches and bag straps. With a soft grunt, he finally pushed himself up on shaking arms, and pressed the heel of his hand against his temple. "Holy shit... Oww..."

Noticing the blood on his face, he wiped at it frantically. "God..." Quickly grabbing the bandage he'd used before, he pressed it against his nose. Then he winced, as he finally focused on her. "Julie... I... I did it again, didn't I?"

She couldn't speak for a moment, fear stealing her words, and just nodded instead.

He squinted his eyes in pain. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice muffled through the gauze. "I don't know why my nose's bleeding... but..." He gave a little smile. "At least I can hear now."

"Yeah..." Julie said, her voice trailing off to nothing.

He was trying to keep a brave face, but he was scared. It was in his eyes, in the creases lining them as he grabbed a second bandage to hold against his nose.

"It'll clot soon, I'll be okay," he said softly. Then he looked down at his hand. "Didn't mean to scare you. I was just... that was a weird one."

Biting her lip against the stabbing in her side, Julie reached for the painkillers in the kit and handed them to him.

"Who was he?" she asked.

Rowan tried to push the pills back. "You need them more than I do Julie." Then he smirked. "It wasn't a he."

Julie shook her head at offered bottle, even as her eyes bulged.

"A girl?" she gasped. "You were female?"

"No," he snorted. "I wasn't, she was. She was older too, like in her forties, not a girl."

"Oh my god," Julie said quietly, shaking her head at Rowan for a second time as he pushed the pills at her again. "Seriously, take those painkillers or I throw them in the fire."

Rowan smirked, and dropped the gauze for a moment to take the pills dry. Then he raised an eyebrow at her. "Why are you so surprised? Wasn't like I only ate guys."

Julie shook her head at him sideways. "I know... I just... that's got to be strange?"

He shrugged. "It's always strange. But with her, I... she knew as soon as she saw my hands that something was really wrong. Like when I saw my face as Jack. Brought me out of it, hard."

Julie stiffened. 'Jack' was the last person she wanted to talk about now.
R noticed. "Sorry, didn't mean to bring him up again." He leaned back against the shelter wall then, and closed his eyes with a heavy sigh. "Julie.. I'm sorry I keep doing this to you. I don't know what's going on. It's like..." He turned to stare out of the shelter, at the flaming wreck of their plane, then rubbed his bloody hand over his eyes. "It's like there's a wall in my head... and it's breaking, and everything's spilling out."

When he looked at her, she saw his fear again, heavy behind his eyes, but his mouth turned up in a smile and he reached out to cup her cheek. "Are you okay?"

Julie gave a soft smile and leaned into his palm. His touch was wonderful. But he didn't get to change the subject that easy. "I'll be okay," she said, "I'm more worried about you."

Then she saw the beginnings of something in the set of his shoulders, and she groaned. "Don't even think about it, stop it!"

Eyebrows arching, he pulled his hand back. "Stop what?"

"You were about to shrug!"

He grinned. "Was I?"

Julie's eyes narrowed, but she couldn't help grinning back. "You know you were!"

Pointedly staring at her, he shrugged anyway.

"God, you're annoying," she said with a giggle, then hissed as she held her side. "Oh... ow.. can't laugh. Hurts..."

"Yeah, I know how that goes," he sympathized, and squeezed her hand. "Want another painkiller?"

She shook her head, releasing a slow breath. "No, no. I'll be okay, just had two. Save it for when I'm trying to sleep."

Rowan nodded, then glanced outside at the burning fuselage of the plane again. She followed his gaze. The flames were dancing hungrily, wickedly over the wreckage, devouring everything but the metallic skeleton of the chassis.

"I was hoping we wouldn't have to spend another night out here."

Julie heard the unspoken 'but', and turned back, waiting for him to finish.

His eyes were pained. "But I haven't heard the plane again. And even if they see our signal, they'll have to land somewhere else and hike to us."

"I saw a couple of helicopters at the airport," Julie offered hopefully. "Couldn't they land in the meadow and pick us up?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sure they have the range. They might be able to get here, but then they'd be stuck." Watching her reaction, he quickly shrugged again. "Though, I dunno, they might know where to refuel. Could happen."

Julie smirked. "You're just saying that to make me feel better."

Rowan looked a little sheepish. "Yep."

She snorted at him and shook her head. "Well, don't. I can handle the truth." She glanced around
the shelter. "I mean, how bad off are we? We've got shelter, a fire, food and water, enough to last a few days, right? This is like the camping trip we've never had."

Rowan was watching her, his chin propped up on his fist, grinning.

"Yeah, sure, the camping trip where you broke your ribs and arm. That'll be a fun story to tell the kids." He started talking off to empty air, "Then daddy crashed the plane, and broke mommy, and they slept on dirt, and it was awesome!"

Julie couldn't help herself, and let loose with a wild laugh she immediately regretted. It cut off with a sharp cry as she squeezed her eyes shut, gritting her teeth against the blade twisting in her side.

"Oh shit! Julie I'm sorry!"

"S'okay" she whispered, slowly getting a handle on the pain.

"It's not okay," he growled, clearly angry at himself. "I shouldn't have made you laugh like that, I didn't mean to..."

"I know," she said, and gave a small smile, hoping to defuse his anger. "It's okay."

He reached out for her, then stopped. "Want to hold you, but don't want to make it worse." He sighed. "It's fucking frustrating."

With a small smile, Julie reached out and grasped his nearby hand, and her smile grew. The touch felt so good, the warm of his fingers laced through hers, the gentle caress as he started tracing along her thumb with his own.

The anger in his brow eased and he smiled back. Then he leaned over, and very gently kissed her.

Marvelously, the kiss dissolved the pain, as her body flushed warmly with his touch, and she drew the kiss deeper, without thinking.

Thinking for the both of them, Rowan very carefully pulled away and smiled.

"Don't think that's going to work," he said.

Julie gave a shallow sigh. "No. I know." Dammit. Tilting her head, she gazed into his beautiful blue eyes, and a smile played at her lips.

His eyes searched her own. "What?"

"I like hearing you talk about kids," she said softly.

"Yeah?" A smile followed the word, but it quickly faltered as he looked away. "Maybe one day, huh?"

Julie sighed. They'd talked about this before. Rowan was worried about having kids. Worried about how they might turn out.

Because he'd been a corpse.

It was smart to be concerned, she knew that. But the doctors had given him the all clear and reassured them both at length that everything was normal. In fact, the city administration was doing its best to get everyone to have kids, now that the world was whole again. It made for some hilarious public announcements. And almost half a day of "Let's Get it On" by Marvin Gaye piped
through the emergency speakers. Apparently the guy responsible had meant to play it all day, but her dad had stormed in, returning late from negotiations with an enclave just outside of town, and ripped the CD from the player.

It was never seen again.

Rowan wasn't convinced, no matter what the doctors said. And she'd never really been able to talk with him about it, because he just shut down.

She opened her mouth to try anyway, but he quickly turned away to a nearby bag. When he turned back, he was holding a can of baked beans. "Hungry?"

Despite her irritation at his inability to handle this talk, her stomach growled loudly and her mouth flooded and she realized that holy crap, she was starving. When was the last time she'd eaten? Yesterday afternoon?

Jesus. Wasn't exactly her fault, but it wasn't smart, not in her condition.

"Want to do baked beans, or this mystery can?" Rowan asked, waggling a shiny can with no label. "Cause I know how much you love beans."

Julie balked, "Is that all we have?"

"No," he answered, shaking his head, "Got two more cans of beans, and some beef stew, but that's so old it's going to taste like shit." He pulled out a couple of blandly labelled plastic packets, "And these MRE's. Barf."

"Oh god," Julie groaned, disgusted. "Can't you go out and get a... I dunno, a rabbit?" She looked down at the fire, gazing at it longingly. "We could roast it, and it would be hot, dripping with fat, and delicious, and amazing..." her voice trailed off as her imagination got the best of her, flooding her mouth again.

Rowan pulled a face. "I'm not killing a rabbit!"

"Why not?" Julie whined, still fantasizing about roast rabbit. She was only kidding, really. Wasn't she?

He snorted. "For one thing, I've never eaten rabbit in my life, and another thing, I couldn't kill one if I wanted to. They're way too fast, and they're way too cute."

Julie shook her head sadly. "I fell in love with a complete hippie. Dad would be shocked and dismayed."

Rowan laughed at that. "Your dad has never stopped being shocked and dismayed by me, Jules."

Julie stiffened, and the fake sadness left her face as she stared back at him.

He'd done it again. Called her Jules.

"What?" he said, picking up on her abrupt change in mood. "I didn't mean that you know, your dad and I get along okay." He laughed. "As okay as two completely different people can get along."

She didn't say anything, just smiled slightly.

"Wait, is this because I called you Jules again?"
She searched his eyes. Did he understand what he was doing?

"I'm sorry," he said softly, then shrugged. "Guess I don't understand why you get upset when I call you that. Lots of people do."

Julie gave a shallow sigh. "They don't say it like..." And she couldn't finish. She didn't want to go where this conversation was going.

Rowan raised his brow in confusion. "Like what?"

"Nevermind," she answered, looking down at her hands.

"I want to know."

No, you don't.

"Julie." His voice was terse. "What do I say it like?"

Frowning, Julie looked up at him again, and desperately hoped that he wouldn't take this too hard. "You say it like Perry did."

Rowan blinked, obviously not expecting that. His mouth thinned to a line as his gaze fell to the MRE packet in his hand.

"Huh," he grunted.

His reaction irritated her, and she pushed on, needing him to see that she wasn't just being sensitive, seeing something that wasn't there. "You remember telling me on the plane that you called me Jules when we were hanging out at Burt's?"

Still looking down, he nodded. "Yep."

"Can you look at me please?" she asked.

Mouth still a tight, irritated line, Rowan looked up.

Julie held his gaze steadily. "Burt died on the day we met Rowan. That memory isn't yours."

As the words left her mouth, something horrible happened behind Rowan's eyes. She could see the shock he felt as she spoke, quickly chased by disbelief that almost made it to words as his mouth opened, but whatever he'd been about to say died in his throat.

"It's Perry's," she said quietly, and sighed, as she watched his eyes shutter down. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't want to tell you, but..."

"No, that's..." he started, but didn't finish. Shaking his head instead, he moved suddenly. "I have to, um..." Pointing to the opening of the shelter, not meeting her eye, he shuffled on his knees past her.

She reached for him, wincing with the motion, but he kept moving. "R, please, let's talk about it, it's not-"

"Going to get some wood," he said bluntly, and reaching the opening, he straightened up and walked away.

As she watched him go, a lone tear spilled slowly down her cheek, and her voice broke in a whisper.
"I'm sorry."

_Seriously Rowan, you have to be able to talk about this stuff dude! Stop running away! (my thoughts as I'm writing this) Thanks for reading folks. :)_
Hi folks. After seeing some reactions to a key part of this fic, I thought I might post a wee bit of a note to prepare you for what you're about to read. And I can do this, because this is an online fic :D Yay!

Things are about to get very squirrely for Rowan here. And you're about to spend time with a group of fundamentalist folks who do Not Nice Things in the name of god. I didn't create this fic to bash any religion, please read with that in mind. They just happen to be Christian, because it makes a lot more sense than Buddhist extremists (they exist!) hanging out in the deep woods of the Adirondacks...

Rowan was reeling. Walking with no destination in mind. He just needed to get out of that tight space, needed some air. Desperately.

The wreck was still burning, and great billowing black clouds rose to the grey, foggy ceiling above the meadow. It was a great signal, and absolutely no-one was around to see it. There'd been no further jet noise. Nothing dropped as a sign that they'd been seen and rescue was coming soon. He was starting to think they'd have to hike out of the mountains, find a town, a car that worked and drive back, siphoning gas wherever they could get it.

The wind picked up, and the fire flared and danced, twisting and lashing at the sky. The evergreens on the edge of the meadow sighed and whispered with the breeze, and he turned to watch them sway, as his hair flicked across his eyes.

Then he turned and walked into the woods, and was enveloped at once by the thick stand of conifers and leafy hardwoods. The light dropped off dramatically, and the cooling air brought goosebumps to his skin. Twigs and leaf litter snapped and crunched underfoot as he walked, not really heading anywhere but away.

Julie's voice echoed in his mind as he walked.

That memory isn't yours.
It's Perry's.

He hadn't believed her at first. It'd offended him actually - he couldn't work out what she was playing at? He had a shaky enough time keeping himself together as it was, without her playing with his head.

But then he wondered where those thoughts had come from, because that didn't feel like him either, the suspicion, the paranoia. And when he let himself feel those memories again, to revisit that time that'd just popped into his head - sitting on a ratty couch in Burt's one room apartment, he'd felt the memory just slide away. Because in that memory... she'd called him Perry.

It was Perry's memory. And he was left shaking inside, once again surrounded by that feeling, something embedded under his skin. A doubt that'd dug in deep, like a tick.

That what he had with Julie, this incredible thing they shared, was because of Perry. That they'd become entwined in some way, joined. That he wasn't really just Rowan anymore. That he hadn't been since he'd died.
That feeling had just got worse lately. The more he'd been accessing other people's memories, to do incredible things he'd never been able to do before, the worse it seemed to be getting. Not at first. Since he'd worked out what Jack had actually been, he'd been able to keep himself separate from the people whose experiences he was using. He hadn't lost himself. Not so completely.

And it'd been just as his mom had said. A gift. He'd worked in the hospital, he'd been flying on supply trips, he'd even acted as a translator. Like the time in the hospital, when an elderly man had been brought in with chest issues. The man's English was terrible, and he was panicking, which only made it worse. Rowan had overheard, recognized the language, then realized that something in him understood it, and he'd simply stepped in and started talking to the man in Lebanese. Calmed the man down, got him the help he needed.

He'd been able to use experiences without losing himself completely, like he had with Jack. And it'd worked really well for a while.

Until stuff started to slip out of him when he wasn't even aware it was happening. When he found himself saying things, doing things, acting from a personality that wasn't even his. Like the morning he'd smiled at Julie as he woke, because he was usually the first one up, and asked her if she'd had a good sleep. Told her how beautiful she looked. And she'd just stared at him blankly. He'd asked her what was wrong, and it just made her more upset, until finally she'd started yelling at him, telling him to stop speaking Russian, and he'd been stunned.

And then the headache hit him. They'd been getting worse too. Always associated with an episode. Felt like his head was being ripped apart, when they really got going. And that's probably what was happening. The minds he'd consumed, the memories he'd taken as a corpse, he tried to keep them separate. Keep them behind a wall he'd 'built' in his head. He'd actually gone to the trouble of imagining it as an actual wall, what it looked like, what it felt like. The imagery seemed to make it stronger somehow, at least.. at first.

If he needed help, he'd step into that space in his mind and search. At least, that's what it felt like. He'd get quiet, close his eyes sometimes, and wander behind the wall. Then he'd pull out what he needed, keeping himself separate, and do what needed doing.

But now... that wall, didn't feel so solid, so strong anymore. Things kept slipping through. The worst episodes came with the minds of people he'd eaten completely. He'd absorbed them totally, and adopting their personalities was like throwing on a new coat. That's what'd happened with Jack, whose mind he'd had time to savor. He'd eaten all of Brett's too. Many hundred's of minds, he'd taken in whole. And a small scared part of him wondered if maybe he had taken a little piece of their souls, no matter what he'd told Jack, that maybe they were the ones breaking the wall.

That maybe they were trying to take him over.

It was completely dumb, and he knew it. But it didn't make the fear go away.

The nose bleeds were new. They scared the crap out of him. Maybe the wall was a physical thing in his head, and it was being torn apart. The minds he'd taken, turning into monsters, just as he had, eating him away from the inside.

*Well that'd be only fair.*

He smirked, stepping over a downed tree where the wood underneath was slowly rotting away, riddled with beetles and ants.
What did it leave him with? With everything leaking out like this, and steadily getting worse? With Perry apparently sharing his mind? Where was he in all this?

Who was he in the end?

"I don't know," he said quietly, and stopped walking.

And found himself standing in front of an old lean-to shelter, propped up against a tall hardwood. It had collapsed in on itself, the main spine snapped in half, the branches it had supported rotted and covered in lichen and spider webs.

Rowan stood and stared at it, and something inside... something behind the wall... remembered.

"Oh shit," he whispered, as his eyes grew wide.

Shaking his head against the feeling, trying to hold the memories back, he turned in place, meaning to retrace his steps, to head back up the long slope he'd come walking down.

But everything was speaking to him now. The lay of the land here felt incredibly familiar, the trees, the shelter, the lichen-covered boulders further down the slope...

Where was the campfire ring?

There.

Slowly, he moved to the small ring of stones, a few short strides from the shelter, almost buried under a layer of dead leaves. Brushing the leaves aside, he sat down next to it and smiled.

Been a long while since he'd been here with his brother.

Rowan blinked.

No... shit! That's not me!

Squeezing his eyes shut desperately, he fought the mind slowly overlapping his own. He couldn't do this again, dammit! Not with Julie alone up in the shelter...

Quickly pushing himself to his feet, he looked back up the slope, wincing against the headache that was just starting to build.

The shelter...

His eyes drifted to the crumbling lean-to. Echoes of kids' laughter filled the woods around him, and he remembered placing every branch, crawling inside to test the size, thumbing through a worn deck of cards and playing war... with...

... his brother.

Rowan's eyes glazed over with memory, and he stood there for a while, a small smile on his face, remembering the adventures they'd had. The stories they'd told over the fire. Their prayers before bedtime.

Was it still there? It had to be. Unless Joshua had come back and taken it out. But they'd made a pact, promised to keep it there, always. It'd be a holy place then, his bother had said. But, he'd been happy just to have a cool hideout only the two of them shared.
Walking to the entrance of the lean-to, he hissed and reached up to cradle his head.

"Oww," he groaned, as the pain grew steadily, stabbing like a sharp blade at his temple with every heartbeat.

Where in the world had that come from? All of a sudden like, and real mean... wasn't a normal headache.

Trying to ignore the pain, he got to his knees in front of the shelter, and looked inside. And there, dangling from the spine that was now snapped and bowed, was the large hand-carved crucifix on a simple leather string.

He grinned through the pain. Still there. Still keeping this place holy maybe, but not whole. He smirked at his own joke.

Something warm splashed on his arm and he looked down, still gently rubbing his temple to numb the pain in his head. What he saw stunned him. A splatter of blood, brightly red against his skin. Joined by another drop, and another. Sniffing, he quickly realized his nose was bleeding, and fear flared in his chest.

He wiped at it, then stared down at his hand, alarmed by both the amount of blood coming from his nose, and by the bandage over his palm.

Why was his hand bandaged?

His gaze fell to his jeans, at the bloody stain saturating his thigh, the dark bandage just underneath, through a wicked looking tear. The fear in his chest grew, and he quickly patted himself down, looking for other wounds, and answers. These clothes he was wearing, they weren't familiar at all. His fingers brushed something stuck to his cheek, and he hissed sharply as he found a long gash there, bandaged in butterfly strips.

Frantically, he jumped to his feet and turned in place, not understanding what had happened to him. How'd he get cut up so bad? Maybe that's where the headache and nosebleed had come from? Somebody had beaten him up?

Frowning, he tried to remember, and winced as the headache grew in strength.

Then it came to him.

Back in the city he'd run to, after he'd left home... That kid, about the same age, maybe a little younger... a punk, wearing a red hoodie, jeans... ratty looking... the guy had tossed him around like he was made of paper... had to have been on drugs. Made sense, the kid was so strong, and looked like death warmed up.

He froze.

Hold on. No, that's not right... guy wasn't on drugs... he was...

The pain in his skull flared again, and he groaned, grasping it desperately. Why did his head hurt so much?

The dead. The cursed ones... He remembered now... Oh dear God in heaven, that's what that kid was. Come to take him as he ran down that alleyway.

No wonder he had all these cuts, the kid...
The kid didn't cut him...

His eyes widened. That kid *bit* him... Oh god! In the neck, right...

With a wild cry, he raised his hand to stop the flow of blood he remembered pouring hot and fast from the hole the kid had opened in his throat. But, there wasn't anything there... there was nothing... *there*...

How the heck did he get away? How'd he get here?

The memories played on, and his mouth fell open in horror... he'd fallen to the ground, and the kid was over him, blood dripping from the thing's face...

*My blood.*

*I didn't... oh sweet Jesus, I didn't get away!*

With a choked sound, he fell to his knees as his last moments came to him, of laying there, his body jerking out of his control on the cold pavement, making that horrible gurgling sound as that *thing*... kept eating...

And he... he...

... died.

The realization brought a terrible lurching sensation as his mind started to fall in on itself, and he felt himself sliding away, felt new memories stirring of holding someone’s head... *my head, that's my head, oh god help me!* and smashing it until it shattered and...

He was turning into the monster, the monster was taking his over mind, eating his memories, and he was dissolving... falling into the dark... he was... who was...

NO!

Bloodshot eyes raised beneath a shaggy fringe of dark hair, lifting with the wild gaze of a drowning man to the crucifix hanging from the broken spine of the shelter. With a shaking hand, he grabbed the cross, tearing it free of the branch, and stared down at it as his breath came in desperate gasps. A drop of blood from his nose spattered against the carved form of Jesus, drawn swiftly into the thirsty wood, and he held the cross tight, his knuckles turning bone pale.

And he prayed.

*Jesus save me from this monster, save me, save me, dear God keep me whole, by your grace I'm whole, no darkness can take me, I'm whole, I'm me, I'm...*

"Caleb," he whispered, squeezing his eyes shut as he brought the cross to his forehead. "I'm Caleb, Jesus, save your son, I'm sorry I left, oh god I never should have left, save me please!"

Something twisted inside him and he groaned, feeling the darkness pulling at his mind, the threat of oblivion lapping at his thoughts, his memories.

*NO! I know you for what you are! You can't take me again demon!*

"Jesus!" he yelled out, tears of desperate terror streaming from his eyes, caught in a fervor he hadn't
felt since he'd been a child, and his dad's sermons had been driven over and over into his head. He'd turned his back on his dad, on his hard words, his hard actions, but he'd been so wrong! "Jesus, deliver me from this darkness! I was wrong, I went down the wrong path! I know that now! Save my soul! Drive the darkness back!"

He staggered to his feet, roaring now, the cross thrust out before him, as if to keep some unseen force at bay. "You can't have me! God protects me, my soul is his, and his alone! YOU CAN'T TAKE ME AGAIN!"

Caleb spun in place, still holding the crucifix as a ward, then lurched forward, down the slope, stumbling over fallen branches and logs, driven forward by fear, fleeing from something he carried inside and could not possible outrun.

The forest canopy above grew thinner, while the underbrush thickened with thorny vines and smaller saplings, and he tried to find the trail they used to take up the hill as kids, but his mind kept slipping sideways, and he found himself torn and slashed by everything in his path.

But it was all a test, a penance for coming home, the way was hard as it should be, like his dad's preachings, it was all hard, and blood flowed, and that was the way of it too.

And then something snatched at his ankle, and he fell at a hard run, his face torn by brambles, a gash opening in his forearm that he'd thrust out to try and break his fall. The air rushed out of him too, and he lay there for a moment, thoughts shifting through the layers of his mind like sand.

He groaned, feeling a hundred points of hurt on his body, every scratch and bruise, and he shifted against the earth, not understanding.

What's... going on? Why am I...

Slowly, cradling his arm to his chest, he pulled himself up from the forest floor, back on his heels, and found himself facing the cold steel barrel of a rifle. Horrifically confused, he stared at it for a moment as it wavered in front of his face and heard someone shift in the undergrowth in front of him.

"Who are you?!" a deep voice barked from behind the rifle barrel, "What are you doing here?! You start that fire up on the mountain?!"

That voice... he knew that voice...

Blinking through fresh blood from the cuts on his face, he looked up, past the rifle, at the figure in a dark military jacket scowling down at him from under an old scuffed baseball cap. His brown eyes were hard and intensely familiar.

The breath left him again, and his thoughts snapped together in a rush.

"Joshua?" he whispered, and a slow smile spread on his face as his heart burst with a sudden wild joy. "Joshua!"

He tried to get to his feet, but the barrel thrust forward, pressing into his chest.

"You stay down boy!" Joshua growled, "How the heck you know my name?!"

Caleb's smile faltered. How could his own brother not recognize him? God had brought him back to life, but had he changed him that much?
"It's me, Joshua!" he gasped. "The demon got me, but God brought me back! He brought me back to life!" He edged forward on his knees, not caring now about the barrel against his chest, about the dark distrust in his brother's eyes. Everything was going to be okay! Joshua would help him drive the demon out, keep him whole!

His brother was looking at him like he'd lost his mind.

With a shaking hand, wet with blood from the gash in his arm, Caleb brought the cross up, and held it out to his brother, smiling broadly, his eyes wide.

"Remember this? From our shelter?" he stammered. "It's protecting me, Joshua, keeping the darkness away! I never should have left... but it's okay now, Jesus brought me back to you!"

Joshua's eyes narrowed as he saw the cross, then flared wide. "What the heck you doing with that? That's not yours!" He reached out and snatched it out of Caleb's hand, then brought the rifle up till the barrel was pointed at Caleb's forehead. "I'll ask one more time - you start that fire up on the mountain? There more of you up there?!"

Caleb stared at his brother in shock, reaching out to him. "Joshua, it's me!" he cried. "Don't you recognize me? I'm your brother!"

"You stay down!" his brother snarled, backing up as he cocked the rifle. "You're no kin of mine!"

Tears welled in Caleb's eyes at his brother's words. How could he say that? Leaving had been a terrible thing for him to do, he knew that, but for his brother to disown him?

"I'm sorry Joshua," he said, his voice small. "I'm sorry I ever left you... I was a fool. Should never have gone to the city like I did. I didn't have the right eyes to see that you and dad were doing good, I didn't see God's plan." Looking up then, his gaze feverish, he talked in a mad rush, desperate for his brother to understand that he'd changed, "But I see it now brother, I'm a part of it now, I'm ready! You and me, Joshua and Caleb together, His holy scouts, like dad used to say, doing God's work! I'm ready!"

Joshua took another half step back, and his mouth fell wide open. "You think you're Caleb..."

Caleb pulled himself to his feet, "I am Caleb, Josh, why can't you see that?! It's me! I've come back home! By God's grace, I'm home!"

Smiling, he stepped forward, and held his arms wide, wanting to embrace his twin brother, but Joshua's face twisted in something like fear, and he steadied the rifle again, sighting down the barrel.

"Boy, I don't know what's wrong with your head, or how you know so much about my family, but I swear, you take another step and I will shoot you!"

Caleb took that next step, and his grin grew wilder. "Then you shoot me Joshua, you shoot your brother, but I tell you, you can't kill me, I'll just come back again - God will bring me back again!"

The rifle cracked as Joshua fired. The sound tore through the forest, echoing off the hillside behind them.

The trunk of a far distant tree spit bark as the bullet struck, and Caleb turned back to face his brother.

"I'm back Joshua..." he said quietly, reverently, and stepped closer still. "I'm here to do God's work..."
with you, like I should have done years ago." His eyes filled with tears again. "The fight we had is
still raw in my heart Josh, those words I said were wrong, you were no fool. I was the fool. I was..."

"Dear God, I swear, you stay back from me!" Joshua yelled, his eyes angry, afraid, confused, lost.

Caleb saw it all, could feel his brother starting to believe, and he moved in till the barrel pressed
hard against his chest again, directly over his heart.

With a trembling bloody hand, he reached out and nudged the barrel gently aside, holding his
brother's hard eyes, pleading with his own. Then he engulfed his brother in his arms, even as
Joshua tried to pull away, and held on tight.

"It's me Joshua, it's Caleb, I don't know what the demon did to me that you can't see your own twin
brother, but I'm here, I'm home." He felt Joshua stop fighting at those words, and his brother
shook, and Caleb knew a sob had been torn from him, something heavy pulled free. He squeezed
him close. "I'm home Josh, I'm home."

"C-Caleb?! You can't..." The words broke from Joshua in a strangled sob, and for the briefest of
moments, those strong arms embraced him back, but then his brother jerked away, as if burned,
and Caleb felt his heart break.

"What the hell... you... you..." Joshua's face was twisted in rage and hurt, and he shoved Caleb
back hard, then leveled the gun once more. His eyes were wet and dark with spite. "You're not
Caleb! What're you pulling... you can't-"

"That time we were on the bridge Joshua," Caleb said suddenly, his voice strong, insistent, "And
you were walking on the railing. I told you don't, but you wouldn't listen, never did, and-"

"Shutup," Joshua growled, and pressed the barrel up against Caleb's head.

"And you slipped, Josh," Caleb continued, feeling the cold metal against his skin, but he couldn't
stop, wouldn't stop until he'd reached his brother, "You fell, just like I said you would. But I caught
your hand, and I held on-"

"SHUTUP! You CAN'T KNOW THAT!" Joshua screamed, his eyes wide and shocked.

"And I pulled you back, and you made me promise NEVER to tell no-one, not dad, not ma, not
anybody, because you were so embarrassed, and you knew dad would lay into you if he found
out." The memory was so strong he laughed without thinking, "And I made you do my chores for a
whole month!"

The barrel slipped from his forehead as Joshua's face went slack with disbelief, arms falling to his
sides.

Caleb grinned. His brother believed! His brother recognized him! "You see me now, don't you
Joshua?! God's lifted the veil from your eyes, you see me now!"

The grin slipped as he saw his brother's face twist in anguished rage, saw the rifle swing back in a
quick arc. Before Caleb could react, or open his mouth to speak, the wooden stock of the gun
slammed into the side of his head.

As his legs crumpled bonelessly beneath him, the ground rushed up and he fell hard on his side, his
head bouncing against a mass of crunchy leaf litter. The darkness lapped at his mind, hungry like
the monster who'd ended his life, and the fearful panic rose again.
"No... don... let take... me..." he moaned, struggling to keep his eyes open, to move, "J-Joshua... ple-"

There was another explosion of sound and force and pain against his skull, and the darkness took him complete.
The Town

Julie had no idea how long Rowan had been gone, but she was starting to get seriously worried. A stray thought kept popping up that she kept pushing down - it was unwanted, unnecessary and stupid.

Maybe he wasn't coming back.

Getting angry at herself for thinking it, she'd grabbed a branch and stabbed at the fire a little, then quickly downed two more painkillers as the motion jarred her broken ribs. She'd been doing okay up till then, taking shallow breaths, not moving, only turning her head to glance outside every time she heard a branch snap or a leaf rustle.

Maybe he wasn't coming back.

*Jesus, shut up!*

Of course he was coming back. He wouldn't do this, he wouldn't *leave* her, wounded in a shelter in the middle of nowhere.

Of course, he had left her, wounded in a shelter in the middle of nowhere. She just knew he wouldn't do it for long. That he'd been hit hard by what had happened between them, that it had hurt, and he needed some space.

Julie completely understood that. It's just that he'd been gone for a long time now and...

...maybe he wasn't coming back.

"Shit!" she swore out loud. This was ridiculous, she was just going to have to go out there and find him!

And it was going to *hurt*. Closing her eyes, she took a few slow breaths to steel herself and shuffled up onto her knees.

*Owowow...*

The painkillers were doing their job at least. Moving was manageable. Caused a fiery sharp pain in her side and arm, but it was something she could handle, at least in small doses.

Should she take something? What if he'd been hurt, and that's why he hadn't come back? Maybe he'd been attacked by a bear or something?!

Julie groaned at herself. *Get a grip!*

She glanced back at her duffel. She was probably over worried about this, but... it wouldn't hurt to take it, just in case. She didn't know the territory here, didn't know the land. Her dad always drilled it into her - be prepared for anything.

Hissing with the movement, she turned around and shuffled to the bag, then carefully, gingerly, felt inside for the Ruger and the spare magazine. When she finally pulled them free, a fine sheen of sweat covered her forehead from the pain stabbing through her chest.

Pocketing a couple more painkillers, Julie shuffled out of the shelter, and slowly, painfully got to her feet.
The sun was shining full on the meadow now, spearing through a break in the clouds, highlighting
the grasses in brilliant gold. The trees rustled in hushed tones as the wind stirred around her.

It was really quite beautiful, and if it wasn't for her injuries, or the fact that they'd crashed in the
middle of nowhere, and she'd lost her husband-to-be, she'd sit and enjoy it for a while.

At least the plane was still burning. It was a good signal, and with any luck whoever had passed
before would pass again and know they were here.

With any luck.

Her dad would be frantic by now, she knew. He'd mobilize every vehicle capable of flight, short of
hang gliders and hot air balloons, to locate them, just as he'd done when R had taken her 'home'
almost a year ago.

So it was just a matter of time.

Julie sighed. She'd been hoping to hear Rowan's voice behind her the whole time she'd been
standing watching the plane. She'd turn around, he'd apologize for leaving her, smiling that
sheepish little smile she adored, and she'd do the same, and everything would be okay.

She frowned, standing alone at the edge of the meadow as the breeze pulled playfully at her blonde
hair, her mind cycling through all of the moments in the last few months where Rowan hadn't
really been Rowan.

Everything was not okay.

Turning, she scanned the nearest edge of the forest for any sign of R. He wasn't there, but she
could see where he'd entered the woods, disturbed pine needles and a broken branch showing the
sign of his passing.

Walking slowly, clenching her teeth with every shift of her broken arm and ribs, she moved to the
forest edge and entered the woods.

It was darker here, and cooler, and the sunlight lay in spare broken patches on a carpet of needles
and curled brown leaves. They crunched underfoot, and as she walked down the gradual slope, she
cought some strange distant sounds between her loud footsteps and froze.

"R?" she called, and waited, hoping to hear the sounds again, or some call back.

There it was again, a deep urgent cry. She couldn't quite make out the words, but the tone made her
heart jump in sudden fear.

It was R... it had to be R, and the sounds he was making... he was terrified.

"Rowan!" she yelled, and cradling her arm close, she started moving as quickly as she could down
the slope, which was nowhere near as quickly as she wanted to move, more like a panicked hobble
than the sprint she'd be capable of if she wasn't so banged up.

Even that was too much to do for long, and she had to slow markedly as she reached what looked
like an old campsite. Looking around the area, she could clearly see that Rowan had been here.
That he'd checked out the old shelter, the campfire...

... and he'd set off running down the slope.
Julie frowned. What the hell was he doing? Why'd he run?

She'd always had a good eye for tracks, and good instincts for the outdoors. Her dad used to take her hunting, back when they lived in Michigan, before everything went nuts, any weekend they had free. She hadn't yet turned ten before she'd tagged her first doe, dressed it herself and tried to drag the carcass through the woods to the truck. She'd got about ten feet before her dad took pity on her, quartered it and left her a leg to carry. By the time they'd returned to the truck she was exhausted, covered in mud, ticks and deer blood.

Her mom had been less than impressed. Couldn't keep her from going back out again though.

Julie had always hoped she'd be able to take Rowan out into the woods some day, and spend time together, away from everybody else. There was a peace here you just couldn't get surrounded by people, and now that the dead weren't a threat anymore, they could actually do it. Course, you had to worry about the big predators instead - the bears, cougars, wolves - who'd returned in numbers to forests they'd been wiped from before. She'd heard rumors too, of sightings of strange animals who must have escaped from local zoos - a whole family of baboons, a pair of actual lions - living somewhere south of the city. It was insane.

The apocalypse had sucked for humanity, but it'd been amazing for the rest of the planet.

Setting off again, following the tracks R had left behind, Julie became aware of faint voices carried on the breezes sweeping up the hill.

They sounded far away, and she still couldn't make out words, but she could tell it was more than one person. The realization made her skin itch, and she reached instinctively for the gun tucked into her jeans.

They were in unfamiliar territory, didn't know the encampments here, and she had no idea how the locals might treat strangers. Even with the world changing, news of the cure might not have reached folks in the isolated communities, and many still held to the shoot first, ask questions later brand of newcomer relations.

*Shit.*

She tried to move faster, gritting her teeth against the growing jagged pain in her side, and her mind focused on another possibility.

Maybe it was the rescue party? Maybe that's why he'd torn off running down the hill? Maybe they were-

The sound of a gunshot cracked through the forest around her.

Julie's heart stopped, and she couldn't breathe for a moment, as she stared down the hill along Rowan's track.

*No no no...*

Then the voices came again, and her heart started, and she sucked in a breath so deep it hurt and left her gasping.

*Oh Jesus...*

It must have just been a warning shot, that's all. He was okay. He had to be okay.
God, R, be okay. I'm coming.

Pulling the gun from her jeans, she moved off to the left of R's track, and silenced her steps as best she could, hoping to circle around and flank whoever he was with. She still couldn't see them, but she could roughly guess from the voices where they were.

Whoever he was talking to had a gun, she couldn't afford to be seen until she was ready to be. Hopefully they'd keep talking until that moment came.

"SHUTUP! You CAN'T KNOW THAT!" someone yelled, and it wasn't R.

The words made her frown. Can't know what?

Rowan's voice came to her clearly then, and sent a shiver down her spine. Something wasn't right. There was something manic about his tone, and something in the way he was talking that suggested he knew the person he was talking to.

But that didn't make any sense? Unless...

There was a horrible sound then, not a gunshot, but something hard striking something harder, and the sound of something falling.

Oh god... Julie rushed forward, as quickly as she could, her shirt snagging in the vines she was crouched against, and finally caught sight of the person R had been talking to.

She didn't see R, but then, as the man swung the rifle down hard, his face twisted in anger, she realized with sickening dread that R was on the ground. That the man was hitting him.

NO!

Jumping up, she sucked in a lungful of air, about to scream at the man to stop as she leveled her Ruger, but someone else yelled out instead, freezing her in place.

"Josh!" came the cry from somewhere behind the man, and he turned.

"I'm here Ed!" he yelled back, then turned to look down at Rowan, his face no longer angry, but strangely confused.

Julie bit her lip and slowly crouched down behind a nearby bush, continuing to watch, and trying to work out what the hell she should do. What kind of numbers was she dealing with here? Was it just these two? Were they both armed?

Shit.

The man named Josh crouched over, and Julie's heart sank as she watched him pull Rowan up, and heft him over his shoulder.

R hung limply, obviously unconscious, and she had a moment to see his face. It was covered in blood.

Oh god.. R... She had to do something, didn't matter what, she had to rush out there and save him now, or-

Another man, presumably Ed, clad in a similar dark jacket and cap, emerged from the bushes behind Josh carrying a semi-automatic rifle, leveled and ready to fire.
If she stood up now, she had no doubt he'd use it. It'd be a very short and stupid rescue.

*Shitshitshit.*

"Heard the gunshot - you okay?" Ed asked, walking over to Josh.

Josh nodded, shrugging Rowan into a better position before slinging his rifle over his other shoulder.

Ed grasped Rowan by the hair and pulled his head up. "Who's the stiff?"

Julie's breath caught. *What? No no, he's not-*

"He's not dead, just out," Josh answered gruffly, and turned to pull Rowan from Ed's reach. "And I dunno, but..."

Ed seemed to hang for the rest of the sentence, then shrugged. "But what?"

Josh shook his head, "Nevermind. Think he came from up the hill, might be more. Jeb with you?"

Nodding, Ed cupped his hands over his mouth. "Jeb! Get over here!" he yelled.

*Oh crap.* Julie crouched lower, scanning around herself for a better hiding spot.

This was bad. If they sent a party up the hill they'd find their stash of supplies and take them. Julie had no doubt she could keep out of their reach, but without gear it was going to be a lot harder.

She couldn't move now though, not so close to the group. She'd have to just stay put.

At least she'd brought the gun.

A younger guy, shorter that the other two, sporting a buzz cut and armed with a Winchester, walked out from behind some thick bushes and headed to Ed and Josh.

"Everything okay?" he asked, and pointed to Rowan. "Who's that guy Josh? You shoot him?"

Josh scowled and muttered something, pointing to the kid's groin.

With an embarrassed duck of his head, Jeb quickly zipped up and leveled the rifle again.

Josh pointed up the slope. "You two head on up the hill and scope for others," he barked, "Take 'em if you can, leave quiet if you can't. I'm heading back."

Ed nodded, and tugging at Jeb's arm, turned and started walking up the slope.

*Oh shit.*

Luckily, she'd taken a wide path to flank Josh, otherwise they would have run right into her. As it was, they passed within thirty feet and didn't even notice she was there.

She couldn't move for a long while though, not till they'd gone well out of hearing range, and by the time she'd turned back, Josh had disappeared.

*Dammit!*

Julie had hoped to confront him while he was by himself, even though she'd known it'd probably play out badly. She had no hope of moving R on her own, she couldn't wait for him to wake up,
and while she could force Josh at gunpoint to move him, she had no doubt he'd take advantage of her injuries as soon as he could.

Slowly, she straightened, keeping a wary eye in both directions, and winced as the pain came thundering back, now her attention was back on herself.

Taking a slow breath, her heart tight in fear for R, she moved off in pursuit of Josh, keeping a wide parallel path, listening for his movement while dampening her own as best she could.

She was almost within range to confront him when the forest suddenly ended in a big wall, a strange incongruous echo of the wall they'd had back in the city, only not of steel, but of anything and everything they apparently could fit together. House doors, plastic tables, fridge doors, car hoods, large logs, but mostly metal, some areas showing signs of burning and bullet holes. It was tall and topped with scarecrows on big wooden crosses, though she couldn't see them that well because of the few trees in the way.

Then the stench hit her, as she quickly crouched down behind a tree, ducking out of sight of an armed guard who pulled open a wire gate to let Josh through.

Dread curled tight in her gut. She knew that smell. It was the smell of death. Of corpses rotting.

But where was it coming from? Inside?

Something moved on the wall, a motion she caught between the branches stretching above her. A quick trembling.

Movement again, and a sound of terrible suffering.

Julie's mouth fell open in horror as her eyes finally focused on the source, and she realized that what she'd thought were scarecrows... weren't.

They were people. Real people.

Crucified.

Tears fell from her bulging eyes as she quickly covered her mouth, muffling the horrified cries she was making without meaning to. She turned away, twisting around the truck of a tree to face back up the long slope, and slid down the rough bark, squeezing her eyes shut against the vision of the woman she'd seen, bloody and scabbed, her legs visibly broken, sagging, shuddering against the wood.

There'd been big black birds on the others... the others were corpses, dangling like broken dolls... they had to be dead... real dead? She hadn't seen them move too, had she?

No, no...

Julie groaned against her hand and tried desperately to think, to understand what the hell she was going to do. The man she loved had been taken by people who tied folks up on crosses, broke their legs and left them to die... what the fuck was she supposed to do now?

Taking a few quick breaths, she shook her head against the tree.

Calm down and think.

Panic wasn't going to help him, wasn't going to help that woman up there either. She had to get
somewhere safe, and work out a plan...

She needed help. She needed backup...

She needed her dad.

God, her dad would sweep through this place in minutes, raze it to the ground...

Julie blinked at the thought.

Jesus, she didn't know these people. There could be whole families in there, good people just trying to survive. She had no idea why they'd done this... the people they'd crucified, she didn't know the story there, maybe they were murderers? Maybe they'd done truly terrible things, maybe they deserved...

*Nobody deserved that!*

There was another moan, and a tear fell down Julie's cheek as she listened to the woman's agony. How could she help her?

She looked down at the gun in her lap. One gun, one broken girl against an unknown number of armed psychos who crucified people.

Julie shifted, and looked up at the figure again. Her face crumpled at the horrible sight, but she made a mental check on the distance between them.

One shot. She could do it. She'd end the woman's suffering, and bring the entire town on top of herself. It would be the end of her rescue, and her end too, most likely.

*I'm sorry.* She sent the silent thought to the suffering woman. *I can't...*

Getting to her feet, staying low, Julie moved slowly and quietly through the forest, intending to scout the entire wall if she could, to try and find any gaps that might let her in to save R.

She was going to get him out. They were going to get away. And she'd bring whoever'd crucified those people to justice, any way she could.

*I promise.*
Facing the Demon

Someone was hammering away inside his head, and it *hurt*. The pain was crippling him, and he yelled out, shouting that they had to stop, that they were breaking the wall, and if they broke it, he would be broken...

But they wouldn't listen.

They just kept swinging at it, the stocks of their rifles slamming again and again at the surface, and it was crumbling... oh god, it was crumbling...

And one of them turned and stared at him, its face featureless save for the black pits of its eyes, and opened its mouth and said,

"Son. Wake up now."

And he blinked, and woke.

He groaned, and tried to cradle his pounding skull, but his arms were stuck in something, held fast by something tight around his wrists. He struggled, not understanding who had him, or where he was, because everything was dark.

Someone had his head, someone was pushing his head down on the bed? Was he on a bed? Had to be... why were they doing that? Where was he?!

Thrashing, he started to yell out, and someone pressed down over his shoulder, gentle but firm.

"Son," the voice came again, "be quiet now, you're alright, I'm not trying to hurt you."

That voice. Memory tickled his brain, but he couldn't quite place it, give it a name or a shape. Things were still sliding around loose in his head. He just knew the voice was familiar.

So he stopped struggling, and eased back against the bed, his chest rising and falling with the efforts of his fear.

"That's it son, just relax..." The voice soothed, and he heard the squeak of an old metal chair as the man next to him shifted slightly.

"Who..." he said with just air, as no voice came from his throat. He swallowed hard and groaned again as the pounding of his head grew worse.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," the man said, "What's your name?"

He turned his head to face the voice, and winced at the motion. "I'm..." Then he stopped, because nothing presented itself as an answer. He went searching then for it, but found a wall instead, and pressing at it made his head flare with a violent hurt. Something wet trickled down over his lips.

"Oh dear... just a moment, you've got yourself a nosebleed."

The chair squeaked again, and the sound of scratchy footsteps on a hard floor followed. They returned and the sudden contact of something against his face made him jerk back, startled.

"Easy... hold on, let me take this off," the man said, and the darkness started to lighten. "I was trying to ease the swelling."
As the cloth wrapped icepack was removed, he blinked up rapidly at the pale bluish light of a caged fluorescent lamp above his head, then took in the rest of the room. It was spare of clutter, with walls, ceiling and floor of poured concrete. Against the adjacent wall, sitting next to the door, was a row of shelves stacked with medical supplies.

His gaze drifted then to the old man standing next to the bed. Short and stooped, his hair was white and closely cut, and thick grey eyebrows floated over small and clouded grey eyes. The lines in his face spoke of deep thought and a heavy share of sadness.

Memory snapped and locked into place. This man... he knew this man. He... knew this place! He was in the bunker, in the hospital...

"Doc?" he whispered, a little uncertainly. "Doc Adams?"

He'd grown so old? Had he been gone that long?

The doctor's eyes grew wide in surprise, but the man said nothing. Had the doc forgotten who he was?

"Doc, it's me... Caleb!" he cried excitedly. "I made it back!" With a wide grin on his face, he reached forward to grasp the old man's hands, but his arms were stopped short.

Confused, he looked down at himself. He was lying on a thin hospital bed, and his wrists were bound in padded restraints.

"Why..." he mumbled, and tugged on them hard. They were firmly buckled and held him fast.

Frowning, he looked up at the man, who was watching him carefully, brows drawn down deep.

"Doc, why am I tied up?" he asked, struggling with them again. "I don't understand? Did I do something wrong?"

He thought back hard, trying to find the reason for this, for being here, for being tied up. But his mind was a mess. What was the last thing he'd done? He'd been talking to his brother. He'd been a little... frantic.

"Joshua hit me!" he yelled suddenly, indignantly, and shook his head slowly. "He didn't see me right." His eyes sought the old man's then, pleading. "But you do, don't you doc?"

Caleb stared at the man who'd been so good to him, who he'd come to see as a father figure, almost more so than his real father, though he'd never ever let his dad hear that. His heart sank. The doc was giving him the same look Joshua had, only... less filled with spite, more drawn in confusion.

Sighing, Caleb let his head fall back, wincing as it flared in a mighty pain. "You don't. I can see it in your eyes. You don't recognize me." His heart clenched, and he turned away, suddenly overcome with a deep sadness, and not wanting the doc to see.

"I don't understand..." he said quietly. "I beat death. The lord's brought me back home, but no-one can see me right. It's like I'm a stranger in my own home."

As he wrestled with the lead settling in his chest, wrestled with a throat growing tight with tears, he felt suddenly the warm, coarse hand of the doctor's patting his own.

Surprised, he turned to look at the man. The smile the doctor was wearing was thin.
"Son, you sure sound like Caleb," he said quietly. "Tell me, what happened to you? How'd you get here?"

"I am Caleb, doc.. I am," he sighed. "And it's a long story."

"I'd like to hear it boy," the man answered, crossing his arms.

Caleb released another sigh, heavier than the last, and nodded slowly.

"I made it to that city with the money you gave me."

The doctor blinked at his words.

"It was hard," he continued, looking at the concrete wall across from his bed. "People were hard in the city. Not like dad... a different hardness. Like a wall, everyone was behind their own wall, and I couldn't really reach anyone. Couldn't break through anywhere. Couldn't get a job." He snorted and looked back at Doc Adams. "You had to have something on paper, and phone numbers for references, and I had none of that. I had nothing." His gaze returned to the wall. "Your money went quick. I followed some kids who lived between shelters and in tunnels and in old building basements. That felt a little like home, odd enough."

"Caleb..." the old man whispered.

A tear fell down Caleb's cheek and he scowled, unable to wipe it away. "Something happened then doc... something terrible. There were people who... they looked dead. They were dead, they did terrible things..."

Adams nodded. "I know of them boy."

Caleb shifted in bed, feeling his body starting to tighten in fear again. Not liking that at all. He didn't want to relive that again. Couldn't.

"What happened?" the doctor asked, and Caleb scowled.

"I managed to keep clear of them for a long time. We knew secret ways that nobody else knew, we knew the best places to hide, secure places you could keep watch from. They smelled us, but they couldn't get to us. And we knew where to get food, the places we'd stolen from before..." His eyes fell. "I'm sorry doc, but I did bad things in the city. I had to... I..."

The doctor patted his hand again. "It's okay now, you tell me what happened."

With a heavy breath, Caleb squirmed in the bed, wishing he was free of the restraints, wishing he didn't have to remember.

"I was... dumb," he said quietly. "I was too slow getting out of an old apartment complex we'd been through a couple of times that had some great stuff. I'd found some photos, got all caught up in them, they'd been twins too, see?" He glanced at the doctor, then shrugged. "Made me miss Josh real bad, made me slow, made me dumb. I got back out on the street, and I wasn't thinking right, my head was back here..."

He swallowed. "I took a wrong turn. I ended up in an alleyway that didn't go nowhere. And... I... he..." He swallowed again.

"He?"
Caleb nodded, his heart starting to pound in his chest. "The demon. The dead kid. He caught me. He killed me." His eyes swiveled to the doctor. "It hurt, doc... it hurt bad to die."

The doc's hand slid from Caleb's, fast, as the man's eyes went wide with shock.

Caleb frowned down at his hand, missing the contact. Not blaming the doc though, 'cause what else could you do, someone tells you they died?

"He ate... my thoughts," he continued, looking at the wall again, looking through it. "Ate them all up. But... I came back... next thing I know... I'm at my old campsite, the one up the mountain Josh and I made? Felt him trying to take me again, but I fought him. The cross kept him away. I need that cross back doc. Can you get it for me?"

The doctor stared at him, his face drawn in a terrible sadness. Looking away, he walked over to the metal chair, sitting on it heavily before leaning forward into his hands. "Oh Caleb... my boy... I never should have let you go."

Caleb stared at the doctor. The man wasn't looking at him, hadn't looked at him when he'd talked just then. It was as if he wasn't there.

"Doc, I don't blame you," he said, trying to make him feel better. "Wasn't your fault."

Doc Adams didn't say anything for a moment, didn't respond, didn't look his way.

Then his eyes rose to meet Caleb's, and Caleb felt an anger there he'd never felt before from the man.

"I could blame you though, son, couldn't I," the man said in a low voice.

The words hit Caleb strange, and he didn't know what to say for a moment. What did he mean? That he could blame Caleb for leaving? Was that it?

"I... I guess it was my fault I left. I'm sorry doc, but I thought you said-"

"Stop it boy!" the man snapped, getting to his feet so sudden Caleb jerked back against his restraints. "You just stop pretending. Why have you come here? The dead get dealt with quick in this place, don't matter if you're breathing now or not, and acting like Samuel's kin won't save you. So why are you here?!

Caleb felt as if he'd been slapped. The doctor's voice, the anger rolling off of him made his stomach churn, and he realized that Doc Adams didn't believe him at all.

"But doc..." he cried, his throat growing tight again, "I am Caleb, I'm not-"

The doctor made an aggravated sound, interrupting him. "You come here out of guilt? Looking for redemption? There's none to be found here boy, unless you feel it comes with a painful death. That's all the judged get here, death by the sun and the crow, a death for all to see, long and slow." The man shook his head, and the anger fell from him all of a sudden, his shoulders slumping forward as he approached the bed. When he spoke, his voice was low, as if he didn't want to be overhead. "You may have killed Caleb, but I wouldn't wish their judgement on you. You want, I can give you a quick exit right now, something in a needle that'd be fast and gentle."

Caleb's mouth fell open as his heart began to race, and he pulled away from the doctor, desperately tugging at his restraints once again. "You've... lost your mind... you stay away from me!" He looked over at the doorway then, frantic. "Josh! Dad!"
"I've lost my mind?" the doctor echoed with a short bark of a laugh. "Seems you've lost command of yours too boy, telling me you're someone you're not." He straightened up from the bed then, watching Caleb close, and crossed his arms with a heavy sigh. "Okay then, you're convinced you're Caleb... tell me, this demon you say killed you. Describe him."

The request threw him off. "What? Why?"

"You'll see. Think hard now, what'd he look like?"

Caleb frowned at the doctor for a long time, then closed his eyes, searching that moment, and the emotions hit him hard as his head started to pound again. His breath came heavy and fast, and he twitched, remembering the viciousness of the attack, those dead eyes, the teeth bared and bloodied, cold hands clawing at his face, oh god...

"No, god, please.. he's got me... he's biting me!" he cried, trying to bring his hands up, but they wouldn't come. He couldn't protect himself!

"Stop." Doc Adams voice cut through the terror sharp, and Caleb's eyes snapped open as he jerked on the bed. "Freeze that moment. Describe him."

"H-he's tall... taller than me," Caleb said in a ghost's whisper. "Dark hair, almost black, hanging over his eyes. Thin... angular. Had cuts on his face. His eyes were horrible pale. Dirty red hoodie, torn jeans. He's one of the dead. He opened my throat doc, he tore me open and he-"

"Stop it," Doc Adams growled, silencing him again. "Don't tell me how he died. I don't want to know." His face fell hard, and he wiped a gnarled hand over his eyes. "He was the closest I had to a son, Caleb was. Always hoped he'd survived. I'd been glad he was far from this place... happy he was free. They've gone wrong here boy... they've gone so wrong."

Caleb didn't know what to say. He felt the doc's sadness as his own, but it felt as if he were hearing a speech someone might say over his grave. But he was here now, everything was as it should be. He was home.

The doctor gripped the bed frame then, and shifted it with a jerk, twisting it in stages to face something on the near wall that Caleb had only glanced over before.

A big mirror.

"Going to show you something now boy. Need you to look at it long and hard, so you'll understand..."

With a final jerk, the doctor brought him within view of himself.

"...that you are the demon."

At first, his eyes didn't seem to track things right, and he didn't understand why there was another patient in front of him, some guy with dark hair, tied down too.

But then... but then he truly saw who it was... the face, that angular face, that brow... eyes no longer dead but startlingly blue, skin no longer grey but flush with life. But... the same face...

As the one who'd killed him.

And he screamed. The sound ripped from a place of pure terror inside him, and he thrashed against the restraints, his body wild with fear, steeped in the memories of that day, and unable to run.
The thing in front of him thrashed too, bloody mouth open wide, the same terror in its eyes, and somewhere deep inside, a part of him understood...

*I'm looking at myself.*

With that thought, buried under a miasma of terror and vivid memories of pain and death, something of Rowan's true mind stirred.

*That's... me... I'm...*

Caleb felt the change inside himself, and his panic went wild. It was coming, the demon was coming to take him again, to pull him back down to darkness and unknowing and he couldn't let that happen, he couldn't!

Clamping his eyes shut, he started to pray, fervent prayers he'd learned as a boy, a mantra of fearful supplication his dad had drilled into him as soon as he'd formed his first words. He said them over and over, hoping to drown out the dawning awareness of the other inside, and it seemed to help, seemed to focus him and calm him back into himself, complete.

"Stop that now, I need you to see boy. You have to see," the doctor's voice came, cutting through his calm, and he flinched back as he felt those gnarled hands cool on his face, and dear god, over his eyes and...

The doctor was trying to pull his eyes open.

The prayers came to an abrupt end as he twisted out of the man's grip, still squeezing his eyes shut tight.

"Don't!" he yelled, turning his head to the far side. "You can't do this, he'll take me again!"

Doc Adams moved away then, and Caleb had a moment's hope that he'd got through to him, that the doctor had seen the danger too, before the man returned to his side, and he felt a sudden sharp sting on the inside of his elbow.

With a choked, disbelieving gasp, he pulled away, only to be stopped short by the restraints. He stared in horror as the doctor finished the injection and slipped the needle out again, pressing a finger over the site, while those old eyes watched him closely.

"What'd you do?! What was that?" he blurted out, already starting to feel a strange distancing between himself and his arm.

"You're going to relax now son," the doctor said calmly, and patted his hand again. "And you're going to look in that mirror, and I'm going to talk to the real you."

Caleb shook his head, but the motion didn't work as he'd wanted, and his head fell back against the bed. Licking lips that felt suddenly dry, he shook his head sloppily again. "No.. no, I don't..."

"Relax boy..." the man said, his voice low and soothing. "Relax now... everything's fine. You're just fine."

Caleb let out a sigh, long and deep, as the doctor's words washed over him, and he felt his body grow heavy and peaceful. It felt surprisingly good, and he found himself settling, nestling into the mattress, as his body relaxed completely.

The doctor nodded approvingly. "There, that's it. You're safe, son. Nothing's going to harm you."
The words were warm, and brought with them a lovely calm that made Caleb sigh again, as his head rolled back.

This was good. He felt good. Real good... better than he remembered for a long time. Since that day he'd done the white stuff that kid brought to the shelter, watching as the kid burned it in the spoon, drew it up in a syringe, injected it and fell back. He was curious, and took some too, and it felt like the world was shrinking around him, and he was so big, so powerful, so good, he was going to wipe the world clean and start over and everything would be perfect, and everyone would feel this good all the time...

That'd ended with him a sweating, shaking mess, vomiting his guts out in a dingy bathroom stall, surrounded by scrawled obscenities and dried puke.

The memory surfaced with a groan, and Caleb squirmed, trying to shake his head again. "S-stop... don't... wan..." His tongue got tangled up in the words, and he stopped and sighed again, as the doctor shifted his head to face forward.

To face the mirror.

Caleb blinked at the figure lying in the bed before him, and the figure blinked slowly back, looking pale, bruised and miserable. He squirmed again and tried to turn his head, but the doctor held him firm, and he had nowhere to go.

"There you are son, now you look long and hard at yourself, and you'll see everything's just fine."

"No... not me," he managed, and closed his eyes again.

The doctor shook him gently. "The cut on your cheek boy, where'd you get that?"

_Cut on my cheek?_ Confused, he opened his eyes, and the demon caught his gaze again. Sucking in a sharp breath, Caleb pressed back into the bed as far as he could, and stared back, frozen by those eyes.

Brilliant blue, _familiar_ eyes.

_Mine... those are... my eyes_.

"No..." he moaned, as a tear fell slow along his cheek.

Lost... he was lost...

"That's it," the doctor said soothingly. "That's it. That's you."

"Me..." he sighed, and something fell away from him then, something terrified and alone, as it sank back into the void.

Slowly, his body relaxed against the bed, as a small rivulet of blood trickled from his nose.

"What's your name boy," the doctor whispered, leaning in close.

With a thin sigh, his head fell back, and the blood continued to flow, leaking over his lips, his teeth, his tongue, as he took a shallow breath.

"Row'n," he breathed.

The doctor gave a very small smile and pulled away from the bed, releasing his head.
"Rowan," he said quietly, nodding. "Good." Crossing his arms, he gave a deep sigh.

"You killed Caleb."

Rowan stared at his reflection, at the blood dripping down his chin.

_The wall is breaking..._

"Rowan, look at me now."

His eyes swiveled to the doctor's.

"You killed Caleb," Doc Adams said flatly. "Didn't you."

Rowan frowned.

_Did I?_

_That wasn't very nice._

But then the memory clawed it's way up, with the cold, flat thoughts of his dead self, and he realized that yes, he had indeed.

It hadn't been a good meal.

"Yes," he whispered in answer, then he grimaced. "Didn' like... eating... him. Too sad... too 'fraid... lonely. Hard memories.."

The doctor made a short, choked sound, and his arms stabbed down by his sides, his gnarled fingers curling into tight fists. "You... bastard."

Rowan's gaze fell to those clenched fists, then away.

He shrugged.

"Dead," he said simply.

Doc Adams glowered at him darkly. "How long ago did he die?"

With a thin breath, Rowan shrugged again. "Years."

"No, you'll give me something specific," the doctor growled. "I deserve that much."

Rowan frowned, but delved into the hollow memories of his dead life, and tried to remember. It was hard. Couldn' t keep focused, and he didn't feel good anymore. Breathing wasn't working right.

"Whad do t'me?" he mumbled, staring down at his arm, where the needle had slid in.

"Gave you a barbiturate. The years Rowan. How many?"

Rowan squirmed, pulling an arm up against the cuff around his wrist. Couldn't move, couldn't breathe right.

"Too much.. gave too much.. too.. fast.." he sighed.

"Perhaps," the doctor said. His voice was soft and somewhat resigned as he shifted to the metal chair, sinking into it slowly. "How long ago did he die? Think of seasons as they passed, that may help."
Taking in a breath he meant to be deep, but wasn't, Rowan let his head fall back again, and sought an answer. How long ago...

It'd been hazy in the sky that day, and the heat intensified the scent of the living, and the dead. Air rippled off the surface of roads baking in the sun, strewn with the carcasses of cars and the fly ridden remains of humanity.

"Sum..mer. died.. summer.." he breathed, and drew in another short breath. Fear began to poke holes through the haze in his head, and he tensed, trying to suck in a deep breath. His body just didn't seem interested.

"Summer," the doctor echoed, and his face tightened in pain. "That... that's right. I remember. It was six years ago."

The doctor's words reached Rowan through the fear, and he stared at the man, perplexed.

"What?" he whispered.

The man looked up at him. "I saw him. At home. Had my nose stuck in a book, heard someone say 'Doc', and I looked up, and... and Caleb was standing there. The most haunted look on his face."

The doctor's face crumpled with the memory. "I was so surprised, didn't know what to say. I turned to see if he'd come through the door, and when I turned back... he was gone."

Guilt wrapped tight around Rowan's heart as the man spoke.

The doctor leaned back in the chair then and looked long at him. "I dismissed it. Figured it was just the day being hard. You start talking and I realize... it was truth. It was my boy, come back to see me, before he went, wherever the true dead go."

Rowan lifted a wobbly finger to the ceiling.

"Up," he said quietly. Then he frowned deeply, his gaze falling from the doctor's milky eyes. ".. 'm sorry..."

Adams nodded. "Yes. I am too."

The man stood then with a heavy sigh, and walked over to the shelves. "Had a mind to ask why you were here, what your purpose in coming was..." He pulled down a small bottle filled with a clear liquid. "But, I don't rightly care anymore. Caleb was my hope, you see. I guess a part of me figured he'd come back, stop Samuel, pull this place back from the brink. As I never could. And you've ended that."

He returned to Rowan's side, taking the syringe he'd used before, piercing the seal and drawing up the entire bottle of clear fluid.

The label caught Rowan's eye, and he blinked, trying hard to focus. When he did, the fear inside flared wildly.

It was morphine.

An opiate after a heavy, fast dose of a barbiturate?

_Oh shit..._

Was the doctor going to euthanize him?
"No... no, don't.." he whispered, struggling dazedly against his restraints just as someone knocked on the door.

A voice, one Rowan immediately recognized from the hazy memories of Caleb's as Joshua's, came through.

"Doc?"

"Josh..." Rowan sighed, and tried again to move, to pull away from the doc, but the man's gnarled hands closed on his arm and held him in place.

Sucking in as deep a breath as he could, Rowan tried to yell. "Josh!"

There was a pause, then the door knob rattled, and the knock came again. "Doc, open up."

"Not now Joshua," the doctor answered over his shoulder with a sigh. "Give me a moment please."

Rowan moaned, as the syringe was pressed against the inside of his arm. "Stop... please..."

The doctor would not look at him, and slid the needle through his skin.

FUCK!

"S-stop!" Rowan yelled. Fueled by a sudden rush of adrenaline, he pushed himself up, swinging his head forward as the doctor pressed the plunger down. His skull slammed against Adams' forehead, and the elderly man staggered back, then fell over, his head catching the edge of a shelf hard, before he hit the floor and lay still.

Reeling from the impact, Rowan fell back against the bed, just as something hit the door with a dull thunk.

The room swam sloppily, and blinking slowly, he looked down at his arm.

Oh god...

The syringe was still stuck in him, fully depressed. Doc Adams had given him the whole dose.

Rowan moaned, and tried to move, tried to pull the thing out, but a strange warmth spread swiftly through his body, settling over him with a deep, peaceful heaviness, and the urge slowly fell away. Blinking languidly, he tried to think, tried to come up with some way to save himself, but the thoughts lost cohesion as he sank further into stillness, and just watched as the door across from him exploded inward and Joshua stumbled into the room.

Black spots were starting to eat at the edges of his vision, and Rowan realized distantly, as the man rushed over to the doctor, that he hadn't taken a breath in a while.

He tried to be relaxed about that too, but it got uncomfortable, and as Joshua suddenly appeared before him, talking, he wondered how he'd get his body to breathe.

Counter drug..

Caleb's brother pulled the syringe from his arm, and talked to him again, then reached up and shook him hard, his motions growing frantic.

The jostling seemed to restart something, if only for a moment, and Rowan took in a breath, a sweet lungful that sharpened his mind enough for him to remember.
The name of the drug...

"Nalox..." he whispered, his eyes desperately catching Joshua's before blurring out completely. "Naloxo... ne... nal..."

Then that was all the breath he had left. As he started to fall backwards, through the bed, through his body, away from everything, he felt Joshua gather him up, freeing him from the restraints, and hold him close.

Everything grew dark and still, and Rowan's last thought before nothingness claimed him was to wonder if Joshua would act in time to save his life.

Long one, sorry. :) Anyone notice a recurring pattern with doctors here? :D Yes, apparently I act out a love/hate relationship with them through my writing... I pity anyone of the medical profession who comes near Rowan, as they either get knocked out, scarred for life, shot, eaten (Jack) or, well.. you'll see. It's not intentional! Really! Regardless, thanks for reading, and leave a comment if you can, means a lot.
Joshua was getting impatient. The doc had promised a quick look at the kid, the usual examination for the mark that his father normally performed, before he was to hand the boy back over. But Joshua had mentioned the kid claiming to be Caleb, with an uncanny knowledge of things only Caleb would know, and he had a funny feeling that's why this was taking so long.

Caleb had always been a favorite of the doc's, and could be the old man was seeing if there was any shred of truth in the kid's story, no matter how strange.

Joshua let out sigh and pulled his stiff vest down, as he waited outside the bunker entrance, hopeful for a sight of the men he'd sent up the mountain. The midday sun was starting a heavy beating on him through the thick black fabric of his uniform, but he kept his place, kept his pose watchful, aware of the glances of the community going about their day topside.

A young lady passed, her hair tied up in a modest bun, carrying a basket of vegetables along the main road to the storehouse. The frayed hem of her dull blue dress dragged along the ground as she walked with quick steps.

Tipping his hat to her with a short nod, he watched her closely as she curtsied quick to him, eyes pointedly averted, then turned back on her way, her step faster than before, shoulders pressed forward in haste.

Joshua smiled. Lisa was looking mighty fine these days. If she wasn't already promised to the Smithfield boy, he'd be looking to take her in as a second. As it was, he barely had time to spend proper with his first wife Adeline, what with being second in command, and currently in charge with his father leading a salvage to Fort Drum.

His thoughts returned to the kid they'd brought in. The one who acted like Caleb. Who'd almost convinced him complete, though he'd never let anyone know he'd fallen for it, hugged the boy and all. What the heck had come over him?

The kid's ranting about being dead, and coming back, that wasn't new. They'd been seeing more travelers like that lately, picked up more on their sweeps. It'd been astounding at first, finding the dead who were on their way to living, finding the living who carried the mark of the dead. Then Samuel had put the proper perspective on it all. Ruled that they were all the Judged, regardless. The devil was just trying something new, trying to sway them with an illusion.

And all of the Judged were redeemed, fully walking dead, or the living breathing kind who still showed the mark. They were all given that blessed passing, which guaranteed their place with the Lord.

Joshua felt a burst of pride at the thought, the quickening in his chest as his heart grew full, knowing and understanding he was doing good work. Important work. And the one they'd just brought in would be redeemed too, if he carried the mark of the Judged, didn't matter if he acted like Caleb or not. Didn't matter that he knew something that only Caleb would know, spoke as Caleb had.

Felt like his twin brother so much it'd pulled tears from him.

The smile fell from Joshua's face. His certainty about the boys fate didn't sit quite right. The boy had talked of a demon. He'd been frantic, begging for Joshua's help in driving it down, keeping it
Was it possible? Was it possible his brother had found a way to return from the dead in a different form?

Joshua scowled at himself. What kind of dumb was that? Why the heck was he even giving it time in his head? There was no real proof that Caleb had even died...

But he knew his brother had. He'd felt it. Many summers ago, he'd felt a pain that'd torn him up inside, took him by surprise as he walked home from an elders gathering in the Branson house. A terrible wild panic that stole his breath as he doubled over on the road, and something was wrenched from his heart.

And he knew at that moment that Caleb was gone. He'd staggered home, he'd crumpled up in the bedroom with a pillow over his mouth and he'd roared till his eyes were swollen with tears. Adeline knew better than to intrude, and left him to his grief, though she never knew the cause of it, and he never shared his knowing with anyone. Not Samuel, not his ma, not even Doc Adams.

What the hell was taking the doc so long? Joshua kicked the dirt at his feet, scowling, then gave up on his men and stepped through the blast door of the bunker.

The cool air surrounded him and the scrape of his boots on the concrete stairs echoed hollowly as he made his way down. Passing through the secondary door, he entered the main assembly room, lined with lockers and benches, and nodded to Foley, one of his best soldiers, who was gearing up for his shift in the ammunition stores.

Foley nodded back, and pointed down the hall towards the medical wing. "Somebody's been screaming back there, about demons or some such," he said, tugging on his shoelaces.

Joshua frowned and turned away down the wide hallway, passing doors ajar to unoccupied beds and shelving cluttered with basic first aid and surgical supplies, to the quarantine room at the back of the wing.

As he approached, he could hear talking. Sounded like Doc Adams doing most of it. Low, muted tones. Curious, he stopped a few feet from the door and listened.

"...stop Samuel, bring this place back from the brink. As I never could. And you've ended that."

The words were a bit of a shock, and Joshua stood completely still, not understanding what he was listening to. Stop Samuel? What in the world was he talking about? The doc wanted to stop his dad? Was he hearing that wrong?

Trying to give the man the benefit of the doubt, he moved closer still, and focused, wanting to hear more.

But the doctor didn't speak again, though Joshua could hear him rustling through supplies and moving around.

Must have just heard it wrong. That's all. No way the doc would turn against his dad. It wasn't possible.

Although... the man had been resisting them recently with the Judged, the ones with the mark. Doc Adams kept bringing up his own theories on what was happening with them, saying that the judgement had been passed, that these people were now free from the devil's influence, that that's why they were coming back. But dad hadn't had any of it. Joshua remembered his father slamming
his fist down hard on the old school table in the meeting house after the doctor's most recent appeal.

That'd ended things quick.

The doc had been quiet since then, keeping his thoughts to himself... but maybe...

Shaking his head at his rambling mind, Joshua raised his fist and tapped his knuckles against the door.

"Doc?"

There was an answer of sorts, something muffled that didn't sound like the doctor.

What the hell was going on in there?

"Josh!"

Joshua jerked back from the door, surprised. That'd been the kid. Calling him by the nickname Caleb used. Nobody else called him that, because he hated it. Made him sound like he was five years old.

Something was wrong, the kid's voice was strained, and the cry had been for help.

Torture wasn't the doc's style... what in the world was he doing?

Joshua tried the handle, but the door was locked. Scowling, and starting to get really worried, he knocked again.

"Doc, open up."

"Not now Joshua," the doctor's voice finally came. The man sounded weary. "Give me a moment please."

Give him a moment? Confused, Joshua stepped back again. If the doctor needed time, he could give it, but...

There was a low moan, and the kid's voice came again, sounding like he was pleading.

Joshua's eyes grew wide. They'd made no agreement about torture, and the doc was not allowed to interfere with the Judged. The kid was afraid, clearly, and Doc Adams appeared to be the cause.

"S-stop!" came the kid's cry, and it was enough to spur Joshua to action.

He took another step back, and rushed the door, hitting it bodily with his shoulder. It held. Ignoring the pain in his arm, he took another couple of steps back, and rammed it hard again, and this time the lock shattered the frame and the door gave way, leaving him stumbling into the room with the momentum.

The scene came as a shock at first. The kid was laying on the bed, his lower face covered in blood, strapped down in the usual restraints, and the doctor was laying sprawled on the floor, head at an awkward angle against the bookcase.

Joshua rushed to the doctor's side, but knew before he'd even put his fingers to the man's throat that Doc Adams was dead. His neck was clearly broken, and an ugly gash on his forehead matched a stain on one of the shelves.
He rose slowly, clamping down quick on the emotion rising from the man's death, and turned to face the kid on the bed.

The boy hadn't moved. At all. And if it wasn't for the kid's eyes peeking out at him from heavy lids, he'd have thought the kid was dead, he was so still. Those eyes were glazed, but tracking him.

"You kill him?" he barked, pointing back at the doctor's body. Keeping his emotions in control, not letting them get the better of him. Not beating the kid's face in...

Then he saw the syringe sticking out of the boy's arm.

*What the hell?*

Doc drugged him? Made sense with what he was seeing, the kid wasn't acting normal, still wasn't moving... his color was getting worse as he watched.

*But why?*

He pulled the syringe free and dropped it on a nearby tray, where he saw two vials, and not of the same drug.

Why two? It wasn't standard procedure to use any drugs until the examination had been completed...

"What was he doing to you?" he said, turning back to the kid.

His heart jumped in his chest. The young man was deathly still, and the skin around his lips, his eyes, was turning blue.

The boy wasn't breathing.

*Oh sweet Jesus.*

Was it an overdose? Had Adams done that on purpose?!

Joshua grabbed the kid, his fingers groping for the pulse at his throat, his chest tightening with a fear he didn't quite understand.

There was a heartbeat, faint, but there, but the kid still hadn't taken a breath.

He shook the kid hard, and yelled at him, not really sure what he felt it'd do, how it would help, but needing the guy to breathe.

Because he'd been Caleb... even if it was a lie, even if he didn't look like Caleb... for that moment, Joshua had his brother back... and...

The kid gasped, and relief came through Joshua in a bright rush. He was going to be okay, kid was okay, just needed some time...

The brilliant blue eyes fixed on him, and Joshua's jaw fell. Caleb was in there. He could *feel* his twin brother in there looking out at him... the connection they'd always had... was *there.*

The kid held his eyes, and Joshua felt the desperation in them, as the guy spoke, his voice a thin hiss, "Nalox... Naloxo... nal..."

The words trailed off to nothing, as the eyes that held him dilated beyond seeing and drifted
Joshua's chest squeezed, and he grabbed the kid again. Completely unresponsive now, the boy lay still against his hand and wasn't breathing at all.

*God help me! Caleb!*

Quickly, he undid the restraints, and pulled the kid into his arms and down onto the hard floor, fully prepared to deliver CPR if he had to, if he couldn't find a pulse again.

It was still there. Shaky, and getting weaker, but there. Heart racing, Joshua jumped up, stepping over the doctor's body to grab a mask from the lower far shelf, and quickly returned, fixing it to the kids face. Taking a deep breath, he closed his lips over the valve and blew. The kid's chest rose and fell, and Joshua continued, desperate to keep the kid alive.

He needed help... they had to work out what the kid had been given, and how to reverse it, if it was possible. But the only person who could tell them what to do was lying on the ground a few feet away, dead.

"FOLEY!" he yelled towards the door, in between rescue breaths, and Foley showed up almost immediately - he must have been coming to see what the noise was all about.

"What the-" the man started, but Joshua cut him off.

"Foley, look at the vials up there, tell me what they are, quick now."

Joshua checked the kid's pulse again, and scowled. It was thready, and slower still. They were going to lose him if they didn't counteract the drugs he'd been given.

Then he remembered... the kid had said something before he passed out... Something that he'd dismissed as gibberish at the time, but... could have been the name of a drug? What was it though... Nola.. Noxo something?

Foley started to reach down to Doc Adams.

"He's dead, leave him!" Joshua snapped. "Check the vials, now!"

"Lord," Foley whispered, then stepped to the tray. Picking up the vials, he struggle to read them out. "Amo..barbie-tal? And morphine? That sound right?"

"Nothing like Nolaxone? Something like that?"

"No sir, want I should check the shelf?" Foley answered, pointing to them.

Joshua gave another rescue breath and nodded, "Yeah, look for Nolax or Naloxone or something." He stared back down at the kid, whose skin had turned ashen. "Hang in there Caleb."

Then he felt like a fool, saying something like that in front of one of his men. Thankfully Foley hadn't heard, he was too busy scanning the shelf.

"Naxolone?" the man said, holding up a box.

"That's it! Bring it over!"

Foley stepped awkwardly over the doctor's body and handed the box to Joshua before peering closely at the young man on the floor.
"Who's the kid?" he asked, scratching the back of his neck.

"He's... a friend," Joshua answered as he fumbled with the box, ripping it apart. The contents spilled over the kid's shirt and clattered on the concrete floor and included two syringes, two small brown vials and simply printed instructions. The word 'OVERDOSE' caught Joshua's eye first, and he knew they had what they needed.

"Keep breathing for him while I do this," he ordered, and quickly scanned the directions for the dosage. Snapping the head off one of the vials, he inserted a syringe and drew up the entire contents in one pull. Then he cleared out the trapped air, and grabbed at the young man's arm.

Foley was dutifully giving rescue breaths and looking down at the kid. "The blood on his face, what's that all about?"

Joshua ignored him, and steadied the needle. The previous injections had left a little mark on the inside of the kid's elbow, the best guide he was going to get for insertion. He had no idea how deep to go, but he'd been given shots before, he knew what they looked like, and he pushed the needle in as he remembered and delivered the entire dose.

And he prayed.

And then he drew the carved crucifix from a pouch on his vest, the one the kid had held out to him in the forest, and wrapped the kid's hand around it tight.

There you go Caleb. You come back for me now, you beat the demon down and come back.

I'm ready for you now.

"Joshua..." Foley said, coming up for air after another rescue breath, "If Doc Adams is dead... what're we going to do for a doctor?"

The question hit Joshua strange, and his eyes sought the still form of the man who'd brought him into the world, lying behind Foley. The man's white hair was matted red with blood from the gash in his forehead, and his skin was about as white. Doc Adams was dead. It still hadn't sunk in right, and he had a feeling it wouldn't for a while. The news would not be welcome to his dad either. No matter the doc's protests of late, he'd been an essential part of this community, and his loss would hit the town hard.

His eyes fell to the boy, whose chest was falling after another rescue breath from Foley. He had no idea what part the kid had played in the doctor's death, but he made a silent promise to whatever lay of Caleb inside the boy that he'd only speak of it as an accident.

And he thanked the Lord above that his father was out on an arms salvage.

"I don't know Foley," he finally answered, resting his hand against the kid's head. "But we'll find another, God willing."

The instructions had said that the drug worked fast, that they should see a response in a couple of minutes... hadn't it been a few minutes already? Surely it had? Did he need to give more? Was there a maximum dose?

At that moment, the kid made a small noise under the mask, just as Foley was lowering to breathe for him again, and his chest rose slightly and fell. The fingers around the crucifix twitched, tightening around the wooden Jesus, and the kid gasped loudly through the mask, his head tilting back with the effort.
Joshua's heart jumped in his chest. It was working! He was coming back!

"Thank you Lord," he sighed, and he quickly pulled the mask from the kid's face, not wanting anything to be in the way of his breathing.

"Foley," he snapped up at the soldier, "Go get one of the oxygen masks in the other room, make sure it's hooked to a full tank."

"Yes sir," the soldier answered with a nod, rising to his feet.

Joshua stared down at the young man's face, at his pale skin, at the red shock of blood against his mouth and chin, and the dark blue shadows around his eyes.

The kid looked like a corpse.

The thought was sobering, and he withdrew his hand from the guy's head. He was being unwise here, letting some fantasy sway him about his brother. How could this boy, who might be one of the Judged, be his brother? How could Caleb be in there?

But he couldn't deny he'd seen him, seen his twin in the boy's eyes. He knew it as truth. And this made him lean in close as he shook the kid's shoulders, and call out his twin's name.

"Caleb! Wake up now!"

The boy gasped again, and his brow trembled in something like confusion or pain... or both. Slowly, his eyelids fluttered open, and dull, bloodshot eyes rolled to settle on Joshua.

"Caleb... I'm here brother, stay awake for me now," Joshua said quietly, only for the boy to hear, as the sound of Foley's returning footsteps came from the hall out the door.

The kid's eyes glazed over as his brows drew in tight, and his head moved the slightest bit back and forth.

"N-not," the kid managed to rasp, before his body rolled suddenly and he vomited in a violent spasm onto the concrete floor.

"Gross," Foley said from behind Joshua, and tapped his commanding officer on the shoulder with the oxygen mask. The tank clanked dully on the concrete floor as he set it to the side.

"Good, thank you," Joshua said, holding the mask back as the kid retched again, then settled back with a groan. He gestured to the shelves. "Pass me that towel."

Foley did so, and Joshua wiped the kid's face, before fixing the mask and starting the flow of oxygen. Then he sat back and just watched as the boy blinked and breathed, occasionally slipping under again before Joshua would shake him and bring him back. Each time he did those eyes would turn to him, and the boy would mumble something Joshua couldn't hear before the kid looked away again.

The oxygen was helping though, the young man was growing more alert, and making clumsy efforts to sit up. When Joshua felt the danger had truly passed, he gestured for Foley to move the tank as he picked the young man up off the floor and lowered him back onto the bed.

When he pulled back, the kid was staring at him, eyes sharper than before, his gaze steady. The look he was giving Joshua was anything but familiar, and very guarded.
Joshua stared back for a moment, then took the kid's far arm and secured it back in the restraint.

The kid fought him on it, trying to pull his arm away, and when that failed, he tried to undo the padded cuff with sloppily scrabbling fingers.

"Stop..." the kid sighed through the mask, jerking away as Joshua went for his other arm.

"It's for your protection," Joshua answered, reaching out and pulling the kid's arm back and into the cuff.

With an annoyed sound, the young man gave up struggling, and flopped his head back on the bed, scowling at Joshua. "Heard... before..."

"Maybe so, but it's meant here," Joshua said, much more kindly than he'd intended. He secured the buckle and nodded to Foley, then glanced down at the doctor.

He gave a heavy sigh then, as sadness gripped him hard, and for a moment he did not know what to do. He was a child again and Doc Adams was smiling at him as he bandaged his knee, and mussed up his hair before sending him on his way.

"Doc, doctor... help him..." the kid said behind him, and Joshua turned back to see the young man twisted over in the bed and pointing at Doc Adams' body.

"There's no help for him now," he answered quietly.

The kid stared at him for a moment, then his brow squeezed in and he shook his head awkwardly. "No... no, just... hit... head," he mumbled and pointed again.

"He's dead, Caleb," Joshua said bluntly. "His neck's broke."

Shock spread on the kid's face, in his eyes grown wide, in his mouth falling softly open, and Joshua could see the kid wrestling with it inside, and knew whatever had been done here hadn't been done maliciously. It truly had been an accident, and he took that as a small comfort.

Then the kid pulled himself up, and tugged at the restraints hard, disbelief apparently giving him strength.

"No... lemme see... m'a medic..." His eyes sought Joshua's, and there was desperation there, a deep need to amend what'd been done.

Joshua held his eyes, and gently, but firmly pushed him back down in the bed.

"Doc's beyond your help boy," he said, and sighed. "He's with God now."

With a low moan, the kid stopped fighting him, and crumpled in on himself, turning away as best he could to face the wall.

"Noo... I didn want... didn mean," he choked, and then the words fell from him as he started to cry.

Joshua stared at him hard a moment, his own eyes growing wet, then caught Foley's gaze. "We need to move the doc to the morgue. Grab his legs for me."

"Yes sir," Foley said, and maneuvered over, waiting for Joshua to gather the doctor's upper body before lifting the man's legs. Together they moved out and down the hall, and Joshua pushed through the first door on the right into a dark room.
"Lights Foley," he barked, and relief flushed through him as the fluorescent lights flickered on above his head, illuminating the single metal table in the center of a space filled with rusted equipment. Grunting, he lifted the doc's body up high enough for the table and set him down with a tender gentleness that Foley didn't quite mimic, missing landing one of the doc's legs as the table rolled on the concrete floor.

"Sorry," the soldier said to Joshua's glaring look, and quickly righted things, then stepped back. He gave the room a moment of silence before opening his mouth again. "Did I hear right? That kid's a medic?"

Joshua just shrugged, unsure of what to say. Caleb had never shown any liking of the doc's trade, so unless he'd taken it up in the city, Joshua wasn't sure whether it'd come from him... or the kid who'd looked at him as a stranger might.

Shaking his head, annoyed at himself for the pretzel his thoughts were turning into, he stepped around and clapped Foley on the shoulder.

"You go get the undertaker, let him know we've need of him. I want him to take special care with Doc."

Foley gave a sharp nod, gazed once at the doctor's still face, then headed for the door. Reaching the door frame, he turned back.

"So that kid in there's got the same name as your brother then?" he asked.

"That important at this time Foley?" Joshua asked back, his voice sharp.

Foley averted his gaze. "No sir." And he disappeared around the corner.

Joshua stared at the empty doorway for a moment, feeling a growing heaviness on his chest. Knowing he needed to look down at the doc, but not wanting too. Not wanting this death to be a real thing. But he did, because he'd always been the one who did the hard things, the harder the better. And looking down at the dead man's face was one of the hardest things he'd done in his life.

"God, doc..." he spluttered, as the emotions slammed him hard. Grasping the edge of the table, he fought to keep the reaction down, to see the body in front of him as just another corpse, but Doc Adams face was just too familiar. And he'd seen the man less than an hour ago, smiling with a sadness that'd been on his face most of the time of late, as Joshua had brought the kid to him. Then there'd been that spark, when he'd mentioned the boy's link to Caleb, the strangeness of it. There'd been a spark of the doc he used to know.

Joshua sighed deeply, and took the doctor's hand in his own, squeezing tight. At least he'd seen that. At least that'd been the last image of the man in his head. And there would be no investigation. There'd be no questioning of the doc's motives, of his methods, and no mention of the man's overdosing of the kid. If that's what truly happened. It had to be though. Kid didn't inject himself.

"Why'd you do that, doc?" he said out loud over the corpse. Then sighed again and shook his head. "Nevermind. God's got you in his hand now. Hope he holds on tight."

Letting go of the doc's hand, and setting it gently down beside the man's body, Joshua stepped back, and said a short prayer. When it was done, he wiped his eyes and stepped out of the room, turning the lights back off and shutting the door reverently.
Snipped this chapter for length. Sooooo freaking long. I realize we're spending a long time with an OC, but bear with me here. ;)
The Mark of the Judged

When Joshua returned to the quarantine room, he glanced down at the small puddle of blood next to the shelves with a sigh, then looked back up at the young man.

His gut clenched - the kid was too quiet again, too still.

Moving swiftly to the bed, he looked the young man over. He was twisted away towards the wall, his face wet with tears, but slack in what looked like sleep, only he wasn't breathing right again. His breaths were too shallow... and way too far apart... his chest barely moving. At least he still had the oxygen mask on.

Joshua grasped his shoulder and shook him. The kid didn't respond.

"Hey, wake up!" he yelled, and shook the kid again, hard.

With a soft noise, the kid's eyelids raised slowly, then fell again. Then he squirmed, gasping thinly, desperately, as his eyes opened wide.

"..help..." he rasped, fixing on Joshua. "...Nax..olone.."

Joshua nodded. "Yeah, we gave you some. You're okay now."

The young man shook his head, the motion slow and incomplete. "More... naxlone.. need... ivy..." His eyes glazed over and started to close, then he started sharply, blinking rapidly as he focused up at Joshua. "Ivy..."

"Ivy?" Joshua asked, not understanding. "Why do you need..." Then he realized what the kid was trying to say and turned away from the bed to the shelves. "IV, got it."

Then he stopped. How the heck was he supposed to set up an IV?

"Caleb," he called over his shoulder, "You have to help me out here, I dunno what to do."

When the kid didn't respond, Joshua looked back to see him passed out again, his hand hanging limp over the side of the bed.

He strode back to the bed and slapped the kid's face lightly. "Hey, stay awake!"

With a moan, the young man stirred, his bloodshot eyes seeking Joshua's again. Then he frowned. "Don... hit.."

"Then don't fall asleep!" Joshua snapped back. "Help me! What do I need for the IV?"

The kid mumbled a few items, and Joshua went back and forth between the shelves, letting the boy point to what was needed from what he'd grabbed. He found two more boxes of Naxolone, and fumbled to get them open, as the kid slipped back under.

"Stop that," Joshua growled, slapping the kid again.

But he didn't stir this time, no matter how hard he slapped him or shook him, forcing Joshua to use another vial of the drug to bring him back.

When the kid came around again, he tugged at the restraints.
"Need hands," he mumbled, frowning, twisting his wrists in the tight padded cuffs.

Joshua shook his head. "No. You tell me if I'm doing it right."

"Not doin right.." the kid grumbled, staring down at Joshua's hands as he worked to connect some port thing to the line of plastic tubing. "Let... me..."

With an impatient growl Joshua dropped the assembly on the bed and stared at the kid.

"I won't try... anything," the kid said quietly, staring at him with sad eyes. "Promise."

Joshua held his gaze, felt that uncanny sensation of Caleb again, and finally nodded, reaching over to unbuckle his far hand first, then the near.

The kid said nothing and worked clumsily, though with an assurance that came with experience, and Joshua marveled again at the knowledge he seemed to have. He was young, how did he know this stuff?

Finally, Joshua was handed a bag of clear fluid that the kid had connected the drug to, and he stood there for a minute looking clueless until the boy pointed to the stand beside the bed. Without taking his eyes from the kid, he dragged it over and suspended the bag, and watched as the young man plugged the tubing into the needle in his arm, finally rolling a little wheel to set the fluid moving.

Then he seemed to relax, sagging back against the bed with a sigh, before his eyes sought Joshua again.

"Thanks," he said, and his eyes drifted down to the puddle of blood on the floor. His face fell. "He's really dead?"

"Yes," Joshua said, reaching over and taking the kid's wrist again. This time there was no fighting, no struggle, and he secured the boy before stepping back and swiveling the chair around to face the bed.

"I never meant... I'm so sorry," the kid mumbled, and squeezed his eyes shut.

"It was an accident," Joshua offered, and the kid's eyes opened again, desperately sad.

"He.. tried to kill me... I hit him on the head... he fell back," the kid's finger lifted to indicate the shelves.

The admission made Joshua bristle. He took a deep, steadying breath. Then he nodded. "It was an accident. The doctor stepped back, tripped over the chair, and fell."

The kid frowned, then shook his head. "No.. it was my fault."

"Caleb, you listen to me. It was an accident. That's all you'll say. All that'll be known about it. The doc tripped, he was old. That's all."

With an aggravated noise, the young man shook his head. "Not Caleb... name's Rowan."

"But Caleb's in you boy, I've felt him."

The kid named Rowan stared down at Joshua again, his eyes angry. "Not a boy."

Joshua laughed. "You're younger n' me. Means I can call you what I like."
It seemed to make Rowan angrier, and his brows drew in hard.
"Caleb's in me... because I ate him," he snapped. "He's dead." The words were bitter, but the kid's expression changed swiftly as he finished, the anger falling away to something closer to sadness, and he looked away as his head fell back. "I'm sorry."

Joshua couldn't think for a long while, he just stared at the kid's profile as the blood beat hard at his temple.

"I knew..." he said finally, his voice barely above a whisper. "I knew he was dead. Felt it..."

Rowan looked at him again, his face scrunchet in disbelief. "Everyone psychic here? Doctor knew, you knew..."

Joshua stood suddenly, and Rowan's rambling ended immediately, his eyes seeking Joshua's warily.

"You're one of the Judged."

Rowan blinked slowly. "Judged?"

"The devil's mark's on you somewhere, isn't it," Joshua said firmly, walking closer to the bed. "Where he dragged you down to hell."

The kid shifted slightly, betraying the fear he wasn't quite showing in his eyes yet. Joshua could sense it though. He had reason to be afraid.

"Devil's mark?" Rowan repeated, tugging on his restraints again.

"The bite. The bite of the dead, the Judged. God's judgement on you." Joshua's fist was clenched hard at his side.

Rowan shook his head, his eyes flicking between Joshua's fist and face. "Wasn't God's judgement... nothing to do with it. It's a disease." His face grew a little uncertain then and he looked away. "Was something... dark behind it but," he looked back at Joshua, shaking his head. "Not the devil."

"Where's your bite, boy," Joshua growled.

The kid didn't answer, but his gaze flicked for the briefest moment to his leg. Joshua followed the look, and pulled the kid's jeans up, looking for the mark. Not seeing one, he tried the other leg, then stared back at the kid.

Rowan sighed. "Ankle."

Pulling at the kid's sock, and turning his leg, Joshua finally saw it. A clean semi-circle of teeth marks, healed to pink bumps on the inside of the kid's ankle.

The mark. The kid was one of the Judged. And his brother had been taken by this thing.

Which meant his brother had been Judged too.

Joshua's face scrunched up in a sudden pain, and he turned away, releasing the kid's leg.

Caleb had been claimed by the devil. No wonder he'd gone off about the demon. But he'd come back... through the kid? Joshua had never heard of that happening before, had never known it's like.
Was it possible that it was God's work, bringing him back? That Caleb had broke free of the devil... like Doc said?

Joshua turned back to Rowan, who was staring at his bitten ankle blankly.

"I want to speak to my brother," he said abruptly.

Rowan did not look at him.

"I want to speak to Caleb."

The kid finally looked up at him through a mass of dark hair, his blue eyes sharp. "It's not Caleb... it's me. I'm just lost in his memories."

Joshua moved alongside him and held the kid's gaze. "Caleb, answer me."

Rowan frowned, and something flickered behind his eyes, before he quickly turned away.

Joshua grabbed Rowan's jaw and pulled the kid's head back to face him, holding his eyes intently.

"Caleb, it's me, Joshua. Talk to me."

"Stop it," Rowan whispered, and closed his eyes, squeezing them tightly shut.

With an annoyed snort, Joshua released the kid's head, then searched around for the crucifix he'd placed in Rowan's hands earlier. Finally he found it, tucked in between the bed and the wall.

Leaning over he pulled it out, and caught Rowan watching, before the boy averted his eyes again.

"I'm Rowan..." the kid said, staring intently at the far wall.

Joshua followed his gaze and saw the mirror on the wall opposite. Rowan was staring at himself in it, concentrated fully on his reflection.

"No, you're not," Joshua said, finally understanding what was going on. He grabbed the bed and shifted it, moving it so Rowan couldn't see himself anymore. "You're Caleb."

"Dammit, stop it!" the kid yelled, his voice stronger than it'd been since he'd first woken. "I'm not your brother!"

Joshua smiled then, and pressed the crucifix into the kid's hand. The kid jerked away from it as if it was burning, and started pulling at his restraints again.

"Caleb, brother," Joshua said quietly, holding the crucifix in place, and resting his hand on Rowan's shoulder. "You're safe now. Come on out. The demon has no power over you."

"God.. s-stop," the kid stammered, closing his eyes again, and Joshua could tell his words were reaching his brother somewhere inside the kid. He needed something stronger though. Something powerful.

With a sigh, he leaned forward and pressed his hand against the back of the kids neck. "Caleb, I forgive you for going to the city. For leaving us. For leaving me. I need you back now brother. Come back to me."

The kid stopped struggling as Joshua spoke, the tight scowl on his face easing away from him, and for a moment Joshua thought he'd passed out again. But then Rowan's eyes slowly opened, and he stared up at Joshua.
Joshua smiled back.

Caleb was looking out at him.

The kid frowned, looking lost and confused. "Josh?"

"Yes Caleb," Joshua answered softly, withdrawing his hand from the young man's neck.

"Josh... I... I don't feel so good," the kid who'd been Rowan said quietly, as a thin trickle of blood ran from his nose. Grunting then, he leaned forward. "Oww..."

Joshua frowned at the bloody nose, and quickly grabbed some gauze to hold up against it.

The kid who was now Caleb tried to lift a shaky hand to hold it himself, but was stopped short by the restraint. "What..." he whispered softly, pulling against it, his eyes taking in the line going from his arm to the bag, before rising to Joshua. "Why am I..."

"You don't remember?" Joshua asked.

Caleb shook his head. "Head's all... messed up. Feel real spacey..."

Then he looked up at Joshua again, frowning deeply.

"Joshua... you hit me."

"I did," Joshua agreed, nodding. "I'm sorry."

Only then did he notice the dark crusted bruise on the side of Rowan's head, almost hidden by hair, and he winced, grasping the kid's shoulder. "I'm real sorry I didn't believe you Caleb. But... you don't look like you anymore. You've changed."

Caleb looked up at him blankly, blinking slowly, then he jerked in the bed, as his eyes grew wide and zeroed in on the mirror on the far wall.

"Joshua," he whispered, sounding terribly afraid.

Joshua stood back and crossed his arms. He knew what was coming, and he was starting to understand what was playing out here. Rowan had been himself when Joshua saved him just now, but he'd been Caleb when he'd been in the forest. Something was making his brother come to the surface in the kid, then burying him again. He needed to find out what.

Because perhaps then they could bury Rowan.

"Doc, made me... see him," Caleb whispered. "The one who... killed me." He tried to point at the mirror but the cuff snapped up against the bed frame. "I... saw..."

"You saw him Caleb, cause you're a part of him now," Joshua said softly. "You're in him. In his head."

"Joshua," he whispered, sounding terribly afraid.

Caleb stared at him, his brow drawn in confusion. "In his head? What d'you mean..."

"I'll show you." Joshua looked around the room then for something he could use, something less confronting than the full mirror...

"No..." Caleb moaned, "don't... don't make me look at him.. he'll claim me again!" The kid grew rigid on the bed, pressing himself back into the mattress, his eyes fixed on the far mirror.
Joshua sighed, and rummaged through the shelves of supplies. "Caleb, you have to face it. Can't hide from mirrors the rest of your life." Then he spotted something perfect - a thin, flexible piece of plastic that'd been coated to act as a mirror. It was small enough and cheap enough to do the crappy job he needed.

"Here," he said, approaching the bed.

Caleb raised an eyebrow, and stared at the thing in Joshua's hands as if it might leap free and strike him. "What?"

Joshua smirked at his brother. "Do you trust me?"

Caleb swallowed. "With my life, but..."

"Good. Here." With that, he held the mirror in front of Caleb's face.

His brother didn't react at first, just blinked slowly at it, then up at him.

"What?"

"Who do you see? Look close at him Caleb. Hold his eye and he won't have power over you."

Caleb scrunched his face up and looked closer, then jerked back.

"Not my eyes," he said in a thin scared whisper. "Not mine... not mine..."

Joshua nodded. "Not your hair, your face, your body Caleb. But we can make it yours. You just have to get used to this."

"Joshua... I can't... I..."

"Yes you can Caleb. You will, because you're strong. Stronger than Rowan."

"Rowan?" his brother said quietly, riveted by the mirror. "Who's... Rowan? I..."

Joshua tapped the plastic reflection. "The Judged who killed you, his name was Rowan."

"Rowan. Rowan..." Caleb whispered, then he tilted his head down slightly and was quiet for a moment. "Joshua, can I... hold it? The mirror?"

"Sure," Joshua said, and put it in Caleb's far hand.

"No," Caleb sighed, his head still tilted down. "Want it... up... need my hand free, Josh."

"Oh sure," Joshua nodded, and leaned over to undo the buckle on Caleb's wrist.

Something struck him funny then, as he pulled back, something in the way his brother had talked, and he looked at Caleb's face.

Under angry eyes, fresh blood was trickling over the boy's lip.

Before Joshua could correct his mistake, Rowan swung up hard, his freed fist connecting squarely with Joshua's nose, and pain flared violently as Joshua fell back, landing hard on the concrete floor.

As the sound of the second restraint unbuckling came to him, he rolled back up, just as Rowan kicked out, catching him in the throat with a foot.
Gasping and coughing, Joshua fell back again, clutching his neck as the kid slipped off of the bed, grabbed the IV bag and stumbled by.

Joshua made a desperate grab for Rowan's leg from the floor but missed. Rolling to his side, he saw the kid stagger out the door as the blood from his nose spattered on the concrete between his hands. Scrabbling to his feet, he tried to yell out to Foley or anyone within earshot, but nothing came out but a strangled wheeze, and coughing, he ran after Rowan.

As he came to the mouth of the hallway, some strange instinct made him turn, just in time to catch the solid blow from a folded metal chair against his shoulder instead of his head, swung by the kid. Falling into the wall, he struggled to get back on his feet, and caught a dark glance from Rowan before the kid darted away again.

God damn him! The kid was getting away!

"Stop him!" he finally managed to rasp out into the main room, hoping for anyone within earshot to act. "Don't let him leave!"

When he finally reached the stairwell, he looked up and was surprised to see the kid come to a complete stop.

Beyond him he could just make out some armed figures in the bright light of day and felt a huge rush of relief. They'd heard him, they'd stopped him. His brother wasn't leaving, his brother was...

In danger...

"Don't hurt him!" he yelled out, the cry ending in a choked cough, and he took the stairs two at a time till he reached the top and came right up behind Rowan, roughly grabbing him by the arm. "Don't shoot, he's..."

The words died in his mouth, as he came face to face with a tall man, with rough shorn hair, skin dark with the sun and heavy with lines, whose deep set brown eyes slowly swiveled to meet his, took in his bloody nose, then flicked back to Rowan.

Joshua tensed immediately, and felt Rowan's arm stiffen in his grip, then realized with a start that the kid was trembling. And suddenly he knew, though he glanced at Rowan's face to be sure and caught the new blood just starting to fall, that Caleb was back in control.

Fear spiked through Joshua as he watched the emotions play on his brother's new face, and he slowly turned to face the man before them, his mind scrambling to come up with some way to handle the situation, some perfect combination of words that would explain what was happening and protect his brother.

And Caleb blew it all up with one fragile word.

"D-dad?"
Dead Outside

Back to Julie! Coming to the rescue, as per usual. : D

Julie was in agony. The painkillers had worn off an hour ago as best she could tell, and every step she was taking crouched in the bushes just beyond the wall felt like someone stabbing her repeatedly in the side with a jagged knife.

She couldn't get more, because those soldiers hadn't come back from the campsite yet, and she knew they'd just take everything at the shelter anyway.

Which meant no food. No water. No fire either, since she didn't want to be seen.

So she was hungry, thirsty and pale with pain. But at least she wasn't cold.

Yet.

She'd found a few gaps in the wall so far, along the half mile she'd traveled. Not big enough to get in with, but good enough for peering through and getting a feel for what this community, enclave, town, whatever it was, was really like.

And it disturbed her. She was already horrified by the tortured dead hung up on crosses along the top of the wall, but every glimpse she got of the world inside the barrier made her stomach twist a little more and made her all the more fearful for Rowan.

The place just felt wrong. Every woman she'd seen was wearing a full length dress, never colorful or bright, all had their hair tied up tight, and every single one of them held their gaze to the ground, save when hanging laundry. It seemed the only time they dared look at the sky.

And it made Julie's skin itch. She wasn't unfamiliar with more conservative cultures. They'd gone on the occasional road trip before everything went insane, and she remembered a drive out east through Pennsylvania, through Amish country, wondering as a kid why they were all wearing very similar, very dull clothing. But they still smiled at each other, shared fond glances, laughter...

There were no smiles here. The women kept their heads down, went about their business in a hurried fashion and disappeared back into their houses. The men, most dressed in simple pants and shirts, walked around much more casually, stopping to talk in the street, a few sat together on a nearby porch smoking. Two younger men were working together out on a fenced field, but they were the only ones who seemed to be exerting themselves at all.

Well, that just made her angry. Freaking backward town where the women had to dress like nuns and do all of the work? God, they had to get out of here... she had to find Rowan...

Please, please let him be okay.

She hadn't seen him anywhere, but then, she couldn't see the whole town. There wasn't anything that looked like a prison or a holding area though, or like the armory back home, so she had no idea where the armed men had come from.

Most of the structures in the town looked like regular buildings, mostly houses, but with the usual post-apocalyptic add-ons such as solar panels, small wind turbines, and a bunch of barrels for rainwater - things she was used to seeing in the city.
There was one structure she didn't get at all though, at the very edge of her view, a strange, almost monolithic concrete structure with a metal door that seemed too small for anyone to do anything in.

It wasn't until a man dressed in the same dark military garb, which was pretty hardcore for a small town like this, walked out of the structure and hurriedly out of view that she realized it had to be a bunker of some sort. Just the entrance to something larger underground.

And it was probably where Rowan was being held.

*Shit.*

God, why couldn't he be in one of the regular houses? A place with multiple entrances she could sneak into and out of, where she had a rough idea of room layout? Not a fucking mystery bunker...

*Shit!*

Julie had been in a few military bunkers at the beginning of the apocalypse, before her family had moved to the city, and they'd all been deep, dark, disturbing places. Didn't seem to matter how much artificial light was used, they all felt like caves - damp and unnatural.

They'd stayed in one that'd been a huge, sprawling underground system, with everything anyone would need to survive for years in any natural or man-made disaster. It even had a pool, where the surrounding walls were painted to look like a tropical beach. They'd met the man who'd built it too, an old friend of her dad's. He'd been so confident and cocky about it, she'd immediately disliked him, and then that woman, the wife of another friend, came in with seizures everyone thought was from her epilepsy.

The woman turned that night, and took her husband, who took their kids, who took the owner of the shelter, who went and took another family who'd been staying there. And that was the end of that place. Her dad ended up closing the dead man in his own perfect apocalypse home, clawing with the other dead at the massive steel door as it shut in his gaping dead face.

Julie shivered at the memory. They almost didn't make it out. Her dad had tried to reclaim their guns, locked up in a safe near the entrance, where the owner had made them stash them, patting the key in his pocket with a titanic grin. They still had their knives of course, but the dead overwhelmed them as they tried to break into the safe, and there was nothing for it but running in the end.

Blinking, Julie pulled herself back from memory, licking her dry lips, and looked through the gap again, to the doorway of the bunker.

How the hell was she going to get into that?

It didn't seem to be guarded at the moment, but she had no idea if that was normal. If she could find a big enough gap to go through the wall, she might be able to make her way to the bunker at night without being seen, but then she didn't know what kind of lighting or surveillance they had set up around it, or where Rowan was underground.

Julie's heart squeezed tight.

This was starting to feel hopeless. Maybe she could find a radio instead? Get her dad up here with some men, take Rowan by force...

But the radio was probably in the damn bunker.
Movement caught her eye on the opposite side of the town - people moving quickly off the street, lining up on the road, looking towards the center of town where she couldn't see. A woman and a young boy stood in front of her, the woman had her head down, like the rest, the boy was waving furiously and smiling for some reason, at whoever was coming.

Then a large group of armed men came into view, dressed in the same black uniforms as the other soldiers she'd seen, led by a man she immediately took to be the commander. The way he carried himself, and the permanent scowl on his lined face, gave her odd echoes of her father back home.

A large camouflaged truck came up behind the men, followed by another smaller truck, and the entire procession stopped in front of the bunker, just as the door was wrenched open.

And a shockingly familiar face came into view.

*Rowan!*

Julie's heart jumped - he was right there! If she could just...

She checked herself. *Just what?*

What the hell could she do?

The soldiers raised their rifles and surrounded the entrance, obscuring her view, but she'd seen the leader up front, staring Rowan down. R's face was still bloodied from the nosebleeds... he looked pale... he looked terrified.

Julie pulled the gun from her jeans.

*What the hell do I do? I can't take them all down from here!*

"Mama? Who's that?"

Julie glanced over at where the boy had been, pulling her eyes reluctantly from the swarm of soldiers around Rowan, then froze.

The boy was standing only a couple of yards away, on the other side of the wall, pointing directly at her.

For a moment Julie couldn't think, and simply stared back, as still as possible, not daring to even blink.

Then the mother walked over, slowly, peering her way with a frown, before her eyes grew wide.

*Oh shit.*

"Fuck!" Julie swore, and tried to twist away from the opening. The motion sent a red-hot stab of agony through her body, and she cried out, just as the woman on the other side of the wall let out a scream of her own.

"DEAD! DEAD OUTSIDE!!"

Clenching her teeth, Julie got to her feet - *too slow!* - and ran as fast as she could - *too fucking slow!* - to the dark shelter of the woods. The pain brought tears to her eyes, but she pushed on hard, desperate to escape being seen. She wasn't near an entrance, so she had that at least, but-

The crack of rifle fire sounded off behind her, and Julie screamed as a branch level with her head
exploded a few yards away to her left. Immediately she started a wild zig zag, never once moving predictably, her heart pounding hard against her burning ribcage, her imagination feeding the fear of where the next bullet would hit.

But no further shots came, and Julie kept running, wondering if perhaps they'd never actually seen her and were just firing blind. She stepped on logs, rocks, boulders, downed branches, anything that would interrupt her tracks, and finally, when she'd left the town far behind, she stopped running.

Alarm calls from chickadees filled the air around her as she leaned against the rough bark of a hemlock. Every heaving breath she took stabbed her deeper still, and she slumped down against the base of the tree, trying desperately to find some way to get above the pain of her arm and ribs, to find some slight relief from the the assault.

As her breathing slowed, as she was finally able to hear over her gasping and the pulse of blood pounding through her skull, she realized she could hear the rush of water over rocks. Faint, but steady, somewhere nearby.

With strength borne of need, she rose to her feet again, grunting against the hurt, and stumbled in the direction of the sound. Cursing at her wobbly legs, she pushed through a thick stand of bushes, and almost fell into a small stream winding its way noisily through the forest, around rocks slick with green moss, and lit with bright dabs of sunlight.

Julie almost cried at the sight. Wincing, she knelt down and brought a cupped handful of the clear, icy cold water to her mouth. The taste was incredible, and she decided she didn't care what animal was pooping in it upstream, this was the best damn stuff she'd ever drank ever, and she was going to stay here for the rest of her life drinking it, no matter what.

Then she wondered if she was perhaps just a little delirious, as she hadn't eaten anything for a day now, she was hurt and had pushed herself too hard, and...

Gently, she lay her hand over her belly.

God, what was she thinking, drinking this water? There could be all kinds of horrible things in it - she had to be careful.

And she needed to eat, desperately.

With a tired sigh, Julie looked up from her stomach and scanned her environment quickly. There were inquisitive birds watching her warily from the branches above the stream, there were a few tiny minnows moving sinuously in the current below, and dragonflies shimmering in the sunlight as they zigzagged above the water. Plenty of vegetation too, but she couldn't remember if any of it was safe enough to eat.

*Should have listened to dad's plant talk.*

No rabbits, no squirrels in sight, and she couldn't use her gun anyway. She could set a trap, but the effort would sap what strength she had left and she had nothing to bait it with.

Maybe they hadn't taken everything from the shelter yet. She could always go back, check from a safe distance and maybe snatch enough to tide her over for a day, until she could get Rowan out of that crazy town.

With a sharp nod to nobody, Julie tried to get to her feet, and was more than a little surprised when she failed completely, her body refusing to do anything but tell her how sore it was.
"Too tired."

"Dammit," she whispered, and released another sigh as she stared down at the water, sparkling in the sunlight.

If she got a little rest, just closed her eyes for a few minutes, she'd have enough strength to get going again, make some decisive moves, rescue Rowan, get the hell away.

Shifting herself in painful stages, she nestled between the twisted roots of the nearest tree, and rested back against the smooth grey trunk.

*Perfect.* A few minutes of rest, then she'd make her move.

*Yup.*

Julie slowly closed her eyes, and the burbling of the stream lulled her to sleep.

As she drifted under, her mind revisited one moment, back at the wall. The drab, bunned woman, eyes fixed on her in terror, mouth opened wide and screaming.

*DEAD! DEAD OUTSIDE!*

Smirking, she nestled in deeper.

*C'mon. Do I really look that bad?*
Caleb stared at his father, unable to think, unable to move, feeling detached and disoriented, and
dread. He was distantly aware of his brother yelling behind him and grabbing his arm, but
couldn't look away from his father's eyes. They bore into him, as hard and as sharp as flint. Glaring
at him as if he were a stranger.

And the word just popped out.

"D-dad?"

As soon as it left his mouth, Caleb felt his brother's hand clench tight on his arm, and realized it
may not have been the smartest thing to say.

Samuel's brown eyes shot wide open at the word, then his heavy brows lowered darkly as his
mouth twisted in a sneer.

"Joshua," he said sharply, his voice rough. His eyes never left Caleb's, and never softened, though
confusion had joined the hardness there.

And Caleb suddenly realized that his dad didn't recognize him. Couldn't recognize him. And the
strangest, most wonderful feeling of relief rose in the hazy mess of his mind.

"Yes sir?" his brother answered, and the grip tightened on Caleb's arm.

Ouch.

"Explain."

Joshua shifted beside him. "Uh."

Caleb stood there, swaying slightly. He felt like throwing up. Not just because his father was
staring him down with a naked malevolence, but because his thoughts were floating around his
head like drunken bees. His body felt like it belonged to someone else.

That's 'cause it does.
No no... not thinking about that...

"Joshua," Samuel growled, this time low and drawn out. A warning. Those hard eyes flicked away
from Caleb to settle on his brother, bringing another rush of relief.

"This is... Eric," Joshua said quickly. "He's been examined, he's clean, been hit on the head... little
confused..."

Joshua's voice trailed off as Samuel raised a finger, and cocked his head back towards a group of
soldiers standing near the truck.

"Morrisey, Denning!"

Two of the soldiers stepped forward, one with pale blue eyes and a thick black beard, one much
older, whose greying buzz cut was just visible under his crammed down cap.

"Morrisey, take Eric down, check him for the mark."
The bearded man nodded, caught Caleb’s eye, and gestured down the stairs with the muzzle of his rifle. "Move it."

Caleb stared at the muzzle, his eyes wide, his head thick, and turned to go, but Joshua held his arm tight.

"Dad, I said he's clean, he's-"

"Denning," Samuel continued, giving his son a warning glare, "Go get Doc Adams, let him know we've got wounded, one badly."

"Yes sir."

"Doc's dead," Joshua blurted out.

Everyone froze for a moment, and all eyes turned to Joshua.

Caleb’s mouth fell open. "What?"

_Doc's dead?_

"Repeat that," Samuel said in a low voice.

Joshua opened his mouth to answer, and at that moment, Foley walked up to the group with another man in tow. He gave Samuel a sharp salute, then nodded to Joshua. "Mr. Burnett as ordered. I've told him to take extra care, sir."

Caleb stared at the portly red man behind Foley for a moment before it clicked. Mr. Burnett. The town undertaker.

_It is true... Doc..._ His heart squeezed in his chest, as tears crept up on him suddenly.

"JOSHUA!" Samuel's voice boomed as he turned back from Foley, his eyes wide with anger and disbelief.

Caleb jumped in his brother's grip, his heart thundering in his chest. But Joshua stood up straight, and faced his dad down.

"Doc Adams is dead," he answered, his voice steady. "He died about an hour ago. Broken neck."

"HOW?!" Samuel roared, thrusting his face into his son's.

Joshua didn't flinch. "He fell sir, tripped over a chair, hit some shelves on the way down."

"And you saw this?!" Their father spluttered.

Joshua nodded. "Came into the room sir, just as he tripped."

"What room?!"

"Quarantine," Joshua answered, and gestured at Caleb, "Doc was treating... Eric."

Samuel's eyes flicked back to Caleb, and Caleb felt himself shrink to a tiny speck of nothing under that gaze.

_God above... whatever it is, I'm know I'm guilty of it, I'm sorry, I promise I'll never do it again, I'll-"
Another of Samuel's soldiers stepped forward, leaning into the commander.

"Sir, we need to get these men treated asap, Saul's lost a lot of bl-"

"Doc is *dead*, Stevens," Samuel shot back, his eyes turning away from Caleb. "You wanna tell me how we're supposed to do that?!"

"That kid's a medic."

Silence descended as everyone turned to Foley, who'd spoken up from the back of the group.

Caleb's heart jumped. Foley was pointing at him.

"What?" he whispered, but his voice was overwhelmed by his dad's angry bark of the same.

Joshua strangled Caleb's arm once again, turning to stare at him with eyes wide in warning. Samuel hadn't seen though, he'd turned to Foley.

"I heard him say it," Foley continued, still gesturing at Caleb. "He offered to help doc, but doc was already dead. He said *I'm a medic*."

Slowly, Samuel turned back to Caleb, and something in his eyes had changed. They were less hard, more thoughtful.

"This true?" he asked.

Joshua's hand dug into Caleb's arm again and he spoke up. "Yes sir, it's true."

Samuel put up a silencing hand again, and moved closer to face Caleb. The nearness of his father made his hair stand on end.

"Is it true, Eric?"

Caleb found himself nodding, and he tried to speak, but his throat had gone bone dry. So he just kept nodding, until Joshua clamped down on his arm again and he stopped.

"You in a fit state to work on my men?" Samuel asked, his eyes tracking over Caleb's face, before he pointed to the IV line going from the bag Caleb found himself suddenly holding, to the needle in Caleb's arm.

Surprised, Caleb stared down at himself, not understanding what he was doing holding a bag of clear liquid. He almost dropped it, but at that moment Joshua pulled him around and nodded at his father.

"He is sir, I'll make sure of it."

Samuel's finger flicked between them both. "The blood on your faces, where-"

"DEAD! DEAD OUTSIDE!"

The entire group turned as one towards the sound, and across the road Caleb saw a woman running from the wall holding a little boy in her arms.

Caleb's heart stuttered. *Dead*?!

Samuel waved at two of the soldiers nearby. "Go." The men immediately turned to run across the
road to the wall, one of them stopping to talk to the woman.

There was sudden crack of a gunshot, as the soldier who'd reached the wall took aim and fired. Samuel immediately pointed to his remaining men.

"Morrisey, Denning - help move the wounded," he ordered, and he grabbed Joshua by the arm. "We'll talk later boy. You get Eric working on my men."

Then Samuel gathered the other soldiers and quickly started towards the north gate.

Caleb didn't get much time to reflect on what had just happened, as Joshua pulled him forcefully down the stairs. As he staggered after his brother, his legs got tangled and he tripped. Joshua caught him roughly.

"Watch it," Joshua snapped, glancing over him at the group retreating from the door.

"Sorry," Caleb mumbled, and his head swam as he pulled himself back up. "There's dead here, Josh?" A dull panic rose at the thought, but he tried to focus on each step as Joshua dragged him down and around the corner into the hospital wing.

"They'll handle it," Joshua said, and let out a heavy breath as he pulled Caleb towards the quarantine room. "Holy God above... I thought we were done."

Caleb stopped then, planting his feet, and brought his brother up short as his mind pulled away from the dead and hung on a terrible truth. "Joshua.. Doc's dead?"

"Yeah," Joshua answered, pulling him forward again. "No time to explain, we gotta get you set up."

"But... Doc..." The tears threatened again, and Caleb swallowed hard, feeling himself falling into a heavy grief. The doc had always been his truest friend here... his guardian... how could he be gone?

Joshua grabbed him by his arms and stared him down. "Caleb. We don't have time to grieve right now. You have to help those men. Push it aside, focus."

Caleb shook his head and the room went wonky for a moment, so he closed his eyes, bringing his hand to his forehead. "But Joshua... I don't-"

"Foley was right, the kid said he was a medic," Joshua said, squeezing Caleb's arms hard till he looked up. "Wasn't lying either, I saw him work. He put that IV in, drugged as he was. You've got to do this, you have to figure it out."

Caleb's heart started to pound again, and he shook his head furiously. "I don't know how to heal folks Josh, you know that..."

Joshua gave an impatient growl, and dragged him into the quarantine room, to the shelves, and Caleb stared down at the dark red puddle on the floor.

"Is that... blood?"

Joshua shook him, and he finally looked up, his face scrunched in despair. His brother held a bottle from the shelf in his face.

"Try to think, Caleb, what's this do?"

Caleb stared at the bottle, hard, his eyes not quite focusing on the writing. "I don't know?" He
backed away from the wall of shelves, away from the supplies... the blood. He couldn't stand the sight of blood, how could he possibly...?

"Josh, don't make me do this..."

"It's not me, Caleb!" Joshua snapped at him. "Dad'll kill you if you don't do this! He'll kill you! Do you understand!?"

"No," Caleb moaned, and raised his hands to his temples, "I can't... I don't KNOW!"

Joshua stared at him then, saying nothing more, his face closed and unreadable.

"I'm sorry Josh... I'm no doctor," Caleb cried, his emotions overwhelming him again, amplified by the drugs, flooding his eyes with tears.

Joshua nodded slowly. "Okay." Then he sighed, nodding over Caleb to the far wall of the room. "Okay..."

Caleb struggled to get himself under control, as he felt his brother slowly guide him across the room. He'd screwed everything up. Everything was wrong. Doc was dead. His father wanted him dead. God had given him a dead man's face...

"Rowan."

Joshua's voice sounded resigned, and Caleb wondered if someone had stepped into the room, before a fragment of memory came to him, of looking in a little mirror and his brother telling him that Rowan... was...

Caleb looked up, straight into the eyes of the demon, reflected in the mirror. The demon his brother called...

"Rowan," Joshua said again, staring at him through the mirror. "I need to talk to you. Right now."

Shaking his head, Caleb blinked rapidly and stared into the mirror, his eyes growing wide as the demon looked back. Why was his brother... what...

Twisting around with a rising fear, he tried to confront Joshua, "What are you-

But Joshua pushed him around, to face the mirror again. "Your name is Rowan, remember?!

Caleb stared at his brother in the mirror, his eyes swimming in tears. "Josh, why?"

His brother's face was hard and hurt. "I'm sorry... but Rowan's the medic... look at yourself Rowan, come on!"

Caleb shook his head, but the motion felt strange and wrong. Joshua was betraying him... he was...

He was...

He looked.

Blue eyes stared back at him, there was blood smeared around his mouth... new blood coming now, and his head... was...

"Owww," he whispered, squeezing his eyes closed, surprised by the cool trail of tears falling down his cheek as the headache pulsed hard against his temple.
"Rowan?"

Rowan looked up, his mouth falling open as he realized who was talking behind him, and he twisted sharply, pulling himself out of Joshua's grip. But the motion was sloppy, and he staggered with it, hitting the wall before falling to the floor. The IV bag fell from him and slid across the concrete.

Joshua was on him quickly, and Rowan lashed out, throwing a messy punch at the man that merely glanced against the soldier's shoulder.

"Rowan!" Joshua yelled, seizing his arms. "Stop it! Please listen!"

"Get the fuck off me!" Rowan yelled back, struggling to pull his arms back.

"You're in danger," Joshua said quickly, holding him firmly. "Not from me! My dad's going to kill you if you don't treat his men."

Rowan stopped fighting for a moment, and blinked up at Joshua, his drugged mind trying to process what he'd just heard. He couldn't make any sense out of it, and shook his head.

"No, listen!" Joshua barked at him. "We've got wounded! You need to help them, or my dad is going to kill you. He'll kill Caleb!" Joshua's expression grew desperate. "Please."

"Caleb's not real!" Rowan growled, finally managing to pull his arms free. Confused, he looked about himself. What the hell was he doing back in this room? He'd broken free, hadn't he? What happened?! Grunting against his throbbing head, he struggled to remember.

"He's real enough," Joshua sighed, pulling Rowan back from his muddled thoughts. "My dad's the leader here Rowan, if you can't prove you're a medic, he's going to check you for the mark, he'll find it, and he'll kill you. You have to do this!"

Rowan tried to get up and failed. He swatted away Joshua's offered hand. "No! Not doing anything for you!"

He had to get out... had to find a way to get back to Julie. She was out there, hurt, alone...

"Jesus," he mumbled, his thoughts spilling from his mouth as he struggled to get up. "I have to find her!"

Joshua looked at him blankly. "Who?"

"Julie," Rowan moaned, shaking his head to try and clear it.

"Help us," Joshua said suddenly, his eyes bright, "and I'll let you see her!"

Rowan's eyes snapped to Joshua's. "You have her?! Where?! Have you hurt her?!" Eyes blazing with anger and fear, he found new strength to push himself up, and quickly grabbed Joshua around the throat, forcing the man back and into the wall. "Where is she?!"

Joshua just smirked, and calmly pried Rowan's hand away.

"Help us," he said quietly, "and you'll see her. If you don't, you'll both die."

Rowan swung his fist up and punched the man.

It wasn't as strong as he'd meant it to be, just a glancing hit on the jaw. Something was wrong, the
counter drug was wearing off...

Rowan turned and looked for the bag, and saw it on the floor. It was leaking... and the needle was pulling free of his arm.

As he frantically reinserted the needle, and lurched over to the bag, Joshua just watched.

"I saved your life you know," Joshua said. "You owe me."

Rowan glared back at him, as he walked unsteadily to the stand with the bag. "Only after.. your doctor tried to kill me."

"Yeah, and then you killed him for it," Joshua spat back. "You took our only doctor from us. These men will die because of what you did."

Rowan hung the bag back up on the IV stand, and slowly his gaze fell.

"You owe us this."

Rowan did not look up.

Joshua had him.

"Get your shoes on, get your head together," Joshua ordered, pulling Rowan's gear out from under the bed. "I'll stay by your side, keep you steady, you tell me what to do."

Rowan pressed his forehead against the cold metal of the stand, and took a deep breath. Then he slowly nodded.

"Good," Joshua said, and released a heavy breath of his own. "Hurry up."

Walking back to the bed, Rowan fumbled to get his shoes on, then stood. The room swam, and he started to wonder if it wasn't just the drugs working against him.

"Need to eat," he mumbled. "Need water."

"We don't have time," Joshua said, his voice exasperated. "They're waiting for us, come on!"

Rowan fixed Joshua with a cold stare. "Get me something or I'll pass out."

The soldier held his stare, his eyes dark, then he sighed and walked to the door.

"You get started and I'll bring you something as quick as I can." He went to open the door, but hesitated and turned back as Rowan walked over, leaning on the metal stand. "And you answer to Eric now, okay?"

Rowan frowned. "Who the hell's Eric?"

Joshua shook his head, "No, no, you're Eric, that's your name here now. I had to come up with something quick, so now you're Eric."

"But..." Rowan murmured, rubbing his eyes as he tried to fight off the effects of the sedative, "Why'd you pick Eric... why not Rowan? Nobody knows me here."

Joshua snorted. "Can't have folks calling you Rowan when you're Caleb, it'll confuse him, and might bring you back."
Rowan stared at Joshua, his mouth falling open as a horrible realization hit him. "You... you can't keep me here as Caleb, Joshua... I'm not staying here... I'm not going to be your dead brother for you!"

Crossing his arms, Joshua leaned back against the door.

"No?" he said, his voice sharp. "You killed Caleb. You killed Doc. Seems only right you take their places here."

Rowan backed away from the door, a growing horror and fear rising through the haze of the barbiturate. "No... it's not right, Joshua - I'm not your fucking slave... or your fucking brother! He's not real!"

Joshua watched him for a moment, his eyes angry. Then with a heavy sigh his shoulders slumped.

"You're right..." he said quietly, nodding as his eyes fell from Rowan's. "You're right."

Rowan studied him warily. "I'll help your men..." he said cautiously, "I owe that much, but I can't stay, Joshua. You... you have to let Caleb go."

Joshua nodded again, slowly, releasing another big sigh, then he met Rowan's gaze.

"Okay. You help our soldiers, you give me one more talk with my brother," he held his hand up quickly, "No matter if it's not real! I want a chance to say goodbye. Then you can go."

"Both of us," Rowan said.

Joshua frowned in confusion. "What?"

"Julie too, you'll let her go. You promise."

Joshua stared at him a moment longer, then furiously nodded his head. "Yeah, yeah. Both of you."

Rowan's eyes narrowed. "Promise, Joshua. One talk with fake Caleb, then we go."

"Don't you use that word," Joshua growled, his face twisting bitterly. "You be respectful."

Rowan's gaze dropped for a moment. "Sorry. Then he looked up at Joshua again. "A chance to say goodbye, then you let us go. Promise."

"Sure."

The door was wrenched open, and Morrissey pushed his bearded head in. "Our guys are waiting for you kid, what's the hold up?" His gaze fell to the door frame. "What in Hades happened to the door?"

"Nevermind that," Joshua snapped. "Morrissey, I need to help Eric with his work. Go to the mess hall and grab a water jug and some jerky would ya?"

Morrissey glared at him. "I'm not your damn waiter! If you're hungry, you get-"

"It's for him," Joshua growled, hooking his thumb at Rowan. "He hasn't eaten for a day, so get him something and stop complaining."

"Yes... sir," Morrissey muttered, fixing Joshua with an angry look before heading back down the hall.
Joshua turned to Rowan. "Ready, 'Eric'?

Rowan didn't answer, but pushed past him into the hallway, and tried to focus on what he needed to do. The men were set up in bunks against the walls. Two of the men were conscious, though pale with pain. Their eyes watched him as he quickly assessed their injuries, his mind sharpening with the need to ease their suffering, and he sent Joshua for painkillers and IV supplies, before moving to the third.

It wasn't a pretty sight. The man had taken a bullet wound to the abdomen, and there was extensive percussive trauma. The guy was out, deep in shock and unresponsive. Rowan knew he needed surgery immediately, but wasn't quite sure he'd be able to perform it.

Didn't matter, it had to be done.

Then he found out they didn't have an OR.

That didn't matter either. The stolen memories he was drawing on came from a medic used to improvising in combat situations, and Rowan set to work immediately, setting up as sterile an environment as possible, an IV with a sedative to keep the man under, and enlisting Joshua for stitching up what he ended up cutting out.

At the end, as his body grew more and more weary, while his mind grew sharper, he was impressed by how cool and steady Joshua stayed, faced with a man opened up before him. And then it just ended up worrying him, as they closed the wound together. What had Joshua seen... what had he done, to make him so used to seeing and doing something like this?

By the time he'd dressed the other men's wounds, distributed pain relief, and given the third man the best chance for survival he could, his mind was clearer than it had been all day, but he was stumbling with exhaustion. Morrissey had indeed brought in some jerky and water, but it'd been meager and his body craved more.

Samuel stayed out of his way for the most part, which was good, because whenever Rowan saw the man, he felt the stirrings of intense emotions that clearly didn't belong to him, and knew Caleb wasn't far off.

Another meeting was inevitable however, Rowan knew that, and shortly after he'd started bandaging some of the minor wounds of other soldiers, Samuel came directly to him. He was glad he had somewhere else to stare than at the man's weathered face.

"Saul's condition?" Samuel asked, and Rowan had to think for a minute before he realized the man was talking about the soldier with the stomach wound.

"Bad." Rowan answered bluntly, still careful to keep his head down, his eyes focused on the swabbing he was doing to the soldier's arm. "Had to remove a lot of damaged tissue, infection's highly likely, and he's in severe shock. I'm not sure he's going to pull through."

Samuel seemed to take it in stride, then spoke in a low voice. "God will see him through. Saul's been a faithful follower, doing His good work. It's God's will he live."

Rowan didn't know what to say to that, and tried to tamp down the urge to shrug, sure it would be one of the worse things he could do that time. He focused instead on applying butterfly strips to the soldier's wound.

"How old are you, boy?"
The use of the word 'boy' made Rowan bristle. He was getting pretty fucking sick of people calling him that here, and he had to stop himself from looking up at the man and snapping back. Instead he took a deep breath and answered honestly.

"Twenty one."

He'd died when he was twenty. His body hadn't aged during the eight years he'd been a corpse, so he'd been twenty still when he returned to life, and he'd just celebrated his first birthday since coming back. It was bizarre.

"Twenty one?" Samuel snorted, and Rowan wondered if perhaps he should have padded the years out a little, added in some of the dead ones to balance things out. After all, it wouldn't be lying, he'd been walking the earth for twenty nine years now.

But nobody would believe he was almost thirty.

Wasn't like he was mentally that age either. While he'd been much better at thinking than the average corpse, marking the passage of time wasn't exactly his specialty as one of the undead.

"Twenty ONE!?" Samuel repeated, clearly having problems with his age.

Rowan felt himself react to the strength of emotion coming from the commander, as his pulse trembled at his throat, and a light sweat broke out on his forehead. It was all coming from Caleb. Something about the relationship these two had, but Rowan had no intention of diving into Caleb's memories to find out. Instead he added an extra bandage to the wound that it didn't need, and pondered how else he could keep his head down.

"Where'd you learn this stuff then?" the commander finally growled.

Rowan didn't miss a beat. "UMASS, Wishard, Army."

Jack's memories came easy to him, and there was no threat of losing himself in them anymore either. He'd already done that a few times, but he'd managed to integrate 'Jack' back into himself. Managed to find himself in the mess. Now he could dance in and out of the man's experiences whenever he needed.

As soon as the words left his mouth though, he winced. What he'd just said was ridiculous, considering his age. He felt the disbelief rolling off of Samuel, and quickly turned away, giving the soldier the all clear. Gathering up the dishes of empty packaging and used syringes, he went to discard them, but Samuel stepped in his way, blocking his path.

Rowan kept his gaze down, and fought to stave off the panic he could feel just under the surface. If he didn't get out of this situation soon, he'd slip into Caleb again, and that would be very, very bad. Something told him Samuel wouldn't be as accepting as Joshua had been...

"Eric," Samuel said, in a strangely casual tone, "You expect me to believe you're some kind of child genius?"

The hairs on Rowan's neck started to soar again, and the skin on his arms prickled in goosebumps. He did not like this man. There was something very uncomfortable going on here. Not just because this man led some kind of military cult. Sure, Samuel was the authority figure in this place, but Rowan had faced up against Colonel Grigio, and while that man had certainly inspired fear in him, the guy had never made his skin crawl.

Without meaning to, he took a step back, and bumped straight into someone he hadn't realized was
standing there. When he tried to turn around, Samuel grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back.

"Joshua tells me you're from a settlement on the other side of the mountains. That you crashed that plane up on our hill. That true?"

Rowan swallowed hard, and nodded. He wasn't sure what story Joshua had told, but sticking to it seemed to be the wisest thing to do right now.

"You spying on us boy?"

Frowning, Rowan looked up, focusing on the man's thin mouth, framed by bitter lines, and shook his head. "No."

"Look me in the eye Eric, so I know you're tellin' the truth."

Heart pounding in his chest, Rowan froze, battling the rising fear of Caleb.

Samuel squeezed his arm tight, and pulled him in close, and the man's breath washed over him in a caustic wave, sour with alcohol.

Rowan looked up, and opened his mouth to speak, to clear himself, but his world started to crumble around him as he met those dark, deep eyes.

"I..." he whispered, and tried desperately hard to hold on to who he was, as Caleb's fear threatened to drown him.

"Father!"

The man before him turned away, towards Joshua, who'd called from the locker room, and Rowan sagged, grabbing at his temple, trying to stave off the threatening headache.

The crushing grip on his arm released with a jarring wrench, and Rowan felt himself fall. With a clatter of metal dishes, he landed on the concrete floor, catching himself with an outstretched hand.

"What, Joshua?!" snapped Samuel impatiently above him, and there was a short pause before he spoke again. "Morrissey, get him up."

Hands hooked under Rowan's shoulders as he sat trying to pull himself back together, and he was suddenly hoisted upward, back onto his feet. The motion made the world lurch dramatically, and a new sweat broke out on his forehead as he felt his legs buckle beneath him.

"I'm..." he mumbled, before exhaustion, the lack of food, and the jarring mental swings he'd had all day took their toll and the world blinked out completely.
The world drifted back in, with the smell of something burning.

Meat.

Rowan's mouth watered. It'd been so long since he'd eaten meat...

An intense pain hit him, shooting up from his leg, shocking and inescapable. Sucking in a breath to cry out, he tried to pull away as his eyes shot wide open.

A hand, clammy and sour with sweat, pressed down over his mouth, cutting off his cry, and Joshua's face came into view, fearful and pale.

"I have to do this boy! I'm sorry! Please, keep quiet!"

Rowan tried to push him off, but his arms stopped short, and he realized he was restrained again, back on a hospital bed.

He tried to scream out, tried to swear his head off, his eyes angry and mad with pain, but Joshua kept a hand firmly clamped over his mouth, glowering at him and glancing towards the door.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not finished! I can't let them find it!"

The hand jerked away, and Rowan sucked in a breath to roar, as he tried again to pull his legs free. Something was thrust into his mouth then, a heavy mass of gauze, that cut off his cry and brushed the back of his throat, making him gag. Joshua taped it down with medical tape, then withdrew, and Rowan raised his head, trying to yell at him, trying to pull his limbs free but getting nowhere.

And he watched, his eyes wide with panic, as Joshua grabbed his leg, and flicked a lighter into life. The thing burned like a miniature acetylene torch, white hot and loud.

_Oh fucking Christ!_

Rowan jerked his leg, trying to free it from Joshua's grip, but the guy held him firmly in place, twisting so Rowan could only see his back as the lighter drew in against his ankle.

And Rowan screamed and jerked and thrashed as his skin burned and bubbled over the flame. He couldn't see it, but he could feel it and the pain was worse than anything he'd ever felt before. He couldn't get away, couldn't stop it, and the smell curled up his nostrils as his head pushed back against his pillow and his mind raced for an understanding of _why._

And suddenly he knew.

Joshua was burning away the bite mark.

Then it was over. Joshua released his leg and Rowan groaned, writhing on the bed, because it felt as if the lighter was still there, still searing through the flesh of his ankle.

But it wasn't. Joshua's face filled Rowan's view and a hand clamped down on his shoulder, and it was only then that he truly noticed the angry bruises on the side of the man's face and over his brow, the gash above his darkened eye.

Joshua's expression was haggard, his eyes haunted.
"I'm sorry... god Caleb, I'm so sorry... but I had to..." he whispered, and gently rested his hand on Rowan's forehead. "Done now though, all done."

Rowan shook his head angrily, dislodging Joshua's hand, his eyes tight with terrible pain.

Joshua seemed to compose himself, pulling back again.

"I know you're Rowan right now, Caleb," he said quietly. "I have painkillers for you, and I need you to tell me how to treat the burn. Can you do that?"

Rowan glared at him. "FFFFGHFFFF!" he spat in rage, then released a long breath, looking away as he groaned. The pain in his ankle was a living thing, ripping, tearing at his flesh still, eating him alive.

Rolling his eyes back to the man he nodded quickly.

Joshua nodded back, "Okay, I'm going to take the stuff out of your mouth. You need to keep quiet. I know you hate me right now-"

"Nnnww?!" Rowan yelled, interrupting him.


Rowan gave an irritated grunt and flopped his head back. Whatever he had to do to get something for this pain, to get Joshua to let him go, to get back to Julie and the fuck away from this place...

Joshua fumbled for the edges of the tape, and pulled it free, drawing the gauze in a wet mass from Rowan's mouth.

Coughing, Rowan pressed his head back into the pillow and squeezed his eyes closed.

"Fuuuck," he groaned, still squirming with pain, "The painkillers, where are they?"

"Here," came Joshua's voice, and he held up a bottle of Ibuprofen. "How many?"

"The whole fucking BOTTLE asshole," Rowan snarled, eyes livid as his voice rose, "This fucking HURTS!"

Joshua's hand clamped down over his mouth again and he leaned in close, his eyes full of threat. "Shout out again, and I'll punch you in the throat, you got it?"

Rowan stared at him, then looked away, and Joshua slowly removed his hand.

"Four," Rowan sighed. "Give me four."

Joshua nodded, tapped the pills out, and lifted Rowan's head to help him take them. Then he followed it up with a glass of water that Rowan sucked down eagerly.

"God..." Rowan moaned, trying to find some way to hold his leg so it wouldn't hurt. Nothing helped.

"What else do you need? Quickly," Joshua whispered, still glancing towards the door.

"Bactitracin... Neosporin, doesn't matter if it's expired, just... shiiit," Rowan said, hissing with a sharp throb of pain. "Bandage, something non-stick."
"Okay," Joshua nodded, and turned towards the door. "If anyone enters, just pretend you're asleep, got it?"

Rowan nodded, wincing, and pressed his head back into his pillow. The sound of the door opening and closing, of a large group of men talking somewhere nearby, came to him as he released a long slow breath.

Why'd Joshua do it? Why the fuck did he do it? The guy said he was going to let them go, why'd he go to the trouble?

_Oh shit._

_He's not going to let us go._

Rowan's eyes opened and he stared up at the caged fluorescent light, dread sinking in deep. When the door handle turned, he quickly closed his eyes and tried to breathe slowly.

"It's me," came Joshua's voice. "Got what you need. Got food too."

Rowan's mouth flooded in a rush at the word, and his stomach growled angrily, awakened by the smell of cooked meat.

Not his own this time.

Joshua put the tray down and looked at him for a long moment.

"Going to release you now so you can see to your ankle. When you're done, you can eat."

He started releasing the restraints on Rowan's legs as he kept talking, "You can hit me and run again, but there are twenty some soldiers gathered down the hall, and they'll beat you senseless. You got that?"

Rowan sighed, and nodded, and felt a keen sense of relief as the ibuprofen started to work on the pain. He waited patiently as Joshua released his wrists and slowly lifted the head of the bed.

Hissing, Rowan pulled his leg in, and his eyes watered as he looked at the ruin of his ankle. The top layer of skin had been burned away. Black, almost papery edges surrounded an angry red wound, the deeper skin was mottled and twisted, dotted with thick puffy blisters.

The bite mark, the wound that'd changed his life, and changed the world, was gone.

"Jesus Christ..." he whispered, dressing the burn with shaking hands.

"Don't say His name in that way boy, I don't care how much it hurts," Joshua chided, and swiveled away from the bed to get the plate of food nearby. "Didn't anyone teach you the right way to speak?"

"Didn't anyone teach you burning people was bad?" Rowan snapped back.

Joshua smirked, and waited for Rowan to finish dressing the wound, before he handed over the plate.

"You swear too much," he added. "You're going to have to..." Shifting awkwardly, he glanced away. "You should change that."

Rowan glared at him.
"I want to see Julie," he growled. "Then you say goodbye, then we leave."

Admit it, you asshole, you're not letting us go.

Joshua gestured to the plate. "Eat first."

"You promised you'd let me see her Joshua. I helped your men. Where is she?"

Joshua sighed. "Rowan, please eat. I don't want to be your enemy here."

"Too late for that, don't you think!?!" Rowan yelled back, then he looked down at the plate Joshua had handed him, fully intending to throw it in the man's face.

On it was a generous heap of corn, a steak, and potato, covered in thick gravy.

It was the best looking meal he'd seen since he'd died.

"I'll get her right after you eat," Joshua said finally, and smiled. "I know you want to. You're starved boy. Eat."

Mouth flooding once more, Rowan gave a resigned sigh, and took the plastic fork and knife Joshua had laid beside him. He cut into the steak first, and the thin juices from the red meat pooled in dark swirls through the corn. Lifting it to his mouth, he hesitated before taking the bite and looked warily at Joshua.

"What is this?" he asked. It hadn't triggered anything weird in him, not like the last time when Evan had offered him food. But he had to be sure.

Joshua looked at him as if he was stupid. "Steak?"

Rowan rolled his eyes. "No, I mean, steak from what?"

With a look of complete confusion, Joshua looked at the meat, then stared at him. "A cow?!"

Rowan stared back, then nodded. "Okay." And he popped it into his mouth.

Joshua shook his head, muttering as he pulled the discarded first aid supplies off the bed, "What the heck they feed you in the city? Never seen meat before?!"

But Rowan wasn't listening, he was lost in the incredible flavor of the meat on his tongue, the bloody juices mingling with the too salty gravy, and he ate everything with feverish need, finally catching and licking the last of the gravy off the plate with his fingers.

Then he sat back, closed his eyes, and sighed.

"Wow."

"Good?"

Rowan nodded emphatically. Weariness fell over him then, like a heavy blanket, and he sat up quickly, watching as Joshua took the plate.

"What happened?" Rowan said quietly, seeing again the angry dark marks across the man's eye.

Joshua dropped the plate on the shelf and turned back. "Huh?"
Rowan pointed. "Your face."

Shaking his head, Joshua dropped his gaze. "Nevermind that."

Rowan swiveled on the bed till he was sitting up, wincing as his ankle flared sharply. Then he gestured at Joshua.

"Come here, let me see your eye."

"No," Joshua said gruffly, "It's fine."

Rowan shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Then he sighed deeply and held Joshua's gaze.

"You're not letting me go, are you."

At first Joshua frowned, starting to shake his head as if to reject the idea, then his brows drew in tight.

"I can't," he said in a voice barely above a whisper. He stood stiffly beside the door, twisting his hands together, as if he didn't quite know what to do with them. "I can't let Caleb go."

Rowan looked down at his feet. At the bandage over the erased wound of his past.

"Fuck."

"You'd be comfortable here Rowan," Joshua said in a rush, stepping forward slightly, warily. "They'd treat you like family, once they got to know you! You would be family here!"

"Keeping us here is a big mistake Joshua," Rowan said finally, looking up at the man as calmly as he could, while his heart started racing. "Julie's dad is a Colonel, he leads a huge military force in the city. He'll come for her, and trust me, you don't want to be on the receiving end of that."

"We don't have her," Joshua blurted out. "She's free to go back, so that doesn't have to happen!"

Rowan froze, and the muscles of his neck pulled taut. "What?"

"We aren't holding Julie," Joshua said emphatically.

"Then where is she?!" Rowan yelled, his voice rising, the panic surging through him in a wave.

Joshua put his hands up. "Don't know. She wasn't at your shelter, and we took everything in it, so she must have moved on."

"Must have...? You fucking IDIOT!" Rowan roared, and pushed himself off the bed. The weight on his ankle brought a bolt of agony up his leg and he grunted, groping at the bed for support. "Oh fuck!"

"I'm sure she's okay!" Joshua said frantically.

Rowan glared up at him with so much hate that Joshua stepped backwards.

"She's was HURT, JOSHUA!" he yelled, spitting the words in rage. "She had a broken arm! Broken ribs! She couldn't move ANYWHERE! And now you've taken her fucking FOOD!"
"Shut up!" Joshua growled, moving forward again, and glancing back towards the door. "Just shut up!"

"Get out of my way," Rowan said in a low voice, and he stepped forward, easing his weight back on his wounded ankle. It hurt like a fucking sin, but it didn't matter. He had to find Julie. He was going to find Julie, and he was going to fight his way through everyone to do so.

"No Rowan," Joshua answered, and stepped in front of the door. "You're not going anywhere."

Then the man squared off slightly, his arms by his sides, his eyes wide and intent.

Rowan took a slow breath, scanning the room quickly, and drew on Jack's military training for something he knew was going to get physical, very quickly.

"Let me pass, or I'll kill you Joshua," he said quietly.

Joshua didn't say anything, just stayed alert and ready. Which was annoying. The man had been trained well himself.

The pain in his ankle wasn't going to help him win a straight fist fight either. Time to do something unexpected.

Rowan slumped his shoulders and turned away slightly, looking as if he was going to move back into bed. Then he threw his arm through the shelf beside him, flinging everything on it at Joshua, before dropping and sweeping his leg at the man's ankles.

It did exactly what he'd hoped, as Joshua came crashing to the ground, and Rowan moved in, bringing his forearm down on Joshua's throat.

Or at least, that was his intention. His foot betrayed him, costing him half a second. Joshua blocked his arm, and threw a fist up and into Rowan's temple, hard. Bright flares streaked down his vision as rolled out of the way of Joshua's second punch, and struggled to get back on his feet, his hands scrabbling for the shelves by the door, hoping to bring them down on top of the soldier.

He succeeded, but Joshua was already up out of the way as the shelves crashed to the floor, and Rowan spun to get eyes on him, but suddenly found himself engulfed in the man's arms as Joshua came up from behind.

Someone hammered at the door. "What's going on in there?!

Joshua landed a kidney punch, hard, and Rowan arched, grunting in pain, then struggled at Joshua's arm as the man pulled it tight around his throat.

"Everything's under control," Joshua growled, and tightened the headlock, pushing Rowan's head forward over his arm and flinching back as Rowan clawed frantically for his eyes and face. "Just having a little... argument."

Rowan bucked and desperately pulled at the man's arm as Joshua drew it tighter still.

"S-stop... can't... breaa..." Rowan gasped, and tried to find something with his hand on the shelf to fight with, but his fingers grasped empty air as Joshua jerked him away.

"That's the idea," Joshua whispered in his ear, pulling the arm around his throat closer.

Panicked, choking, Rowan kicked and flailed furiously, his body desperately fighting to survive. But Joshua rode out the fight.
"Relax boy," the soldier whispered, slowly lowering Rowan to the floor as his struggles grew weaker. "Not killing you. Just let go and sleep... that's it."

Some distant part of Rowan raged as his limbs sank to the cold floor, but his body wasn't his to control anymore, and as he lost consciousness he felt Joshua's hand against his head, stroking there in comfort.

"I've got you Caleb. I've got you..."

"And I'm never letting you go again."

Like I mentioned before, this story is darker than the previous one, and gets quite harsh at times. Rowan and Julie both go through a lot. I hope you'll stick it out to the end, because beautiful things happen as well. :)
Of Drowning

Julie’s eyes flicked open and she gasped, grabbing for her throat as the dream fell from her, of drowning and being unable to breathe.

Then the pain hit and she moaned and squirmed against the hard trunk, her whole body alight with sharp hurts and deep aches.

And she was cold. Terribly cold. As she blinked, trying to understand where she was, it slowly came back to her with the burbling chatter of the stream. A stream she could barely see now, because it was dark. Night had swallowed the world, and her with it, stolen the warmth of the sun, made her stiff with pain and the deepest chill.

Moaning again, she tried to get up, remembering her failure from earlier. So much earlier it seemed, what had happened? She'd only meant to close her eyes for a few minutes...

At least she was still alive. They hadn't found her, hadn't killed her.

But was Rowan still alive?

*Jesus, don't think like that. Of course he is.*

Nodding to herself, Julie gave herself no more time to think and tried to get to her feet again. The pain roared up within her, and cursing, she pushed through it and the exhaustion, and curled up onto her knees, then up to her feet.

Head swimming, surrounded by the darkness of the forest, Julie just stood there for a moment, unsure of what to do. A deep shiver gripped her and she gasped with the motion as her ribs and arm spat back in pain.

*Back to the town, get Rowan, get away.*

Nodding again, Julie felt for the gun at her belt, and then stared into the woods, waiting for her vision to open up a little. The moon was out, the thin crescent shedding very little light, but the stars were blazing. A brilliant sea of shimmering haze above her head, and for a minute she stared up at it, wavering on her feet, her eyes bright with wonder. She'd seen them like this before of course - another benefit of the apocalypse - but it never got old.

Distantly, through the trees, she could see the flickering light of fires, and knew that's where she had to go. Releasing a sigh, she kept her gaze to the forest floor and walked forward.

And kept walking, even when thorns pulled at her jeans and she tripped a few times on rocks and branches she'd missed in the dim light. Even when everything had started to run together in her head, and she wasn't even sure where she was anymore, or how long she'd been moving, she kept walking, till the fires stood tall on the terrible wall, and the skeletal, pecked and stripped remains of the corpses hanging above almost seemed to move in the harsh, dancing light.

Her body wasn't even hurting anymore, but she was having trouble feeling her fingers, they were chilled to numb stumps.

Following the wall around, Julie came to the gate. The town was quiet inside, but she could hear someone shuffling on the other side, a guard, possibly by himself, keeping vigil.
Blowing a not-so-silent raspberry, she moved back to the forest edge, and grabbed a branch as thick as her arm and about as long. Then she returned to the gate, and threw it as hard as she could across the width of it. The branch gave a satisfying crack as it fell, and Julie pressed back against the wall, in the deepest shadow she could find, and waited.

And out came the soldier - the thin kid she remembered from the hillside after Rowan had been taken. What was his name... Bill? Bobby?

She watched him move toward the branch for a second, still trying to remember his name, before she jerked, realizing she was supposed to be acting, not thinking, not wasting her time on a name... what the hell was wrong with her?

With two quick silent strides, she crossed the ground to the armed kid, and brought the butt of her gun down hard on the back of his head.

With a small surprised noise, he fell to the ground and lay still.

Blowing another raspberry, Julie grabbed the kid's hand, grunting with pain as she bent over, and tried to pull him away from the gate, out of sight.

It hurt too much, and she stopped, gasping.

Then she leaned over again, and pulled the rifle from underneath him, moaning as her ribs complained again, before slinging it over her shoulder.

When she found Rowan, he could use it.

Too tired and sore to do anything more to the kid, she turned and forgot him, and headed through the gate, keeping the Ruger out before her, and watching for any movement in the pools of light surrounding the flickering torches.

Then she looked up, at the woman on the cross who'd made such terrible noises only hours before.

The woman was dead. Julie's heart fell hard, feeling as if she'd failed, that she should have acted sooner, should have ended her pain when she'd had the chance.

With another sigh, she shook her head. There was nothing she could have done.

And at least the woman wasn't suffering any more.

Turning away, Julie kept to the dark shadows, moving from building to building, to shed, to cart, to an outhouse that stank so bad she actually dry heaved, her body having nothing to give back up.

Until finally, she made her way to the bunker.

There were people moving around. Armed men she found easy to avoid, as they walked down the main street in pools of flickering light, casual and chatty.

She was just about to try the door on the bunker when she heard voices from within, and the sound of footsteps approaching.

Julie slinked back into shadow, and waited, and almost cried out as she saw Rowan walking from the doorway, limping, followed by another man she recognized immediately, whose rifle was pointed before him.

It was the guy who'd knocked Rowan out, back in the forest. What was his name?
Heart pounding in her chest, her skin flushing with the sudden rush of blood, Julie followed them, silently, waiting for the moment when they were in shadow and she could act.

And the moment came, and she rushed forward, hoping to strike the armed man down as she had the kid, but he turned, alerted at the last minute, so she had to adjust her plan.

"Don't move," she snarled in a low voice, and held the Ruger steady, aimed for the man's head. Rowan stopped ahead of her and put his arms up, and she wondered if her voice had been so strange he hadn't recognized it.

The man stared at her, in complete astonishment for a moment, before he opened his mouth.

"You're Julie..."

His hands tightened on the stock of his rifle then, and she shook her head.

"Don't even. You'll be dead before you swing that thing around." Without taking her eyes off of the soldier, she moved over to Rowan, who'd turned around to face her, and shrugged the rifle off her shoulder. "Rowan, take this."

"Thanks..." Rowan said softly, and bent over to pick it up.

Julie kept the Ruger trained on the soldier, and spared a quick glance over at Rowan, eager to see his face again, his smile. God, this was going to work! They were going to get out of here! Maybe she could...

The thoughts fell from her mind as Rowan drew the rifle up, cocked it, and swung the muzzle directly at her chest.

"Drop it," he said.

Julie's mouth fell open, and she swayed on her feet, shocked to the deepest part of her being by what Rowan had just done.

"Rowan? W-what?" she whispered, and shuffled back from him, her gun still pointed at the other man, though her hand was starting to waver and shake.

"You heard me girl, drop it now," the man she loved said, low and sharp, and with sudden clarity she realized... the vocal pattern, the look behind his eyes...

It wasn't Rowan anymore.

No... nono... no..

"I... who..." she whispered, through a throat dry as dust, as the world started to feel unstable around her, and something closed tight around her chest like a vice. Why couldn't she breathe properly? Where was the air going?

Rowan stepped forward then, and closed his hand over the gun in her hand, and pried it free. With a quick flick, he put the safety on, then walked over to the other man, holding it up.

"Ruger," Rowan said, and ejected the magazine before closing it back in again. "Nice. Sixteen rounds still. I call dibs."
The soldier snorted, his eyes still fixed on Julie as she stood there, arm falling slowly to her side. She couldn't move? Why couldn't she move? She needed to run... back beyond the wall, get away...

Rowan...

"I'm the eldest, Caleb," the soldier said with a smirk. "I get first dibs."

"By six minutes Josh, that don't count."

Julie made a small sound then, a sound of utter bewildered pain and disbelief, and she staggered back a half step, trying to feel for her knife... where was it?

Boot.

Reaching down was impossible. It was too far away, and everything moved suddenly, the buildings, the street, the flickering unsteady lights, the men in front of her, both watching her with impassive faces.

Rowan - no, Caleb - was walking towards her, his eyes distant and unfamiliar, as Julie's legs finally gave up and folded, sending her speeding to the lurching ground. She hit hard, and as her eyelids slid shut she saw Rowan's dark sneakers come to a stop just beyond her outstretched hand.

"She's hurt," he said from somewhere far away.

"Yeah, that's what he said," the man named Josh answered. "Make sure she's not playing around."

There was a distant sting on her cheek.

"Nope, she's out," Rowan's voice came again, and it pulled at her, made her want to rise up out of the dark. She moaned, and whispered his name.

Someone spoke somewhere. "... back... bunker..."

Hands grabbed her roughly, and her ribs and her arm started screaming, and she drowned in the agony of it, till it snatched away her thoughts, her mind, and left her with absolutely nothing at all.

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Julie is seriously awesome. I have a feeling, if she hadn't been running around with a broken rib and arm, she would have just kicked everyone's butt, and sat on Samuel's face as she waited for her dad to find her. %) Anyway. One loooong chapter next, then something lighter. Much needed. Thanks for reading, let me know what you think in a comment, if you can. :D
"Julie."

"Julie... wake up... please."

She surfaced slowly, thoughtlessly, her mind like cold treacle, her body heavy and still.

"That's it, come on," came a voice she knew, warm but on the trembling edge of despair.

"R..." she whispered, still shut in a world of dark. Why was it so dark?

Mouth was so dry...

"Julie, open your eyes for me. I have food... you need to eat... please."

With terrible effort Julie pulled her eyes open, and the world peeked in, blurry and bright. And moving in towards her, was a face.

Rowan.

"Hey," he said softly, and his voice grew choked as he brought something warm and salty to her lips. "It's soup, Julie. It's good. You need to eat... they just dumped you in here last night, those fucking... they didn't even give you water. You were so cold this morning... I thought..."

The spoon at her mouth shook as she drew in the liquid, and it spilled over her lip and down her chin.

"Shit, sorry," Rowan said quickly, and he swabbed it up. "I'm so fucking angry, I just want to tear him apart." He sighed then, and she watched him shake his head through the blur. "Not helping anything, I'm sorry. Here."

Another spoonful met her lips and she slurped at it, savoring the taste. It was delightful, and the corners of her mouth lifted.

"S'good," she said, and tried to focus. The room resolved, in strangely patchy stages, into a bare concrete box, lit by a long fluorescent tube in a caged fixture above her head. She lay on a simple hospital bed without sides, facing a featureless door.

And Rowan.

"Rowan..." she whispered, and smiled as he brought another spoonful of soup to her mouth.

His answering smile was weak, as his eyes were heavy with the same trembling sadness she'd heard in his voice. Then he pulled in close, kissing her gently as he brushed his thumb against her cheek.

"I'm so sorry Julie," he said softly. "I'm sorry for what Caleb did."

She'd been in a pleasant haze of non-memory until then, enjoying the soup, feeling warmth and sensation returning to her body as she lay there, cocooned in rough blankets, her heart thrumming with joy at seeing Rowan.

But it trickled back then, and she frowned, and blinked some more, and struggled to move.
Where was her gun? She needed it, so she could get them out of here... she'd had it, and then...

Julie pressed back into the bed.

Rowan had pointed a gun at her. He'd threatened her, and he'd taken her gun.

"R... you..."

Rowan watched the play of emotions on her face, his brows pulling into a deep frown, before his gaze fell to the bowl of soup in his hands.

"Wasn't me," he sighed. "I'm sorry."

Julie swallowed, and shifted again, feeling a growing sense of urgency and fear. Where were they? Where was this place? She took the room in again, and pulled her unbroken arm free of the blanket, then reached for the tube and needle taped on the inside of her elbow.

"No, don't Julie, it's okay," Rowan said, and placed a warm hand over her own. "You needed fluids." He smiled then, just slightly. "It's only saline, and a little painkiller. I'll take it out in an hour or two."

"Hour... or two?" she said, her voice hoarse, and she shook her head frantically. "We.. we can't stay here Rowan.. these people are crazy!"

"Yeah. Aware," Rowan answered, nodding. "But Julie, you're in bad shape, you couldn't walk five feet, let alone five miles. And while I could carry you, and would, they'd be on top of us before we left the bunker." He sighed then, deep and heavy. "Trust me, I've tried. Twice."

Julie frowned at him, then truly saw how deeply weary he seemed to be. Saw the bruise on the side of his head, the scratches and cuts on his face beyond the gash on his cheek that he'd patched at the shelter. He'd put up a fight, and he'd lost.

"Rowan," she said softly, and reached for him, brushing her hand lightly across the cut above his eyebrow. With another long breath, he closed his eyes and leaned into her hand, as much needing her touch as she needed his. He pulled forward again, and their lips met gently once more. A soft and reassuring kiss, before he pulled away again, and played with the spoon in the bowl.

"You need more," he said quietly, and lifted it to her mouth.

About to say she could feed herself, she stopped and kept quiet, and just let him take care of her, knowing it was something he needed right now.

"God, that's good," she murmured, licking her lips.

"I know," Rowan agreed with a slight smile. "One thing they do well here."

Julie took another mouthful, then looked down at the bowl, suddenly realizing that the same people responsible for what she was eating, were responsible for what she'd seen outside. The thought turned her stomach and she held her hand over his, stopping him from lifting another spoonful.

"Rowan, did you see the wall?" Julie asked, her eyes haunted. "Did you see what they did to those people?"

He frowned and looked down, as if searching through memory, then shook his head. "No? What
Tears sprang to her eyes. "They hung them Rowan, tied them up on crosses around the wall... there
was a woman... she... she was still alive... and..."

"What?!" Rowan said, and his voice turned to a whisper. "Jesus Christ..."

Julie nodded and looked down at her hand. "Couldn't save her... should have. Couldn't..." A
solitary tear fell down her cheek, then dropped and disappeared into the blanket by her hand.

"Jesus Christ," Rowan repeated, closing his hand over hers, but his eyes were distant. "That's what
he was talking about..."

"Who?" Julie asked, wiping her eyes.

"Joshua... and... shit, the doctor too. That's all hazy though, I was Caleb at the time."

"Caleb..." Julie said softly. "You were Caleb last night."

Rowan frowned, and nodded, looking down at the bowl again. "Yeah."

Julie squeezed his hand. "Who was Caleb?"

Rowan sighed. "Like all the rest, someone I killed." He shrugged. "Joshua's twin brother."

"Joshua was the guy from last night? The guy who hit you with the rifle before?"

Rowan frowned. "He hit me with a rifle?" Looking aside again, his blue eyes darting back and
forth, as if he was scanning through memory. "Oh, yeah, I was Caleb then too."

There was something she didn't understand, and she squeezed his hand again to make him look up.

"You killed Caleb in the city?" she asked.

He nodded, his expression closing down. "Yes."

"But... we're nowhere near the city, Rowan, what was he doing out there?"

"Running away," he said simply, and he looked down at the soup again, stirring it back and forth.
"Should put a cast on your-"

"What was he running away from?" Julie asked, not meaning to talk over him, but she was
away from that..."

"They didn't used to do that..." Rowan said in a quiet voice, as he started to stab the soup with the
spoon. "But, there was too much... judgement... too much pain. Didn't feel right here anymore, just
felt wrong, and Doc..." He gave a heavy sigh. "Doc was just trying to help. He was a good man."

Something fell into the soup, a bright splotch of red, that was quickly swirled in by the spoon. It
was joined by another.

"God..." Rowan whispered, and grasped his head. "Doc... I..."

Julie's eyes grew wide. Oh shit.
"Rowan?"

Rowan's head rose slowly, and his beautiful blue eyes found hers.

And Rowan wasn't in them anymore.

A bright trail of red trickled from his nose and over his lips, and he blinked and wiped it away, looking utterly confused.

"Shit," Julie said, and stayed completely still, being a foot away from someone that she realized, she didn't actually know. She had no idea how he was going to react.

Rowan's eyes grew wide in wonder and he smiled brightly. "Oh... wow."

Julie smiled hesitantly back. Every one of the people Rowan became seemed to be drawn to her, without understanding why, and if she could get close enough, she could usually draw Rowan back out again.

"Rowan?" she said, and reached for him.

"Joshua!" Rowan yelled suddenly, grinning at her.

Jumping in shock at his sudden cry, she watched in complete confusion as he swiveled quickly off the bed and went limping towards the door.

What the hell?

"Joshua!" he yelled again, then seemed to notice the bowl in his hands as he went to reach for the door.

The door flew open, and Joshua burst in, twisting away as he realized who was standing there. Quickly, he brought up the gun at his belt and leveled it at Rowan.

"Joshua, no, it's me, Caleb!" he cried, and pointed to the blood smeared around his mouth.

Joshua stared at him warily, swiveling to Julie as she watched them open mouthed, then swung back.

"Caleb?" he asked, in complete disbelief.

Caleb was grinning from ear to ear, and Julie's heart sank. Now she knew why he was smiling. It had nothing to do with her. He was excited because he'd taken over.

God, he didn't even see me.

"Yeah!" Caleb answered excitedly, "Can you believe it? It just happened!"

Joshua was grinning now, and slowly returned the gun to the holster at his side. "Caleb.. that's great! How'd you do it?"

Julie felt like crying. They were celebrating getting rid of Rowan.

Caleb drew up a spoonful of soup and shrugged, and for a moment, the action was so Rowan like, Julie had a flash of hope - maybe he was still Rowan, maybe he was just pretending, maybe-

"Dunno, just happened," he continued, and the hope sank away. "Guess he was talking to his
woman," he took another spoonful with a noisy slurp, "and suddenly... I was there!"

_His woman?! What the hell?_

"This is good soup," he added enthusiastically, bobbing his head.

Joshua smiled, then looked down at the bowl. "Caleb."

"Yeah?" Caleb looked up, pulling the spoon from his mouth.

"That's her soup," Joshua said, pointing over at Julie. "She's supposed to eat it because she hasn't had enough food. Rowan was worried about her."

"I don't care," Caleb snapped back, his look darkening as he glanced at her over his shoulder.

Julie stared at him, her mouth opening in shock.

Caleb saw her expression, and he dropped the bowl on the shelf hard. "Don't give me that look! He killed me! You know that right?! Why should I care what he feels?" Pointing at her then, stabbing the air between them, he started to yell, "Your boyfriend MURDERED ME, you get that?!"

Julie felt as if the air were being sucked from the room around her.

It was just like Jack. Jack had _known_ he was in Rowan, had known he'd been killed by him. And Jack had almost taken his own life. Rowan's life.

_Oh god..._

Joshua put a hand on Caleb's shoulder. "Caleb, you calm down right now. They'll hear you."

The words seemed to reach him, and his face fell, his head sagging as he nodded softly.

"Sorry."

Joshua reached around the back of Caleb's neck and squeezed comfortingy, and the simple affection in it struck Julie. They'd obviously been close. What had Rowan said? That they'd been twins?

_God, that's so terribly sad._

"It's okay brother," Joshua said quietly. "But, can you go to the mess hall, get a new bowl? I know how you feel, but Rowan's our doc now, we need him. And he needs his woman."

Julie blinked. There was that damn phrase again. His woman. _Jesus_. She blew an annoyed raspberry, and both men looked over.

Caleb spoke first. "Only 'til I can do what he does," he said quietly, looking back at Joshua. "I was trying what you asked Josh, but it's hard, he's got some kind of wall up, and-"

"Not here," Joshua growled under his breath, "Go get the soup now, okay?"

Nodding, Caleb picked up the bowl and left the room, glancing back at Julie.

Joshua closed the door behind him and turned around to face her.

Julie stared back, her mind clicking uncomfortably over what they'd been talking about.
"What did you mean, Rowan's your 'doc' now?" she asked.

The man stared at her for a moment, then lifted the gun from his holster. Only then did she realize it was hers. A little startled by the action, she pressed back into the bed and wondered horribly if he was just going to execute her then and there.

"Where'd you find this?" Joshua asked, waggling the weapon.

Julie frowned. "Answer my question and I'll answer yours."

Joshua didn't answer, didn't say anything, just tucked the gun back into his holster and watched her, his face unreadable. His eyes were deeply set, a dark brown, his hair a dirty blonde that'd obviously never been shown much care. He looked like a hard man.

Crossing his arms, he leaned back against a shelf on the side wall, and his eyes traveled slowly over her face, then down, leisurely.

Rolling her eyes, she drew her arm across the blanket and drew it up and over her shoulders.

Joshua smirked.

"Rowan has taken Doc Adams' place here," he answered finally.

Julie glared at him. "He can't do that, he works in a hospital in the city."

Joshua shook his head slowly, his eyes never leaving hers. The motion infuriated her. He was treating her like a child.

"Not anymore."

Anger rose in a swift rush. "What the hell's wrong with you?!" she yelled. "He doesn't belong here! You can't just kidnap him!"

Scratching his nose casually, Joshua leaned an elbow back over the shelf. "The gun," he said simply.

"Fuck off," she snapped back, glowering at him.

Joshua broke into a smile that didn't reach his eyes and shook his head. "The two of you."

Julie blinked, confused by his reaction. She'd expected him to cross the room and just hit her, he seemed that kind of man.

"What?"

"Always swearing," he answered with a sigh. "The city must be a terrible dark place, all you folks do is curse the Lord and speak foul."

Julie's mouth fell open. Speak foul? Was he serious?

"Are all women armed in the city?" he asked suddenly, as if the thought took him by surprise, and the smile faded from his face. He actually looked a little unnerved, and she wondered what he'd do if she said yes.

So of course, she had to.
"Yes," she said confidently. "Absolutely."

He laughed. Sudden and strong, a heavy barking laugh that stopped quick, but ended with a genuine smile.

Julie wasn't sure what to do, his reaction had completely thrown her again. So she just frowned back.

"I can see why he likes you," Joshua said, then looked down quickly, as if he hadn't meant for that to come out of his mouth. He scratched his nose again and looked at the door. "Where's my fool brother then."

Julie sighed. "He's not really Caleb you know."

Joshua didn't answer at first, just looked at the door. But she saw something at that moment in the pull of skin around his eyes, something that spoke of a heavy sadness... and her heart went out to him.

"I'm sorry," she said softly.

He looked over at her then, his expression surprised, and incredibly, amused.

"You have any brothers or sisters?" he asked quietly.

She stared at him, blindsided once more by his reaction, but eventually shook her head.

"Never had a twin," he stated for her.

"No, and I can't imagine how hard it-"

"I'm talking woman, you listen now."

Julie stiffened, feeling his words like a physical slap. A deep rage rose up in her and she glowered at him, wishing she had her hands on her own gun at that moment.

"Woke some anger in you there, didn't I," Joshua said quietly, and grinned. Then he sighed, and the mirth slipped from his face.

"I felt Caleb die, Julie," he said heavily. "I felt it like my own. Knew he was dead. Grieved him alone, surrounded by folks oblivious to how my world had been torn."

The anger fell from her as he spoke, and she felt, despite herself, a stirring of sorrow.

"So I know my brother is dead..." Joshua glared hard at her. "I know his body lies somewhere in the city, nothing but bone and dust now."

He walked over to her then, and stood beside the bed.

"But I also know a part of him lives in Rowan," he said, looking down at her defiantly. "I've felt Caleb inside him. Felt him as only a twin could. My brother lives thanks to God's grace, and he's home now."

He leaned forward. "And here he'll stay."

The sorrow dried up, leaving only a heavy dread, and Julie's face crumpled as she shook her head. "You can't keep him here."
"He's my brother," Joshua said simply, and turned to walk away. "Think that's up-"

Julie moved quicker than she thought she could, thanks to the painkillers Rowan had given her, and in one smooth motion pulled the Ruger from the holster at Joshua's side.

Immediately she had it up, the safety off, and pointed at his head, as she shimmied to the far side of the bed, out of his reach.

Joshua's mouth opened in astonishment, before a small smile spread on his face.

"Lose the smile or I'll shoot it off."

Joshua shook his head and raised his hands. "You're misinterpreting it," he said softly.

She shook her head, not caring. Gingerly, she stepped off the bed, pulling the IV from her arm, and tested her ability to stand. A little dizziness hit her, but she knew she could handle it. Slowly, she moved to the door, the gun still trained on Joshua.

"You're going to help us get out of here."

"Sure," he said agreeably.

Julie glowered at him. "You're fucking maddening, you know that?"

Joshua laughed, and she was really tempted to shoot him at that moment, somewhere non-vital, just to wipe that goddamn smile off of his face.

And that's when Caleb burst into the room.

Julie had been maneuvering towards the door, aware that he'd come in at any moment, but she hadn't expected him to act so quickly. Before she'd had a chance to swing the gun to cover him, he'd slammed his arm down hard on hers, sending the bowl of soup spilling to the floor.

The gun barked deafeningly in the small room, kicking up a spray of concrete a foot from Joshua's boot, before Caleb wrenched the gun from her hands, elbowing her hard in the chest in the process.

The blow to her ribcage spiked straight through the painkiller, and Julie cried out, doubling over as Caleb threw the gun to his brother, and closed in on her.

Face twisted in terrifying anger, he grabbed her good arm, and yanked her in, his free hand swinging towards her in a tight fist.

"ROWAN!" she yelled, raising her broken arm to defend herself. Flinching, eyes squeezed tightly shut, she waited for the blow.

But it never came.

"Julie?" he whispered.

Wincing, she looked up at him.

He looked completely and utterly wrecked, blood dribbling from his nose as he stared in horror at his fist unclenching inches from her face.

Rowan.
"Julie..." he whispered, anguish clear on his face as he released the crushing grip on her arm, "I..."

The sound of boots on concrete thundered from the hallway outside, and as Julie grasped her side tightly with her freed arm, two soldiers stormed into the room, guns raised, and immediately targeted Rowan.

"Stand down!" Joshua yelled, raising his hands. "Stand down!"

"Sir?" one of the men asked, his gun trained on Rowan's back.

Joshua stormed forward and pushed the man's rifle down. "I said stand down." Holstering the Ruger slowly at his side, he raised his hands again. "It was just a misfire, that's all. My fault. We're all clear here. Return to your posts."

Slowly, uncertainly, the men lowered their rifles.

"Now!" Joshua barked, and with a final frowning glance at Rowan, the soldiers left the room.

Rowan seemed oblivious to it all, his eyes only on Julie, and filled with a terrible hurt. She gave him a small smile, and went to reach for his hand, but her ribs let her know it was a bad idea, and hissing in pain, she drew into herself.

Behind Rowan, Joshua muttered something under his breath as he closed the door to the room. Then he looked over at them, most warily, Julie thought, at Rowan.

"Shouldn't have got out of hand like that, I apologize," he said quietly, his eyes focused intently on the back of Rowan's head. "Caleb shouldn't have hurt her, Rowan. He was being protective. Won't let him do that again."

Julie watched Rowan's expression darken into something she'd never seen before, as his eyes grew wild and sharp, his brows drawing down deep. His head turned slightly as Joshua spoke, and his lips twisted, the blood leeching in around his teeth.

Rage.

Julie shook her head quickly, and tried to catch his eyes, fearful of what he might do, fearful of what Joshua might do to him. They had no advantage here. Joshua had every advantage.

"Rowan, it's al-"

With a guttural roar, Rowan twisted and rushed Joshua, one hand quickly closing over the man's throat, the other closing over his wrist as Joshua went immediately for the Ruger. The force of Rowan's attack was disorienting - Julie had barely registered that he'd left her side before they were both against the far wall, Joshua squirming against Rowan's hand at his throat, as Rowan lifted him straight up the concrete surface.

Jesus!

Rowan pulled Joshua back with a snarl, ignoring the blows Joshua was aiming at his face, and rammed the man forward, striking Joshua's head with a thunderous impact against the concrete.

For a moment Julie couldn't move, and her mind flicked back to that horrible day in a different hospital room, when Rowan had done exactly what he was doing to Joshua... to her.

Oh god!
"ROWAN! NO!" Julie screamed, moving to his side as quickly as she could, pulling at his arm as he drew Joshua back again. "You'll kill him!"

Again Joshua's head hit the concrete with a sickening thunk, and for the first time Julie saw fear in the soldier's eyes.

"That's the idea," Rowan growled, his mouth twisting in a bloody sneer, and Julie saw the muscles of his forearm squeeze tighter.

Julie was stunned. She'd never seen this side to him, not like this. This wasn't Rowan, it couldn't be!

_I have to stop him!_

Joshua stared down at Rowan and tried desperately to speak, his eyes bulging, ",..kkaylu-RK"

The sound was cut off as Rowan squeezed tighter, and shook his head.

"No. None of that," he said in a calm whisper. Then he sneered again, tilting his head to the side. "Just SLEEP, Joshua, just LET GO."

The spite in Rowan's voice sent a chill down Julie's spine. She didn't understand what was happening to him, didn't understand what was driving him now, but she couldn't let him do this! It came to her then, what Joshua had tried to say, and as she saw the man's eyes start to fade, she grabbed at Rowan's arm, shook him as hard as she could, and hoped he'd forgive her for what she was about to do...

"Caleb!" she yelled at him, "You're killing your brother!"

Rowan glanced at her quickly, his eyes wide with shock, before turning back to Joshua with clenched teeth.

"Julie... don't, I-"

He wasn't letting go though, he wasn't stopping, and.. oh god, Joshua wasn't moving anymore! She didn't have any choice!

"CALEB!" she screamed, making one last attempt to pull him away, "Joshua is DYING, Caleb! STOP IT!"

Rowan's head dipped sharply, and the hand that'd kept Joshua from reaching for a gun shot to his temple, grasping there as his eyes squeezed down hard. As she wrestled with him, frantically trying to get him to release his grip on Joshua's throat, a thin stream of blood joined the smear around his mouth, and his eyes shot open again.

And she wrenched him away, twisting him free of Joshua, who fell without a sound to the floor and didn't move. She stared down at the soldier, past Rowan who was gripping his head as he faced her, and fear made her skin flush - what if Rowan had killed him?! Would they be able to get out of here? What would happen now?!

_God, don't be dead!_

"You..." came Rowan's voice, and Julie suddenly realized that she'd made a mistake. That her fear had been focused on the wrong man.
She was still holding Rowan's arm, and as her eyes rose to meet his, all she saw was the same anger that'd gripped Caleb when she'd pointed the gun at his brother.

Caleb ripped his arm free of her grasp, his face still twisted in hate, and brought it back in a fierce swing.

And she had no time to react before he backhanded her across the face.

The sound hit her first, the horrible smack of skin, muscle and bone as her head snapped around, and she was flung violently to the concrete floor, landing hard on the shoulder of her broken arm.

The pain hit, and she screamed, twisting off of her arm, to her side, which hurt almost as much, and then struggled to sit up, to shuffle away because Rowan - no, CALEB - was still coming after her, storming towards her with a murderous look on his face.

Rowan's face.

And that's when the shock gripped her hard.

Rowan had hit her. He'd hurt her. And he was going to hurt her again.

As Caleb.

"Not your f-fault," she stammered suddenly, as she crawled towards the wall, her eyes riveted on Caleb's. Whatever happened next, she wanted Rowan to remember that. It'd been her stupid idea to bring Caleb back, and god, she was paying for it now. Something wet dribbled over her lip, and she wiped her hand across her mouth. It came away bloody. She looked up at him again, and shook her head, "Not your fau-"

"SHUT UP!" he yelled, and he lifted his hand, as if to strike her again.

And that's when Joshua came up behind him and grabbed him.

Caleb jerked, not seeing who it was, and tried to bring his other arm around in a defensive punch, but Joshua deflected it easy, and leaned into his brother, shaking his head.

"Stop," he said in a rasping whisper. "Don't."

Then he sagged and fell to the floor, landing on his butt awkwardly, and tried to look as if he'd meant to sit down the whole time.

"Joshua?" Caleb said, and quickly sank to his brother's side. "What's wrong?"

Joshua lifted his head to stare at Julie. "You.. okay?"

She didn't say anything. Couldn't. She was on the verge of tears, her face, her arm and chest throbbing viciously, but deeper than that... was the guilt of forcing Rowan under. Pushed him away...

But she'd stopped him from killing Joshua... that was important. She had to focus on that. Not the look on Rowan's face as he bore down on her...

Oh god...

Caleb glanced over at her darkly, then back at Joshua. "Forget about her, Joshua, what happened to you?!" He reached out then, to grasp the back of his brother's neck, but Joshua twisted suddenly, slapping his hand away.
"Don't..." he gasped, then seeing Caleb's shocked reaction, he reached out and held his shoulder. "Sorry... just give me.. minute."

"What did you do to him?" Caleb growled her way, and seemed ready to came at her again, but Joshua held him firm.

"Nothin..." Joshua answered, his voice slowly returning. "She brought you back... to save me."

Caleb's mouth fell open, and he looked back and forth between them. "What?!"

"Not that I needed... saving," Joshua continued, rubbing his throat. "He wasn't going to kill me."

Julie's stomach dropped. "What?" she whispered.

Joshua smirked and looked at her. "What he did there... was payback..." he said, and gave a dry chuckle. "Think... he wanted to scare me... make me see what he was... capable of..." With a low groan, he dipped his head forward.

"Worked..."

Julie felt sick. She'd pushed Rowan down again, basically turned against him... for nothing. The look he'd given her as she'd done it flashed in her mind, and her heart squeezed tight. With a soft sound she pressed back into the wall, and the tears hit her hard. She choked them down, not wanting to cry in front of the two men.

"Joshua..." Caleb said suddenly, urgently, pointing to his brother's head, "You're bleeding!"

Joshua looked up slowly and brushed his hand against the back of his head, and his eyes widened as his palm came away bloody.

"'kay..." he whispered slowly. "Maybe he was trying to kill me..." He felt it again, and hissed. "Darned fool."

Then he laughed, and both Julie and Caleb looked at him, stunned.

"Think I might need..." he said, and nodded Julie's way, "Might both need... a doctor." He smirked and shook his head. "Figures."

"Maybe I can?" Caleb said quietly, staring intently at his brother.

"Could you handle stitching my head up?" Joshua asked, but the expression on his face suggested he knew what the answer would be.

Caleb visibly paled. "Could try?"

Joshua shook his head. "You'd faint on me," he said, and pointed to Julie. "Help her-

"Would not," Caleb grumbled.

"Help her to the bed, Caleb."

"No," Julie said quickly, raising her hand defensively as Caleb got to his feet. "I'll get there myself. Don't touch me."

"Fine," Joshua said quietly, and blinked slowly as his head sagged on his shoulders. "Caleb, help me to the back room... think... need to put my head down... just f'minute."
"Okay Josh, I got you," Caleb said softly, helping his brother to his feet. Pulling Joshua's arm over his shoulder, he glanced over at Julie, frowning thoughtfully, before shuffling slowly with his brother out the door.

And the lock clicked over a moment later.

"Oh god," Julie cried, and finally released the tears she'd been choking down, holding her hand over the shoulder of her broken arm as she shook.

The painkiller was wearing off, and she didn't want to move. It hurt too much just sitting against the wall, her ribs stabbing her with every breath, her arm throbbing sharply. Her face felt like it was burning up, and the swelling was something she could see as well as feel.

At least her nose had stopped bleeding.

Wiping the blood away, Julie stared at the bare walls around her, at the stark light overhead, and couldn't stop crying.

What the hell had she done?
If you're an overtly religious person, offending by the Lord's name taken in vain, this next chapter's going to be a bit rough, sorry. Next few chapters after this one lighten up a bit. :)

God... Rowan, I'm sorry...

Would he understand, when he came back, why she'd done it? He had to... he'd always understood... She couldn't just stand by and watch him kill someone, didn't matter what they'd done. He had to understand that...

The door clicked again, and he burst in, at first moving towards the bed, then stopping to finally find her against the wall. He looked so worried, her heart jumped - he was back!

"Rowan," she cried, the tears spilling over again, "I'm so sorry, I had to, couldn't let you just kill him!" The words rushed from her desperately, wanting him to understand.

But as he strode towards her, he shook his head.

"It's not working," he said quickly, and he reached down and put his hand under her good shoulder, "Come on, I need your help."

Julie stared at him, not understanding. "What? Help with wha-AAAH!" She cried out then, as he yanked her to her feet, jarring the pain she'd just got a handle on into vivid, deafening life again. "Oh.. god, stop, please..." She moaned, as he pulled her then, towards the door.

With an impatient noise, he... Caleb, she knew that now... returned to her side, his face tight with anger. As she tried to get away from him, he scooped her into his arms, and carried her out of the room. Screeching in pain, she fought against him, the pressure on her ribs and arm beyond agony.

"Stop it!" he yelled, and move quickly down the hall, then through the door at the end, into another concrete walled room, lit by the same light, with another hospital bed.

There he dropped her to her feet, shaking, in front of a tall, wide mirror, and she sagged, gasping in pain, against the wall. Through the mirror, she saw Caleb rushing to his brother's side - Joshua was lying on the bed, his eyes closed, and he didn't move as Caleb shook him roughly.

"Josh, come on! Wake up!"

As Caleb moved back towards her, Julie's eyes raised to meet her reflection, and what she saw shocked her.

The lady had been right to scream what she had. Julie looked half dead - her skin pale, eyes shadowed with exhaustion and pain, and now an angry welt swelled where Caleb had smacked her in the face.

She rested her head against the wall and started to slide down, so she could sit, but Caleb was suddenly there, thrusting his hand under her arm again, pressing her forward to the mirror.

Julie gasped, and stumbled over her own feet, then glared angrily at Caleb as he held her there, facing the mirror.
"Good, okay, call me Rowan," he said quickly, and glanced back at Joshua, before staring at his own reflection.

Julie stared at him, blinking dully. What was...

"QUICKLY!" he yelled, and shook her, then reached out to press his hand against the surface of the mirror. "I don't understand why this isn't working. I'm looking at him! It's him, why isn't he coming up?!

"Rowan," Julie whispered, squeezing her eyes tight as nausea washed over her in a trembling wave.

"No, you have to look at me!" Caleb cried, shaking her again. "Come on!"

With a small hiss, Julie opened her eyes and stared at him. "R...

"You're going to spell it now?!" he screeched, and his fingers dug into her arm. "What are you doing?!

"R-Rowan... please..." she whispered, her eyes seeking his, but seeing only Caleb looking back she dropped her gaze and swallowed as her throat grew heavy with tears. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry I made you go away... I..."

There was a silence between them then, until he gave a big sigh.

"Well I'm not," he said quietly, and released her. Then he shook his head and stared at himself. "This isn't working.

"For God's sake brother, you're hopeless," came a bemused voice from behind them.

Julie sagged against the wall, and caught Joshua watching them from the bed with a lopsided smirk through the mirror.

"Joshua?!" Caleb cried, and rushed over. "I thought you'd passed out!

His brother sighed, looking up at him with eyes tight in pain. "Nope. Just trying to bring out the doctor in you."

"What?! You were pretending?!" Caleb shouted, obviously annoyed. "You scared me to death!"

"Sorry," Joshua said, smirking again. "Just taking advantage of a moment." His eyes darted to Julie then, and she looked away, not wanting to see that fucking smug look of his.

She watched Caleb instead. Wearing Rowan's face, using Rowan's voice, a complete stranger wrapped in the man she loved.

Why hadn't he come back?

Where was he?

The questions brought a heavy dread, and her pain seemed to rise with it. With a small sound, she lowered against the wall till she was sitting flat on the floor and closed her eyes.

"So you're okay?" Caleb asked.

"No you dummy, I still need stitches in my head."
"I've tried to get him back Josh, nothing's working!"

"But you're able to look at yourself now..." The mattress squeaked as Joshua shifted slightly. "That's... real good Caleb."

"Yeah... but, what are we going to do now? I'm no doctor!"

"I have an idea."

"Okay, what?"

"Julie, keep your eyes closed."

Julie frowned and immediately opened them, not understanding. Joshua smirked at her.

Caleb looked over at her, frowning. "What's she got to do with it?"

Joshua ignored him, and the smirk fell from his face as he spoke directly to Julie. "Close your eyes now."

"But.. wh-" DO IT!"

Julie jerked, stunned by the force in Joshua's voice.

"What are you going to do?" Caleb asked.

"You'll see," Joshua answered. "Julie..."

Heart starting to race, Julie closed her eyes.

"Okay Caleb, come here."

"Don't hurt him," Julie blurted out, suddenly terrified.

"Tsk girl, I'm not about to hurt my brother."

"Lean down now Caleb, I need to tell you something. Something important."

Caleb laughed, and the sound wasn't remotely like Rowan's buoyant laugh. "What are you playing at?"

"You lean down close, and I'll tell you."

"Okay."

Julie's heart was pounding as she heard Joshua shift again, and a barely audible whisper drifted to her, the words of which she couldn't make out.

What was Joshua doing? The urge to open her eyes was overwhelming, but she didn't want to do anything that might make him hurt Rowan.

"That's harsh brother," Caleb said quietly. "Think it'll work?"

"Yes, because I'm serious. Let me show you."
And that's when Julie heard the sliding click of a round being chambered in the Ruger.

"Keep those eyes closed Julie."

With a trembling breath, Julie suddenly realized what Joshua was doing.

*Oh god...*

The gun wasn't pointed at Rowan.

It was pointed at *her.*

"You'd really do that?" Caleb asked.

"I will, right now." Joshua's voice was rock steady. "Three..."

"Shouldn't we-"

"Two..."

Julie squeezed her eyes tight as fear rushed wildly through her, making her breaths shallow and fast. She should run, try to make it out the door, but she was frozen to the spot, her body in agony.

"I... I don't-"

"One."

Julie turned her head away with a small noise, waiting for the sound of the gunshot.

Nothing happened.

"Hello, Rowan."

With her heart thundering in her chest, Julie opened her eyes and looked over to the bed.

Joshua was lying against the mattress looking back at her, one arm pointed her way, holding the Ruger.

And Rowan's hand had covered it, turning the barrel away. His blue eyes were focused on the gun, squeezed in pain, and blood was dripping from his nose.

"Welcome back," Joshua said quietly, his eyes flicking to Rowan's. "Kindly step away and stop bleeding on me."

"The gun," Rowan whispered, not moving.

Joshua pulled it from Rowan's grasp and aimed it at him. "That better?"

Rowan didn't answer. He just blinked at Joshua through bloodshot eyes, and took a step back, raising his hands slowly.

Julie watched him, desperately trying to catch his eye, but he wouldn't look her way. She glanced at Joshua. The gun in his hands was pointed at Rowan's chest.

"Please leave him alone," she said quickly.

"Girl," Joshua hissed in irritation, glancing over at her. "Calm yourself." He turned back to Rowan,
and flicked his gun towards the door. "You clean that blood off your face, and check on Saul. Take a pill for the headache if you have to, but you do that now."

Rowan shook his head, and lifted a hand towards Julie. "I help her first."

"You tried to kill me boy," Joshua growled. "You forfeit your right to do what you want. You take my orders, you do what I say first, or I act on my little promise." His gaze flicked back to Julie, and it was cold enough to make her tense up. "Don't think I won't."

Rowan's lips grew thin in anger.

Joshua sighed. "Tried to do this friendly, but you've made me the enemy. Welcome to what you've sown." Staring at Rowan hard, he rested back against the bed and flicked the gun again. "Go and do what I said. Come back here and stitch my head up. Then you can care for your woman." He gave a mirthless smirk. "Just remember where that mark on her face came from."

Julie's heart clenched as she watched Rowan's anger give way to confusion, and he quickly looked over at her, his eyes roaming her face in shock.

She shook her head, her eyes welling with tears. "It wasn't you Rowan, it wasn't your fault."

"No?" Joshua said in a mocking tone, "Thought you both said Caleb wasn't real? Means you hit your woman hard enough to knock her down, Rowan. How'd that feel?"

"SHUT UP!" Julie yelled, and lowered her head, unable to watch the dawning horror on Rowan's face anymore.

"Oh.. fuck..." Rowan whispered. "Julie.. god... I didn-'"

"Boy, what'd I say?!" Joshua barked. "Get going, check on Saul, now!"

There was the sound of footsteps, and the opening and closing of the door, then silence.

And Julie cried, unable to hold back anymore, and hated herself for doing it in front of Joshua.

"I'm sorry."

Joshua's voice, heavy and tired.

Julie wiped her face with her good hand and stifled her sobs. "Fuck off."

"Wouldn't have shot you, just so you know."

Julie looked up and glared at him, hating him with an intensity that made her shake. "Fuck. Off."

He sighed, and had the decency to look away. "Sure."

The hatred swelled, and needing to strike back in some way, needing to see fear in his eyes again, words spilled from her mouth. "When my father finds us, he's going to wipe your little backwards town here off the map."

Joshua's eyes swiveled back to hers, annoyingly unconcerned. "Oh?"

God, she hated this man. "Yeah. He's a Colonel. Military man."

"Good for him," he said, and that fucking smirk appeared, slowly, on his face.
Julie stared at him, livid. But then she gave a smile of her own. She knew how to wipe that smirk off of his face.

*Let's see him shrug this off.*

"He'll bring an arm-"

"My dad's a military man too," Joshua said conversationally, talking over her. "They should hang out."

"Shut the FUCK up!" she spat, infuriated beyond belief. "He's going to bring an ar-"

"Hard sometimes, growing up like that."

"JESUS CHRIST!" she screeched, "SHUT UP!"

"Don't say His name like that," he said quietly, frowning.

A reaction! Finally!

"What? Jesus Christ? Jesus fucking Christ?" Julie snapped back, feeling an exultant burst of satisfaction as Joshua's expression grew darker.

"You shut up," he growled.

"Goddamn Jesus fucking Christ fucker!" Julie yelled, and grinned. But the smile didn't feel right on her face.

*I'm acting like a five year old...*

Instead of yelling at her, or lashing out in some way as she expected, Joshua closed his eyes, and started talking in a soft voice. "God, hear my prayer. Free this child from Satan's grasp, pull the dark taint from her soul, purge her of the influence of the Judged. I pray this in-"

"Seriously?"

"I pray this in your holy name. I am your sword, your wrath, till my dying day. Thank you Lord."

"Don't need your prayer, asshole," Julie said under her breath. "Don't think God's listening anyway. Not with you crucifying people, and hanging them up like trophies."

Letting out a long breath, Joshua opened his eyes. "God approves of our redemption of the Judged."

Julie raised an eyebrow. "He does, huh? Told you that personally?"

Joshua scowled at her. "I feel His approval. But He talks to Samuel. He hears the Lord's voice. Knows the Way."

Now Julie felt smug. "Wow. Guess this Samuel guy wanders off, comes back and tells you what God said. And you believe him."

"Of course," Joshua answered. "He's heard God his whole life."

"And you believe him!" She laughed. "Of course you do... you're a backwards, brainwashed, woman-hating prick!"
Joshua's face twisted in rage, but only briefly, as he quickly closed his eyes and started to pray again, his brows folded in fervent concentration.

"Oh stop it," Julie said, laughing again. "You're the one who needs saving Joshua. You're truly fucked in the head. This whole town is."

Joshua's eyes snapped open, and he sucked in a deep breath, and started to roar, "SHUT UP YOU STUPID CO-

At that moment, the door opened, and Rowan walked in, glaring at Joshua.

The soldier immediately cut off his outburst, and shifted on the bed, releasing a deep breath.

Then his eyes fixed on Rowan.

"That welt on her face's coming up real good now," he sneered. "Don't you think?"

"You bastard," Julie said quietly. But the damage had been done, and she watched as Rowan's gaze fell, and he walked quietly towards the bed, carrying a tray of suture supplies and bandages.

"Saul?" Joshua asked, wincing as he lifted his head from the mattress and turned to face the wall. There was a shock of red where his head had been, and he groaned, dipping forward before catching himself.

"Same," Rowan said in a flat voice.

"He's gotta get better, or it'll go poorly for you," Joshua said quietly. Then he added with a sigh, "For us. Samuel doesn't take kindly to failure." Then he hissed, as Rowan started to work on his head.

Julie couldn't watch for too long, as Rowan stitched quickly with a curved needle, the fingers of his gloves growing stained with Joshua's blood, and she stared down at her own hand, smeared in red.

Too much blood. She was tired of it. Looking at it brought her back to her own injuries, and her pain grew with the attention, particularly her arm. As she studied it, felt around the break, she realized why. It was crooked again.

Her face flushed with fear, knowing how much it was going to hurt to straighten, and she closed her eyes and lay back against the wall, steadying her breath.

"Go," came Joshua's voice. "We're done." He sounded tired and hurt. "You'll stay Rowan for the afternoon, keep on Saul. I'll come get Caleb for dinner, after you've fed your crazy woman."

"She's not my property, asshole," Rowan growled at him. "And she's saner than anyone else in this place."

"Whatever. Get her out of here."

Rowan was by her side immediately, his features crumpling as he gingerly examined the swollen bruise on the side of her face. He wouldn't look her in the eye, though she tried to catch his gaze with her own, desperate to connect with him, to reassure him.

He sought out her arm then, and swore under his breath.

Finally he looked at her. It was devastating, and she felt new tears well as she stared back, shaking her head at what she saw. His eyes were so incredibly sad.
"No, Rowan," she whispered urgently, "Don't let him get into your head, it wasn't your fault, it wasn't you!"

"GET HER OUT!" Joshua shouted, and they both flinched.

"Going to give you something heavier for pain," Rowan said softly, and held up a bottle of morphine.

"Not under," she said, shaking her head again.

"No Julie," he answered, his eyes soft. "Just enough so you can move."

Glancing at the bottle then, she nodded, and watched him as he prepared the injection and gave it gradually.

It worked quickly, and she felt herself relax as the pain melted away, replaced with a sense of calm and wellbeing that was weirdly out of place in the little concrete box of a room where Rowan's bandaged and broken face watched her carefully.

"Whoa," she said quietly.

Rowan didn't say anything, just gave a half smile as he threaded his arms behind her back, and under her legs. Then he gently lifted her from the ground.

"Okay?" he asked, and she nodded back. There was a little pain, but she felt safe and comfortable, and closed her eyes as he headed towards the door.

"Just one more thing you should know," Joshua said, as Rowan reached for the handle.

"What," Rowan asked wearily, turning back to face him.

"Your military man dad isn't coming, Julie," Joshua said quietly.

Her eyes opened at the sound of his voice, and she heard the smirk in his words.

"He isn't coming, because we got rid of the plane."

"What?" Rowan whispered. His eyes went distant for a moment, before he looked up sharply. "Oh shit..."

"Yeah, you remember what we did? Caleb and I, with a small crew? My dad's been up there all morning with another, catching what we missed. The plane's gone. Buried. The mess you made on that hill, covered up."

The haze of wellbeing around Julie started to drain away, as Rowan looked down at her, his eyes wide with shock. Joshua's words sank in slow, and her heart sank with them to somewhere dark and hopeless.

"Nobody's coming for you, Julie." Joshua continued, his voice bitter and smug. "Not your big strong daddy. Not his big strong army."

And he laughed.

"So this is your home now, guess you better get used to it."
Julie looked up at Rowan, feeling only fear and pain and dread, wanting him to somehow say something that would erase everything Joshua had just said. Make it untrue, make it a lie. But he didn't look at her. Scowling, his eyes burning with anger, Rowan grabbed the handle and pushed through the door.

Joshua snorted behind them.

"Welcome home!"
That Dead Guy

The Colonel stood on the tarmac, in the grey light of dusk, as the jet rolled to a stop beside him. The engines died with a sinking whine and shortly afterwards, two soldiers disembarked, saluting the Colonel before the group started briskly towards the hanger.

"You said you had some possible hits?" the Colonel asked over his shoulder, as they walked to the command station, set up towards the back of the large open space - a cluster of tables ringed by portable lights, spread with maps, compasses and other tools meant to mark and measure. A group of men stood around the tables, analyzing the maps, and as the Colonel approached, one pulled away and met the group, immediately looking to the airmen flanking him.

"What'd you find?" he asked, his expression eager, his eyes bloodshot and beyond weary.

"Mark, let me debrief them please," John answered, holding his hand up. "You were supposed to get some sleep."

"Can't sleep, just like you," Mark said with a sigh, then rubbed his eyes as he turned to walk away. "Fine, I'll get you guys some coffee."

"Thank you sir," the pilot to the Colonel's left said, and they continued around the tables, heading to the larger topographical map covering upstate New York and Vermont.

"For the hundredth time Dale, don't call me sir," Mark called from the coffee machine as he poured the steaming liquid into a mug. "I'm not in your little army."

"Little?" John answered with a smirk. "We're six thousand strong now, over eleven if you count our cooperative contacts."

"Don't care," Mark said as he took a slurp from his own mug and walked over balancing two more. "Here."

The two airmen accepted the coffee gratefully and turned back to the map. Dale tapped his finger, the nail lined with engine grease and dirt, down on a western facing ridge in the Green Mountains.

"Possible sites here," he said, and shifted west, over Lake Champlain, tapping another spot on the southern slope of Mount Marcy, "and here. Both small aircraft hits."

The Colonel nodded and released a heavy breath. "Chance of survivors?"

The other crew member spoke up, "None at the first, only recognizable piece was a wing. Second, I'm thinking maybe 20%, cabin was relatively intact, but burnt through." He took a sip of coffee and shook his head. "Wasn't able to age either site. Could be a day old, could be years old. Would need to get closer."

"Well, let's get closer Ed," Mark said, slapping the guy on the arm. "The Piper's ready to go."

John grabbed Mark's arm as he turned from the table. "Neither of you are going up tonight."

"Excuse me?" Mark said, pulling his arm from the Colonel's grasp.

"None of you are going up tonight," John repeated, turning to face Mark directly. Usually, this was the point where people ducked their heads and agreed to what he was asking. But, this was Mark,
and John drew himself up, fully prepared for an escalation of the argument. If he had to, he'd just have Mark escorted back to the city. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that. Adding to Mark's distrust of the military establishment wasn't something he wanted to do. Particularly after the man's enforced quarantine almost a year ago.

John liked Mark. Knew Mark didn't like him much, but he was used to that. It was a trade off for control. For order.

In this case though, considering what was going to happen to them both in the near future, it was probably advantageous for them to get along.

The thought brought an unwelcome clenching of his heart, and he sighed heavily. "Don't want to fight you on this Mark, but you're all running on fumes. You've had, what, two hours sleep in the last forty eight hours? Dale and Ed have been flying almost non-stop since yesterday." He held Mark's defiant gaze, and did something he very rarely did. He dropped the Colonel and let some of the terrified father peek out. "I want to find them Mark, we will find them, but if I let you go up now, we'll lose a pilot and a plane. Neither we can afford. You understand?"

Mark stared at him, his posture stiff and angry, and John got ready for the fight.

But then Mark sagged and the weariness grew in his eyes until John could feel it as a palpable thing, a heavy cloud around the man, dragging him down. He actually had to break eye contact, to stop himself from yawning.

Mark nodded, his face growing terribly sad. "We have to find them John. We need to find them soon. Where are they?"

John tried to give the man the strength of his own conviction, that was thankfully still holding, even two days since news of the mayday from Davis. "We will find them, no matter what it takes, you got that?" As Mark nodded again, John gestured to a young soldier nearby, "Jared, take Mark back to the city. Might need to get some sleep aids from the hospital en route. Bring him back at seven hundred sharp."

Jared nodded, and waited for Mark to grab his flight bag before leading the way to a jeep parked just outside.

John watched them go, then turned back to his team.

"So Ticonderoga looks good?"

"Yeah," Dale said, nodding. "The airstrip's a little cracked in places, but clear, had no trouble landing. The fuel tanker needs some repair, but they have jet and avgas reserves."

"Good," John said, gazing down at the map. "That's good. I want to set up a secondary search base there tomorrow, get some men on the ground."

He looked up at his crew, releasing a heavy breath. "I need more pilots. Can't keep running you guys into the ground."

"What about Ben Poland, the dead guy?" Ed asked.

John shook his head. "His skills are unstable, by his own admission. And he hasn't been dead for about three months now Ed, come on."

"Sorry," Ed said with a shrug. "Just find it easier to say."
"Well work harder, and say it the right way, got it?"

The pilot nodded. "Yes sir."

"Marcus," Dale said suddenly.

John's face darkened. "THAT dead guy?"

"Sir," Ed said quietly, "he's been alive for a ye-"

"Shut up."

"Yes sir."

With an aggravated groan, John looked sideways at Dale. "He can't fly a plane."

"No," Dale answered evenly. "But he can handle a helicopter, he's had experience with search and pursuit operations."

"Because he ate a cop," John snapped back, "And he's probably just as unstable as Ben!"

Dale stared at the Colonel for a moment. "Sir, the reason Ben's skills are 'unstable', is because he's scared of heights."

John blinked. "He's scared of..."

"Heights, sir."

John wiped a hand down his face. "Why didn't he tell me this?"

Dale's mouth twitched, and John had the impression he was trying to resist the urge to smirk.

"Oh for..." John grumbled. "Do we even have a helicopter with that range?"

"If we prep the Ticonderoga strip sir," Ed answered, "range would be less of a factor. As would the fuel costs. But," he paused and glanced at Dale, "don't we have a 412? And a Huey? Those have a longer range than the Enstrom."

Dale nodded, "Yeah, but I wouldn't go up in that Huey if you paid me. Damn thing's rusted through."

"But the 412's in decent shape last I saw, and I'm pretty sure it's got a searchlight." Ed looked towards the open hanger door and shrugged. "Heck, might even have a night vision camera. Long as the rats haven't eaten through the wiring..."

"Well, shit. That settles it." John folded his arms and sucked in a deep breath. Then he grabbed the comm by his side and barked into it. "Gimmel!"

There was a short pause, then a voice came through in a light scatter of static. "Yes sir?"

"Gimmel, where are you right now?"

"Market district sir."

"Very good, I need you to locate and retrieve someone for me."

There was a pause. "Who's that sir?"
"Marcus."

A longer pause, then, "The teacher?"

John frowned thoughtfully. That was a better way to think of the man than 'that dead guy'. "That's the one. Bring him to the airport, Hanger J."

"Uh sir?" Gimmel said hesitantly, "What should I tell him when I pick him up?"

With a deep sigh, John looked out over the darkening tarmac, at the last thin ribbons of golden light on the far horizon.

"Tell him his friend needs his help."

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*Let me tell you how thrilled I was when Marcus showed up in this story :) (and then, how worried I was, when Marcus showed up in this story...) Had no idea that was going to happen. His chapter's next, and offers a take on how he and R found each other as corpses. As always, thanks for reading, and leave a comment if you can!*
Marcus was having a perfectly fine evening with a perfectly fine bottle of wine in his perfectly fine apartment when the knock sounded at his door.

"Mandy," he yelled across his one and only room, "for the last time, I don't want a cat!"

Damn woman couldn't seem to accept that he was perfectly fine by himself. That his breakup with Emily hadn't made him a reclusive, desperately lonely guy, mourning over a particularly dull red with distinctive notes of vinegar and dirt.

Because it hadn't. Everything was perfectly fucking fine.

The knock came again, and the insistence made him rise up out of his seat angrily, burp aggressively, and stride towards the door grumbling. With a dramatic swing of his arm, he wrenched it open, eyes focused on where he thought Mandy's face would be.

Instead he found himself staring at a black flak jacket, and glancing upwards, the carefully neutral expression of a man with dark hair cut messily short and the faint hint of a mustache.

"You're not Mandy," he said, keenly observing the man standing in his doorway.

"Correct," the man answered. "I'm here to take you to the airport."

Marcus pondered this.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To the airport."

Marcus nodded for a while, then tilted his head. "Are we going on a trip?"

"Yes," the soldier said, nodding back slowly, then spoke even slower. "To. The. Airport."

Now feeling the circuitous nature of the conversation, Marcus shook his head. "Sorry, I've been drinking shitty wine, so perhaps I'm missing something, but people usually go to the airport to go somewhere else."

"The Colonel told me-"

"The Colonel?" Marcus snorted, interrupting him, "What the hell does he want?"

The soldier outside his door sighed. "He said to tell you that your friend needs your help."

Marcus frowned.

"My friend?" he asked. "You mean R?"

"I mean nothing sir, I'm merely-"

"That's not true," Marcus said quickly, emphatically, leaning out of his doorway, "Never let anyone tell you that man, you mean something to some-"

"Sir. Please remove your hand from my shoulder."
Marcus blinked, then shook his head again. "Sorry. Shitty wine. Shitty week." He leaned back into the apartment and grabbed his keys from the small table by the door, before exiting and locking the door behind him. "What's wrong with Rowan? Is he okay?"

"That I don't know sir. The Colonel just gave me that message. I'm to escort you to the airport." He paused and looked Marcus up and down. "Is that all you need?"

Marcus stared back, not understanding, then looked down.

He was in a pair of blue boxers and a plain white t-shirt.

"Ah." Looking back up, he held up a finger. "A minute."

After said minute, he was walking behind the soldier in jeans and a light jacket as they made their way down the stairs and out onto the street. A patrol car sat idling at the curb, and the man opened the door for him before walking around and climbing into the driver's seat.

Marcus leaned back as the car pulled away from the curb, then leaned forward again, pulling the radio handset out of its cradle and clicking the switch a couple of times.

The soldier reached over and calmly took it from his hands, returning it to the cradle.

"Please don't touch anything in the car sir," the soldier said politely, glancing over his shoulder as he took the next left towards the interstate exit.

"Right," Marcus answered, and crossed his arms. "Sorry."

For a moment, he simply stared out of the window at the dark streets, and the wild tapestry of the stars behind the edge of the city. Then he reached down and pressed the button to the glove compartment, which shot open onto his lap. Papers, a packet of cigarettes and two cassette tapes spilled over his jeans and onto the floor, and he fumbled for a minute to gather it all again, before straightening up with one of the tapes.

"Huh, you guys still have these?" he asked, turning it in his hand to read the song list. Then he caught the soldier's glare. "Sorry." Quickly closing the glove compartment again, he dropped his hands to his lap.

The soldier let out a loud breath and turned back to watching the road.

"So, what's your name?" Marcus asked, bringing the cassette back up as he tried to read the label in the bounced glow of the headlights.

"Gimmel, sir."

"Jewish, huh?" Marcus asked, as he pressed the tape into the slot on the dash. There was a manic burst of squealing guitars, with some wacky distortion that only added to the sound, before it cut off with a sharp click.

Gimmel plucked the tape from the deck, and threw it over his shoulder into the back seat.

"I prefer silence."

Marcus glared at him.

They drove in silence then, and as they neared the airport exit, Marcus stared out over the stretch of dark tarmac. One runway was faintly lit by solar lamps, and his eye was drawn to a bloom of light
spreading from a cluster of hangers on the north boundary.

Marcus let out a sigh without meaning to.

It wasn't the first time he'd been back to the airport since he'd walked out with a crowd of zombies over a year ago. His most recent visit came after answering an open call for 'those with special talents - living, dead or inbetween' posted on the common room noticeboard back at his apartment complex (or 'The House of the Dead' as it was unaffectionately known by the regular city inhabitants).

He'd answered the call, and after a special screening process, he'd had a few fun helicopter flights with a guy named Dale, showed off his markmanship - poorly, he hated guns - and demonstrated his ability to teach.

And that's where they'd ended up placing him. In a school. As an elementary teacher. For first graders.

If he had any hair, he'd have ripped it out by the end of the first week.

The problem was, he was a damn good teacher. It didn't matter that, before he'd died and turned into a rather sharp looking corpse, he'd absolutely hated kids. Couldn't stand the little snot-nosed shits. Pre-apocalypse, anyone who'd tried to get Marcus to hold a kid and turned away for a moment, would turn back to find him nursing his drink again and their child gurgling on a nearby couch, or in the arms of a complete stranger.

It was like a magic trick.

Then, on one of his many culinary strolls through the city, he'd gone and eaten someone who'd spent her life helping the little bastards learn things. Like colors, shapes, letters. How to use the crapper without asking for help.

And now, he adored them. As soon as he walked through the school doors, he was transformed from a scowling, balding man feeling like he was about to face a firing squad, to a smiling, balding man who couldn't wait to see what his class had brought for show and tell, couldn't wait to read out the new book about morally righteous mice he'd unearthed, and couldn't wait to lead them in a counting song about rabbits.

She'd never had kids of her own, the teacher he ate. Her class had been her family, one she'd always struggled to let go of at the end of the year. He felt her pain and her love, and it made him a truly exceptional teacher.

And it drove him nuts.

He'd been a perfectly good salesman before everything went insane. Apparently there was no room for 'his type' in the brave new world. But that'd probably change once folks started looking past the basic needs situation again.

There hadn't been any room for a piano tuner either. That guy had been an interesting meal. Scales had reverberated around his empty head for about a week after he ate that guy. Everything he heard during that time - doors opening, rasps and groans, shattering glass, sobs and screams - turned into notes that needed just a little nudge to be perfect. It'd been the only time he'd ever truly stopped to listen to a bird. Then it'd faded, as he'd eaten a couple of cashiers, a postal worker (he could sort mail like nobody's business)... and a librarian.

What a fascinatingly quiet mind. He didn't often wish he'd had more of a certain person's mind
after consuming it. There were only a few. The librarian's had been one of them. Calm, like sitting beside a lake with no breeze, but vivid. Filled with unreal worlds, and journeys that stepped sideways from normal and kept going.

He could have eaten her mind for days.

And the porn star's as well. That guy's brain had been magic. Though, at the end, he was a little disillusioned with how bored everyone seemed to be once the cameras stopped rolling.

"We're here."

Marcus snapped back to the present with a start, turning to look out of the driver's door as they pulled to a stop beside the large hanger and Gimmel climbed out. Through the window he watched the soldier walk towards the bright interior of the building, then the man turned back and gestured for him to follow. Another figure, who Marcus immediately recognized as the Colonel, detached from the group inside to greet them.

"Great," Marcus muttered, and stepped out of the car, then quickly ducked in again to grab the cassette tape from the backseat. Tucking it into the back pocket of his jeans, he turned and strode towards the Colonel.

"John," he said, with a short nod at the man.

A scowl formed on the Colonel's face for just a moment. Probably because he'd used the guy's first name.

*Oh well.*

"Marcus," John answered, making his name sound like a swear word.

Marcus looked over the man's shoulder towards the group of men clustered around the tables inside. He recognized Dale, and the other pilot, whose name escaped him, but that was it. Big sheets of paper covered the tables, and Marcus quickly saw they were maps.

"What's going on?" he asked, looking back at the Colonel. Only then, in the light spilling from the hanger, did he notice the emotional tells around the guy's eyes.

The man was exhausted. And worried. Really worried.

In a flash, he did a quick inventory of what could possible make the man as worried as he looked. And apart from an invasion of new and improved dead who really meant it this time, there was only one thing Marcus could think of.

*Julie.*

And if he was worried about her... then...

"Where are they?" he asked quickly, as the Colonel's worry started to infect him too.

The man raised an eyebrow, apparently surprised by Marcus' quick assessment of the situation.

"We don't know," the Colonel said, and nodded at the soldier who'd driven him over. "Thank you Gimmel, please return to your post."

"Sir," Gimmel replied with a nod, and saluted to them both, with a small smirk at Marcus, before returning to the vehicle to drive away.
Marcus turned back to John as they walked into the hanger, and the smell of sweat drifted over him as they neared the group. None of these guys had had a shower recently. They must have been at this, whatever this was, for a while.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" he asked, frowning.

"Hey Marcus." Dale said from the group, giving a small wave. "Feel like flying again?"

"Let me explain please, Dale," the Colonel sighed, and pulled Marcus over to the bigger of the maps.

Marcus glanced over it quickly, and felt a familiar stirring inside his head, the life experience of someone he'd taken, waking in response to the familiarity of a moment. The cop. Pouring over a map, interpreting markings that showed what ground had been covered, what had been dismissed, assigned search quadrants and the projection of possible flight paths with jotted timestamps.

The Colonel started speaking then, as he stared down at the map, telling him that R and Julie had been en route to the Davis Outpost two days ago, and had hit a storm about forty minutes in. They'd actually missed the mayday in the city, but the outpost had caught most of it and relayed what they'd received.

'storm, severe... blind west... the Adiron... unknown, emergency land...' They'd received no contact since then.

Marcus stared at the map, and felt a quick tightening in his chest.

"Shit," he whispered, eyes tracing the possible routes the men had marked in, the few circles of possible sites, the broad X's over the ones that'd been explored and dismissed. All over mountainous country with few airstrips to speak of. "Shit."

"Apparently Rowan was calm," John said quietly. "Which is good. I've no doubt he'd bring them down safe."

"But would the plane bring them down safe?" Marcus wondered out loud, still staring at the map.

The room grew very quiet around him, and he felt a sudden tension in his shoulder blades.

*Mighta been the wrong thing to say...*

"Marcus," John growled. "You can think those thoughts, but you sure as shit can't say them around me, you got that?"

"Sorry," Marcus said, and straightened up. "Sorry." He glanced down again and nodded at the map. "You check this airstrip?"

"First thing we tried," Dale answered, meeting him on the other side of the table. "But the storm system was still active - big sucker - we couldn't get eyes on the ground at all. We did another flyover of both strips yesterday morning. Still too much cloud cover, too low to punch through. Fared better in the afternoon, and landed in Ticonderoga today. They aren't at either airport."

"What're these?" Marcus asked, tapping the map.

"Identified crash sites. We've crossed out the ones we've confirmed aren't the Cessna they were flying, but some we need to get in for a closer look."
Marcus nodded over the map. "Any nearby settlements?"

"A couple, but we know very little about them. Lake Placid and Saranac seem to be deserted, but there's some activity at Keene. There's something further west too, that looks fairly fortified, but we haven't surveyed that yet, been sticking to this projected path."

With another nod, Marcus straightened and found the Colonel watching him closely.

"So," he said, looking between Dale and John, "When can I go?"

The Colonel did not answer straight away. John simply stared at Marcus, judging, measuring him, until the silence got a little uncomfortable. Marcus could see the gears working in the guy's head. Knew the questions the man was asking himself. Could Marcus do what they needed? Was he responsible enough? Could he take orders?

Marcus could read John like a damn book. Wasn't hard. He knew the type. A man who needed to be in control. Who needed obedience, and meted out punishment with an overbearing hand when he didn't get it. A man who believed his way was the only way.

It was no wonder they didn't get along.

He smirked.

The Colonel scowled.

They'd been much more civil the first time they met, with a handshake to bridge the divide between living and dead. A lot had happened between them since. Mostly at high volume. Mostly one sided. Marcus had an unerring ability to meet a roar with a whisper and still somehow get his point across. More than one of their exchanges had ended with the Colonel practically frothing at the mouth.

And Marcus loved it.

But this wasn't the time for that.

He met the Colonel's gaze and dropped the smirk.

"What do you need me to do?"

The effect on John was palpable. Marcus watched the slight easing in the man's shoulders, the slow exhale, the tension fade from the man's eyes, and the Colonel nodded then, glancing at Dale.

And together they made their plans for the next day, the movement of men and supplies, parts for possible auto repairs and food for an extended operation plus essential medical gear. They moved to the hanger that housed the helicopters and assessed both the Huey and the Bell 412.

The latter aircraft felt so familiar to Marcus it was a little unnerving, touching it for the first time yet knowing every panel and instrument intimately. It was a big jump up from the Enstrom, but it had been rigged for police work, and Marcus was pretty damn sure his inner cop had actually flown it before.

The Huey was a write off, but they were able to use some of the parts to bring the 412 up to operating capacity, and while they couldn't get the FLIR camera to work, the spotlight came on without a hitch.
It was perfect, but a damn expensive rig to fly in terms of fuel, which is apparently why they hadn't activated it before. As long as the Ticonderoga strip had a decent fuel reserve though, they'd be in good shape.

And Marcus couldn't wait to get up in the air.

The moment finally came as the sky was just beginning to lighten to the east, and a squad of soldiers sat behind him in the extended cabin - he could hear the metallic jangling of their harnesses as they buckled in.

Dale had settled in beside him, and was going through the pre-flight checks. Marcus stared at him, slightly annoyed, his body on the edge of tired.

"I can fly this myself you know," he said. "I don't need a babysitter."

"Not my call sir," Dale answered in a weary voice. "Colonel wants backup on this flight. Once we're at Ticonderoga, you'll be doing solos."

"Sure," Marcus grumbled.

Dale smirked and slapped his arm. "Hey, once we're airborne I'm planning on getting some serious shuteye. How's that for faith?"

Marcus smirked back. "I'll take it."

The Colonel approached then, ducking down as the rotors picked up speed, and Marcus pulled his headset off one ear to catch what he had to say.

"You'll be on a night shift once we've settled in up there," John yelled, "so hit the hay as soon as you find a spare corner, got it?"

Marcus shrugged. "I guess."

The Colonel stabbed a finger at him. "No guessing," he snapped. "You find time for sleep, we need you tonight! I want a round the clock operation, can't do it if all my pilots are searching during the day!"

"Fine," Marcus sighed. He glanced over at Dale. "We good to go?"

Dale nodded, and his voice came through the headset. "Clear for take off."

"Ed and I will bring the jet over at ten hundred hours," John yelled, fighting the buffeting wind. "Mark will operate the Piper from here, and we'll be in radio contact en route - got it?"

"Got it!" Marcus yelled back, trying to resist the urge to just take off and leave the man on the tarmac.

John leaned into him. "Standard response is 'yes sir'!"

Marcus pulled back and gave a sloppy salute. "Sure thing!"

The Colonel scowled, but didn't seem to have the energy for a fight. "Just keep my men safe!"

With a slight nod, Marcus smiled, sincerely this time. "Will do."

John gave a small nod of his own, and stepped away then, ducking to jog clear of the blades, as
Marcus eased the helicopter into the air.

It felt good, and he couldn't help but grin as the airport shrank beneath them and they gained enough altitude to push forward. The 412 was a monster compared to the Enstrom he'd flown before, and he felt that power as he pressed forward into their cruising speed.

It was good to be back in the air.

And he knew it was the cop in him that made him feel that way, but that was alright. Long as his inner fuzz could help him find his friend, it could go on feeling anything it liked.

The grin slipped from his face, and he looked out over the dim land passing beneath them, just starting to feel the first touch of morning light.

Christ, Rowan better be alive. There wasn't any other scenario he wanted to consider save the one where they found the two of them alive and well. And maybe humping like rabbits as a big screw you to the odds.

Because the odds weren't good. Storms could tear a light aircraft to pieces, or make it drop right out of the sky. R might have eaten a good pilot, but he couldn't do shit if a wing fell off, or a microburst slammed them into the ground. Plane might as well be made out of a paper then, and there wouldn't be much of anything left for them to find.

His once dead best buddy would be well and truly dead.

_Crap, stop thinking like that._

Scowling at himself, he shifted against his harness and gazed towards the sunrise. The sun was almost clear of the horizon now, and the world was crisply golden around them. They'd cleared the outer suburbs and were crossing over broad patches of farmland, dotted with lonely farmhouses with long misshapen shadows, most with crumpled roofs, sagging barns and fields roughly overgrown.

Occasionally he spied a property surrounded by a wall of sorts, and it looked like the fields were still being tilled, though on a much smaller scale. That was doing the apocalypse right - living away from crowds, growing your own food, a stash of shotguns to keep the crows... and zombies... away.

He'd never eaten a farmer, had no idea what that kind of life was like. But it didn't look too bad from up here.

A soft sound finally reached him through the headset, and for a moment he wondered if there was some mechanical problem with the chopper, before he realized Dale was snoring.

His co-pilot was slumped against the far wall of the cockpit, one hand relaxed around the stick between his knees, the other dangling beside the collective lever.

Marcus had no doubt that if he pushed the 412 into an impromptu dive right now, Dale would be on the controls and steadying it before he'd truly woken up.

He smirked. _Tempting._

_Nah._ Poor guy was exhausted, he needed any sleep he could get.

Marcus stared ahead, thankful for the clear skies, and focused on getting to Ticonderoga as quickly
as he could.

But his thoughts kept wandering to ugly what ifs, kept tugging at him with an unwelcome and premature sense of loss, and he kept dwelling on the face of his friend sitting beside him at a dust laden airport bar.

How many hours had they spent together like that? Not really talking, or doing much of anything... certainly not breathing. Occasionally it came in handy, obviously you needed it to groan or whisper, but most of the time they just sat like statues, sharing a moment of intense stillness. But very much aware of being in each other's company, and oddly thankful for it.

That was the weird thing. Before he'd met R, he'd been pretty much a blank, hot off the press zombie. Thoughts around that time were vague sensations he felt inside. Like hunger, recognizing what was food, and what wasn't. When the stimulus went away, so did those thoughts, leaving him a listing nothing, frozen and empty.

But then there was R. A tall shambling figure in red. The red had confused him at first actually, he'd tried to bite R in the shoulder, stirred by thoughts of blood, even though he couldn't smell anything living for a mile. The heavy cotton was a big let down.

R had simply turned and looked at him, and as their eyes made contact, something changed. They must have stood like that for an hour, just staring. Then R said something.

Well, it was more of a grunt than a word, but it was close enough to a word that Marcus, not even M at the time, stood there for another stretch of time just devouring it. Like it was something hanging in the air he could physically take into himself.

R said "Hey."

Then he turned, and walked away, towards the escalators leading to the baggage claim.

M stood there for a while longer, his being caught up in doing something it hadn't done for a very long time.

Thinking.

Small, slow, simple thoughts, but powerful enough to eventually propel him to follow in the footsteps of the tall red man, to track him down in the airport filled with shuffling dead who looked through him and away, until he finally found the guy drifting like a ghost on a long people mover.

And Marcus watched him, drift away, then drift back, then away again, and every time the guy came back, their eyes would meet, and Marcus would feel that questioning again, the something inside responding to... a connection.

And finally, the red man got off of the mover, and walked over.

And Marcus opened his mouth, and said, "Hey."

Or at least, that's what was supposed to come out of his face. Instead, it was a hollow voiceless gasp, because he hadn't taken in enough air to do the job.

But when R heard it, he did something that no other dead had ever done before.
He smiled.

Marcus smirked in the cockpit of the helicopter. *Okay, wasn't really a smile.*

To a human being, it would have looked like the discomfort that visits a person's face after they've eaten a suspect burrito.

But to M, at the time, it was as if R had laughed out loud. The faces of the dead moved of course, they had to - you had to open your mouth to eat somebody. And sometimes there were snarls, brows drawn low, the wild screeches and groans, but that was the *need* expressing itself, taking over.

This was different. This was... well, he didn't know what it was at the time, it was all rather new.

It wasn't like he'd never heard words before, or seen emotions cross people's faces. Plenty of people had screamed at him, shouted at their friends over him, or pleaded with him as he'd torn into their innermost innards. But it all just washed over him, because he was wrapped in need. It was in control. They were living, they were food.

It was that simple.

R left him then, as M stood thinking small thoughts, and feeling *something* he could not express outside of the boundary of what he was. When he moved again, it was with a strange purpose. His body took him somewhere he'd only passed before, but now called to him with a shadow of an urgency.

Because he needed...

...*a stiff drink*...

And he found the place, and sat at the counter, surrounded by dusty glasses, facing a wall of broken bottles and the corpse of a man with a shattered skull and gaping ribcage propped up against an ice chest.

And he wondered if he was having the stiff drink yet. He wasn't sure. But it felt... it *felt*...

Why did it *feel*?

M sat there, lost in being lost, until the need grew so loud inside he could no longer think his small thoughts, and he rose and wandered to the front of the airport, where clumps of needful dead waited for a corpse with greater need to start the slow migration to hunting grounds.

But before he left...

... he looked for R.

And found him, staring at a mug of pencils in a gift shop.

M stared at R, stared at the pencils, then back at R. And watched as R pushed his finger through the mass of colorful sticks, making them shift in circular patterns around the confines of the mug.

Then R picked the mug up and put the whole thing in his hoodie pocket.

Marcus was befuddled, another new thing for him that day, and he sniffed the air, wondering if perhaps the gift shop held real gifts of edible things that he'd just missed before. But no.
R was just...

...not all there...

Which confused him even more, because R seemed to have all of his pieces, unlike many of the dead in the airport. There was one guy in particular who'd been eaten clear through before he turned. The man had been set upon by a mass of dead when he'd run through the security gate on his way to the tarmac. M knew this because he'd been a part of the group, and pieces of the man had been flung clear over his head in the frenzy. The guy looked like a boney at the end, only he had hair, and everything was still wet inside. Black and oozing, dripping from a yellowing scaffold of spine, ribcage, pelvis, and not much else.

The need screeched inside, just like a boney, and M could not wait any longer. He reached out and took R's arm.

And both of them froze and stared at his hand, the grey fingers wrapped around R's red hoodie.

R looked up, and tilted his head, the slightest tremor of confusion on his brow.

And M stared up at him, releasing his arm, and took a step backwards. Feeling... feeling...

Afraid.

This wasn't the way of things. This was not... *natural* and he did not know what that meant. He did not know why he was wondering *why*.

And the questions made him... angry. And he was hungry. So he stopped, and he looked up at R, and his mouth opened, and with breath this time, he said,

"...eat..."

The word hung in the air between them, sharp and brittle, and R's brow trembled again, dipping lower.

A whisper drifted from him then, and it made M angrier still.

"..w..h..y.."

M's face twisted as the dark thing inside took control, and a voice that didn't feel quite like his own came from the dark cavern of his mouth.

"..HUN..GRY..."

At that, R's face changed. The confusion, the questioning slid away from him, leaving his features slack, and empty.

"..hungry.." he echoed, with a whisper.

M turned then, no longer feeling or thinking, driven only by need, and left for the exit, towards the waiting dead.

And R followed.

And they hunted, they killed, and they fed, surrounded by a sea of scattered pencils.

Marcus sighed. Blinking, he turned to the rising sun, suddenly needing to push the dark memories
back. The blades chopped the air wickedly above his head as the helicopter cruised forward, and the land turned thick and wild beneath him.

He hadn't revisited that moment for a long, long time. And seeing it again, playing in his head, he could see Rowan trying so hard to break free from inside R - from a body stilled by infection, reanimated by something truly dark and hungry.

And Marcus had basically acted like a bad father, told him in no uncertain undead terms to get a grip, grow up and act like a proper zombie.

He snorted. His own father had been like that. Marcus had rejected it, rejected him, but somehow, even dead, he'd passed on the same lesson. Not literally, sure, but close enough for a corpse. Christ, he'd even tried to get R to eat Julie!

And not in the fun way either.

Least the kid had enough sense to ignore him then.

With another sigh, Marcus stared out over the undulating green slopes of the Adirondacks, dotted with deep blue lakes, stretching out almost endlessly before him as he turned northward on the approach to Ticonderoga. Lake Champlain shimmered below, a thin sliver of a lake snaking up and widening grandly on its way to Canada.

It was truly beautiful country. Something he'd appreciate more if R hadn't gone down in it.

Christ, he wanted to see his friend right now. See him and give him a big hug. Marcus wasn't really a hugging kind of guy, but he'd break that rule for the kid. Might even give him a big sloppy kiss that they'd both regret.

He felt pulled west, and he had no idea how they expected him to wait till evening to search. The urge to veer left and start a weaving coverage pattern with the whole squad in tow was overwhelming.

Because R was out there. Somewhere. Maybe dead. Likely dead, his head offered. Maybe hurt. Maybe dying.

And maybe, by some fucking miracle, alive and waiting for a rescue.

His hand clamped tight around the stick between his knees. Dale was asleep, and probably wouldn't even notice. He'd burn through a shitload of gas with this heavy a load and seriously deplete their supplies...

But R... needed him.

Just as he was about to pull off from the descent path, Dale stirred in his seat and looked blearily over at Marcus as he straightened against his harness.

"We there yet?" the man asked, glancing out over the scenery below, as he rubbed his face.

Marcus just looked at him.

"Yeah," he said finally, releasing a heavy breath, and edged the nose down slightly as he eased into a descent over the airfield.

"Yeah."
He took one more look out over the expanse of green, before it disappeared behind the nearest peak as they sank to the strip.

_Hang in there buddy. I'm going to find you, and I'm going to bring you home._

_Whatever shape you're in._

_Ah Marcus, you rock. This chapter was a breeze to write, and such a fascinating journey into this guy's head. Hope you enjoyed it!_
R was in bad shape.

For the fifth time that morning, he hugged the porcelain bowl of the toilet and vomited his guts out.

Then, weak, pale and shaking, he sagged back against the bathroom wall, and tried to think around the sledgehammer pounding against the wall of his skull with every heartbeat.

It was impossible. His head hurt too much to think. Couldn't open his eyes either, every time he did it was like the world was interrogating him with a spotlight the size of the sun, and his head split wide with it.

It'd be a blessing actually, his head splitting open, ending this misery.

At least he'd stopped vomiting.

No. I haven't. ohgod

Rowan pushed off the wall at the sudden swell of nausea and held on for dear life as his stomach offered up the very last particle of food it held.

There was a knock on the bathroom door as he sagged over the bowl, well and truly done.

"You alive in there?"

It was Joshua's voice, and he could tell it was framed by a smirk.

The sound of the voice buffeted harshly against his brain, and he groaned, desperately wanting the world to fuck off and leave him to die in peace.

Everything smelled of alcohol. His breath, his clothes. What he'd just graced the toilet with.

And why did his mouth taste like dirty socks? It was the first thing he'd noticed when he woke a little while ago. He'd barely lifted his head from the couch he'd found himself on before the world had crushed in, and he'd half staggered, half crawled to the bathroom before spending the next however many minutes in hell.

Caleb had obviously spent the night eating dirty socks, drilling holes into his brain, and showering in vodka.

The thought of vodka made him want to puke again.

"Seriously, say something kid," Joshua said, with the tiniest measure of sympathy in his voice, though that could have been Rowan's imagination.

"No," Rowan mumbled, and groaned as the sound reverberated through his head.

Speaking was not allowed. No more speaking.

"That's it," Joshua sighed. "I'm coming in."

Oh god, go away.
But Joshua didn't. Rowan couldn't even lift his head to look at him as the man pushed into the room and stood over him.

"Kid," the man said.

Rowan ignored him.

Something cold was pressed against his temple, and Rowan jerked away instinctively, pressing up against the wall as he raised his hand to ward Joshua off.

The cold something was pressed into his hand, and slowly, as his eyes creaked open, he realized that Joshua was giving him a drink.

"Uh," he grunted, and tried to see what the drink was. The glass was deliciously cool against his hand and beaded with condensation. It was red. That's all he got before he had to shut his eyes again.

Joshua pushed it at him again. "Drink it, it'll help."

Instead Rowan took it and pressed it up against his forehead, his temple, his cheek. So wonderfully cold. It felt good, and helped to focus his mind a little.

What the hell happened last night? What the fuck did Caleb do to him?

Where was the nearest gun to shoot himself with?

Joshua laughed above him. "Drink it kid, it'll work faster that way."

Rowan peered up through slitted eyelids, trying vainly to ward off the interrogative sun. "What...?" he asked, hoping Joshua would know what he meant.

The man smirked high above him, and truthfully, didn't look much better than Rowan felt. His eyes were puffy and shadowed. A mass of yellowed bruises dotted his neck, and oddly, there were new bruises on his cheek and jaw. He had no idea where those had come from. Maybe last night... what had happened last night?

"Hangover cure," Joshua answered, and he crouched down against the opposite wall. "Tomato juice, cayenne pepper, some other stuff. Adeline makes it, never fails." He gestured with a finger. "Drink it."

Rowan made a face. He hated tomato juice. But, it felt like his brain was collapsing in on itself, so, lesser of two evils.

As quickly as he could, he drank the entire glass. And promptly started coughing as his mouth lit on fire.

"Holy shit," he croaked, and searched frantically for a sink as his throat screamed murder. "Help! Hot! Fuck!"

Joshua rolled his eyes at him, grabbed the glass and filled it with water from the sink before lowering it to him. "Here."

As Rowan frantically drained the glass, trying to douse the lava he'd poured down his gullet, Joshua shook his head at him.

"You're a real lightweight, kid," he said, smirking again. "Caleb used to do three times what you
managed last night, and still made room for another shot. Don't they drink back in your city?"

Rowan got on his knees and refilled the glass, and drained it again, leaning back against the wall. Things were coming together in his head now. Despite the hole he'd just burned through his stomach, his head wasn't pounding quite so much, and the light wasn't as bad. He could think. And he did, trying to remember what had happened after he'd been pulled from Julie by Joshua.

He hadn't wanted to go. She'd been in a lot of pain, and it was all his fault. Jesus, it'd been horrible, knowing he'd hit her. Didn't matter that he'd been Caleb when he'd struck her down. Didn't matter at all. And he didn't understand why he hadn't stopped Caleb. When Julie had pushed him away, bringing Caleb up to help Joshua, he'd fallen somewhere deep. He'd been well and truly lost, and only Joshua's threat, whispered in Caleb's ear had brought him back.

It terrified him. What if Caleb hurt her again? How would he stop it?

Would he be able to?

Julie had drifted to sleep then, and he knew if he didn't do what Joshua wanted, the man would just make life more of a hell for them both. He'd made Joshua promise that he wouldn't leave Caleb and Julie alone ever again, and after he had, Rowan brought Caleb up quick, and... and it was all hazy from there on.

Samuel. Samuel had talked to him... about... ugh. The headache started building again, and Rowan knew he was treading shaky ground. He wasn't going to give himself to Caleb right now, forget about it.

So he stopped trying to remember, and gazed across at Joshua, remembering that the asshole had just asked him a question.

Rowan sighed, not wanting to talk to the guy, knowing that didn't matter. "Alcohol's banned in the city."

Joshua's eyes grew so wide, they could have popped from their sockets.

"Banned?!!" the man gasped, and opened his mouth as if to ask something else, then closed it and shook his head. "Now that right there is a sin."

Rowan's mouth tugged back a little, despite himself. "I don't miss it. Was never a big drinker."

"You poor fools," Joshua said, still shaking his head. Then he looked back up at Rowan. "We'll fix that. Get you back up to shape."

"Oh god," Rowan groaned, dropping his head in his hands. "Please don't."

He was startled when Joshua burst out laughing, the sound bright and hearty. "Kid, you're a riot. It's a pity we can't be friends." His smile grew lopsided. "We were pretty friendly last night though, drinking together, shootin' the breeze."

Rowan looked away. "Wasn't me," he said quietly. Then his gaze locked back on Joshua. "I need to see Julie."

"Was good to have my brother here... just like old times," Joshua said fondly, ignoring him. "Real good."

And Joshua looked at him then, and his eyes were terribly sad, and a little needful. "Caleb, I'm real
Rowan squeezed his eyes closed and sighed. "Joshua, I need to see Julie. Please. You can't have Caleb until I've spent time with her. I need to check on Saul too."

"Yeah, 'bout that, kid," Joshua said, his eyes pained. "Saul's dead."

Rowan's mouth dried in an instant. "What?! When?"

"Early this morning," Joshua answered. "Before the first shift started. Foley went in to check on him. Must of died not a half hour before, he was still a little warm."

With a soft sound, Rowan closed his eyes and rested his head back on the wall. Dammit. It always hurt to lose someone he'd fought hard to save. Never got easy. Truth was, he didn't think the guy had much of a chance, and was frankly surprised the man had lasted this long. Still hurt though.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"Yeah, you're gunna be."

Rowan looked up at him, taken aback, but there wasn't a trace of malice in the man's face, just the same sadness.

"What?" he asked.

"Dad gets a righteous fire under him when he's angry. Right now he's real angry at you." Joshua's mouth grew thin. "Angry at me too, cause I'm the one who brought you here, and said you'd do the job right."

Frowning, Rowan shook his head. "Saul's chances were bad, I told him that. He can't blame me."

Then he put two and two together. "Did he hit you? Is that where you're getting those bruises from?"


"A father shouldn't hit his own kid Joshua," Rowan persisted, finding something in him responding to what was going on here. A deep anger. Was it his? Or Caleb's? "He do that to you a lot? Did he do that to Caleb? Is that why Caleb's so scared of him?"

He was tempted to search through Caleb's memories then, but knew it'd probably bring Caleb back up. Couldn't risk it. But something bad was going on here. Outside of the religious crap, the poor dead hung on the walls. Something dark and bad. Something about Samuel.

Joshua made an angry sound, and shuffled up the wall to his feet. "I told you to mind your own business," he growled. Then he sighed. "Now, you do me a favor. You stay yourself, no matter whatever happens, right? You stay Rowan." His eyes grew haunted. "Don't let Caleb out till my dad's done with you. Please. You can have all day with Julie, all night too, just... please."

The hair on Rowan's neck rose, and he pulled himself to his feet to face Joshua, grimacing as his head pounded angrily. "Your dad tries to touch me, I'll rip his fucking arm off."

Joshua snorted, and his face twisted into a sneer. "Yeah, I bet. Cause that worked well on me... and who do you think taught me to fight?" Then, surprisingly, his eyes softened somewhat, and he took
Rowan by the shoulders. "Look, it'll be over quick. You go ahead, be strong, he'll respect that. But end result will be the same. You stay yourself, not Caleb, and I will make it worth your while. I promise you that."

Rowan pulled himself free of Joshua's grasp, and turned to the door. "You can all fuck off. I'm going to see Julie."

The man sighed behind him. "I'll walk you over."

"Stay the hell away from me, Joshua," Rowan snapped back at him, and wrenched the door open. And walked straight into a petite figure of a woman, with jet black hair tied in a small bun atop her head. Her brown eyes rose not quite to his, and she gave a hesitant smile.

"Uh..." he mumbled, pulling back and raising his hands. "Sorry, I... um..."

"Adeline, clear the way for the man," Joshua barked behind him.

The woman immediately dropped her head, and shuffled aside.

"Jesus Christ," Rowan swore, angered by the clearly subservient way she'd reacted to Joshua's words.

What she did next was even more alarming. With a gasp, she quickly clapped her hands over her ears, and she looked up at him in shock.

"Oh fuck," Rowan swore again, the raised his hands apologetically, "Sorry! I mean... shit!"

Joshua smacked him in the back of the head. "Would you shut your foul mouth already? Adeline, move from the man's path!"

Rowan glared back at Joshua, then reached out and lightly touched Adeline's arm as she obediently turned to go. She flinched back as if burned.

"Thank you for the-"

Something hit him hard in the back of the head then, and he dropped to his hands and knees, groaning as the throbbing began anew. "What the..."

A hand grasped him roughly on the arm, and he realized it was Joshua, pulling him to his feet, and he was dragged towards the front door, through a living room decorated with old black and white photos, framed cross-stitchings and more crucifixes than he could count.

"You DO NOT touch my woman!" Joshua roared, pressing forward to push the door open. "You NEVER touch what's mine again, YOU GOT THAT?! GET OUT!"

Before he had a chance to stammer a reply, Joshua pushed him out the door, and Rowan found himself staggering out into the brilliant sunlight, barely keeping his feet beneath him as he slid to a stop in the dust of the dirt road.

The door slammed behind him, and Rowan winced, blinking up at the staggering amount of sunlight as he cradled his head.

Then he looked around.

People stood, silent and still, watching him, frozen in the activities of the day. The woman all
avoiding eye contact, but fixed on him nonetheless, the men standing, frowning his way.

And above and beyond them all, the wall, with the grisly decoration of misshapen corpses, rotting on crosses, attended by a scattering of crows.

*Jesus CHRIST.*

He had to get Julie away from this fucking nuthouse!

Grunting against the pain in his head, against the too bright light, Rowan ignored everyone and started off towards the bunker, his feet shuffling up dirt and gravel as he moved as quick as he could without running, still fighting the effects of the hangover and Joshua's last blow.

The man's insistence that he would face some kind of punishment played at the back of his mind the whole way, and he looked around nervously, watching every black clad man he saw closely as he neared the concrete entrance way. They all watched him, tracking him with their eyes, and the fear grew. The air was heavy with some expectation, and as his hand raised to grasp the handle to the bunker, he found out why.

Morrissey stepped around the corner, and pressed himself between Rowan and the door.

Rowan's heart started to pound. "Excuse me," he said firmly.

"You're excused," Morrissey answered back, his mouth pulling back in a smirk. "Time to come with me, son."

Fear swelled sharply within him, and Rowan took a step back, clenching his fists. "Let me see Julie," he said, low and angry.

"You'll see Samuel first," Morrissey said, echoing Rowan's tone right back at him.

Adrenaline raced through him in a rush, and he was about to put his fist through Morrissey's face, when the man calmly raised the rifle towards his chest. The soldier twitched the end, gesturing back the way he'd come.

The adrenaline petered out, and Rowan raised his hands slowly.

*Shit.*

What the hell was he supposed to do now?

Bowing his head, hoping to give them a false impression that he'd given up, Rowan turned and shuffled back the way he'd come, and around him, the people gathered and watched. More soldiers closed in behind Morrissey as they walked, and when he peeked up through his overhanging bangs, he saw another group of armed men waiting in the center of the town.

"Shiiit," he whispered under his breath.

They were going to try and make some kind of example out of him. All because he'd lost a patient? Or was it because he was new? Was it some kind of thing they did to everyone? A way to break people down, push them into shape?

Rowan clamped down on his racing thoughts. They weren't helping. He had to stay sharp, and get his head up out of the hangover, and the hammering Joshua had given him back at the house. Breathing evenly, he walked forward until he could go no further.
Because Samuel was standing in front of him.

Rowan stared at the man's chest, both because it was the best place to focus in a fight, and because he had no desire to be Caleb right now. And not because Joshua had asked him to stay himself either, but because he had a much better chance in a fight as Rowan.

These people wanted a show? A demonstration? He'd give them one.

Be nice if his brain stopped pounding.

"We brought you in as one of our own," Samuel said loudly, so the gathered group could hear. "Trusted you with the life of one of God's chosen. And you let him die, let death claim him, when he still had the Lord's work to do."

"I tried to save him," Rowan said quickly, hoping for reason. "but his wounds were tooUG!"

Something smacked him in the back of the head, and he staggered forward, almost running into Samuel.

"You wait till I'm done now," the man said calmly. Then he gestured to the men behind Rowan. "Hold him."

*Shitshitshit!*

Blinking against the painful thundering in his head, Rowan swiveled away, trying to keep out of everyone's grasp. The circle closed in, and he realized that this fight wasn't going to go the way he'd imagined. It certainly wouldn't be fair.

So he did something crazy. He rushed Samuel, pressing in close, and hit the man with a quick strike to the bridge of the nose. Samuel immediately dropped back, grunting as he grasped at his face, and the blood gushed over his lips.

Rowan didn't stop to gloat, immediately following it up with sharp, hard kick to the man's solar plexus.

It struck true, and the leader doubled over, gasping, a sound echoed by the voices of the people gathered around them all. Rowan had a feeling they'd never quite seen this before, but he didn't give any more thought to it, moving in swiftly to bring his clenched hands down on the man's skull.

He never delivered the blow, as someone struck him from behind again, a blow to his head from the butt of a rifle.

Rowan dropped without a sound as agony lanced his skull. Landing face down in the dirt, he writhed there, his breath kicking up puffs of dust.

*Get up GET UP!* The pounding in his head had reached a crescendo, and his whole body was feeling it now, as he rolled over, and tried to get his hands up underneath him.

Samuel kicked him in the side.

The breath left him in a rush, and he groaned, rolling away to his other side.

"Get.. him.. up," Samuel gasped. "Hold.. him!"

Rowan twisted onto his back, and lashed out at the soldiers reaching for him, but his swings were
slow and sloppy, and he was grabbed and wrenched to his feet. Everything spun, as his side and his
head pulsed in a symphony of hurt, and he struggled vainly as they pulled him forward.

To Samuel.

Blood was smeared shockingly over the man's face, and Samuel's breath came in pained gasps as
he leaned in close.

"You failed Saul," he panted, and his fingers dug like claws into Rowan's shoulder as he stabbed
his finger at the gathered group. "You failed us." His eyes grew sharp and dark as he drew in close
again. "You failed me, boy. And through me... you failed God."

The man's voice turned to a growl. "You'll feel pain now."

Before Rowan could react, Samuel's fist drove hard into his abdomen, and all of the air flew from
him as he gasped and curled forward. The blows kept coming, the steel ram of Samuel's fist hitting
the same spot, over and over, until Rowan was leaning on him, unable to breathe, and finally threw
up, the red of Adeline's hangover cure spilling out over the dirt road.

And the blows stopped, and Rowan sagged in the men's arms, no longer able to hold himself up,
fighting for every breath through lips stinging with cayenne.

"Take him to the cells... search him for the mark... I don't care what my fool son said... Morrissey?"

"Got it," came a voice behind Rowan, and Rowan felt his arm lifted, then quickly draped over the
man's neck, and he was pulled away from the circle. He had no strength, and could not lift his legs
as they were dragged behind him, his sneakers drawing gouges in the dirt.

Everything went foggy then, light came and went, darkness drew him down deep, then released
him, and found himself staring up at a caged fluorescent light, flickering randomly against the dull
walls of a small concrete room.

Someone's head came into view, and he felt his own head being shifted back and forth as he
frowned up at them, swallowing thickly.

Cool fingers pressed against his shoulder, prodding and stretching the skin for a moment before
pulling away. "Someone stitched you up good there..." came a man's deep voice, and he felt his
arm lifted, twisted back and forth as fingers traced along his skin. "Here too. Made a right mess of
that though..."

Morrisey.

Rowan tried to focus on the man's words, understand what was going on, but his thoughts drifted
away like smoke.

Distantly, someone tugged on his shirt, lifting it up to his neck.

"Damn..." The voice was hushed with amazement, "You got some mean scars kid. No wonder you
know how to fight."

The world lurched as he was rolled over and his shirt lifted again. Cool fingertips pressed against
his shoulder blades, as Morrisey gave a slight sound of disbelief at the exit scars. Only when his
shirt was pulled back down, and he was rolled back again, did he realize what the soldier was
doing.
Morrissey was looking for the mark.

His jeans were tugged off next, and Rowan groaned, trying to cover himself as Morrissey quickly looked him over and rolled him again.

Cool hands grasped the foot where his ankle had been burned, and twisted it back and forth. A finger ran lightly over the area, then tapped it, twice.

"Where'd you get this burn?" Morrissey asked.

Rowan swallowed again, and tried to roll back, but Morrissey wouldn't release his foot.

"Boy, the burn, it's new, where'd it come from? Answer me."

"p-plane.." Rowan whispered. "fire.. m-metal.."

"Huh," Morrissey said quietly. Then the man released his foot, and rolling him back, quickly drew his jeans up again.

"You check out," he said, when he was through. "And you put up a good fight, kid. Things'll be better for you now, you'll see."

Then the man stood, turned and left the room, locking the door behind him.

Rowan sank away for a while, his body a wretched landscape of hurt, every breath piercing his stomach like a blade.

When he came back, someone was lifting him off the ground, sitting him up against something warm.

Held... he was being held. Something hard was pressed against his mouth, and a cold liquid lapped over his lips. Rowan took a sip of what turned out to be water, and slowly opened his eyes.

Joshua was holding him, his face drawn in worry, inches from his own.

"Je..sus," Rowan mumbled, and tried to twist away from the man, wanting nothing to do with him. The motion hurt like hell, and he stiffened, his breath leaving him in a sharp gasp.

And Joshua engulfed him in a sudden hug, cradling the back of his head. Rowan winced at the pressure, and tried to squirm away, but Joshua held him firm.

"Thank you," Joshua said quietly, "God.. thank you. Didn't mean to make it worse when I hit you, but you can't... you didn't know the rules... I'm sorry. Caleb didn't feel it though. You saved him from it... thank you."

The words washed over Rowan in a confusing wave, and he gave up fighting the man, then must have fallen unconscious again, because the next thing he knew, he was alone in the cell.

Thirsty as hell too, and his skull was pounding up a racket. Turning slightly to take in the room, he realized someone had tucked something under his head, an improvised pillow of some stiff fabric.

Just beyond his hand was a green plastic cup. Stretching to reach it, Rowan pulled it over and took a shaky sip. Felt good, and he quickly drained the rest, then dropped it aside and just laid there, trying to pull his mind together, work out how badly he was hurt.

Pretty bad. Above the pounding of his brain, and the tight, sharp stabbing in his gut, nausea was
gripping him hard. Could be the hangover still, but might be a concussion. That wasn't good. He had to avoid falling under again, try to keep awake.

With a slow breath, Rowan tried to lift his head, and the room immediately went pitching back and forth. It just made him feel more sick, and he had to fight to keep the precious water he'd drunk down. Too dehydrated and concussed to let that go.

He looked up at the horrible, pale light flickering maddeningly above him, and sighed.

Being a punching bag sucked. Wasn't the first time someone had laid into him though, and was nowhere near as bad. Least the asshole hadn't hit him in the face. If it wasn't for the crack to the back of his skull, he would of held his own, and that bastard would be the one lying on the ground now.

God, this place was a madhouse. He needed to get Julie out of here. But how? Shooting their way out would just get them both killed.

Where was the hell was the Colonel? Why hadn't he found them yet? How many days had it been?!

He frowned. Wait.. didn't Joshua say.. something about... something buried...

Rowan blinked slowly.

Definitely concussed. Shit.

He closed his eyes, meaning to dig the memories up, but time slid out from underneath him, and when he opened his eyes again, there was someone standing above.

Samuel.

"Good," the man said, with the slightest smirk. His face had been cleaned of blood, but his nose and left eye socket were darkly bruised, almost purple.

As his eyes caught Samuel's, Rowan felt a surge of wild fear, and he quickly looked away. That was Caleb's reaction. Jesus, Caleb right under his skin... he couldn't do that right now...

The man crouched down beside him, and Rowan stared at the thin hard line of Samuel's mouth, at the deep gouges of wrinkles low on his jaw. They spoke of a lifetime of scowling, and Rowan had to avert his eyes completely as the fear swelled in a heavy wave again, laden with memories.

Jesus, not NOW...

"Got in some good blows Eric," the man said in a rough voice, "Guess I should believe you now about the Army?"

The man reached down and tugged his shirt up. Rowan reached up to pull it back down, but Samuel merely swatted his hand away. Then his eyebrows arched in surprise.

"Lord Almighty, Morrissey wasn't kidding," he muttered. "You been shot, Eric?"

Rowan said nothing, he was too busy trying to stay present, to not slide away as Caleb's fear worked to overwhelm him. What the hell had this man done to his kid?

"This a stab wound?" the man asked, and Rowan's skin shivered as the man's coarse finger slid down his chest, over the scar Julie had made so long ago.
At the touch, Caleb's fear rabbited inside of him, images flashed behind his eyes, memories leaking, and he grunted as his head, already crushed with pain, started to get worse.

Samuel let out a deep breath, and ran his rough hand down slowly, almost tenderly, over Rowan's bruised abdomen.

The touch made Caleb scream inside, and Rowan slowly started to understand. Struggling to keep it together, he reached up and sloppily pulled his shirt back down, pushing Samuel's hand away.

The man's brow dipped angrily for a moment, then smoothed as his lips thinned.

"Showed a lot of strength today boy," Samuel said quietly, "I respect that."

Thick fingers closed around Rowan's collar and he was pulled up, until he was face to face with Samuel.

Rowan groaned. Caleb was frantic with fear now, tearing away inside his skull. As Samuel leaned in close, Rowan's eyes, tightened to slits in pain, couldn't help but lock onto the soldier's.

"But don't ever think I don't own you," Samuel growled, his eyes livid. "You're mine. You're here because I allow it. You do what I want, when I need, you understand? My word is law, come straight from God, so when I say jump, you say 'off what?' - got it?!

Those eyes held him fast, and Caleb's memories swallowed him whole, leaving him trembling as his head split wide open and the blood trickled warm and salty over his lips.

"D-dad... please..." he whispered, reaching for the man's arm, "p-please... don't hurt.. me."

Samuel jerked back as if stung, his brow drawing down hard. "What?!!"

"M'so..rry..." Caleb whispered, drowning in his body's pain, as he tried to pull his father's hand from his collar. "Whatever did.. s-sorry... Dad... I des-deserve it... hurts... ev'thing hurts... why..."

"Boy, I don't know what kind of brain damage you got," Samuel growled. "But I am not your father."

Caleb winced up at him, lost and confused, thoughts scraping through his head like bricks. "S'me dad... 's Caleb... p-please... don' hurt me.. an-anymore.. can't.."

Samuel stood up so quickly he staggered back, his eyes as wide as plates, his mouth falling open.

"W-what?!!" he stammered.

Caleb fell back, unable to stop himself, and his head hit the concrete floor through the stiff fabric. Everything started to pull away then, as if he was falling down a deep hole that had no bottom. His father, glaring down over him in shock, drew back, the flickering light and dull stained walls stretching away to an infinite point.

As he sank beyond everything, his father's voice came to him one more time. A roar of rage, and something he'd not heard before.

Fear.

"JOSHUA!"
From here on in, things get a little more desperate, though there’s a surprise reunion soon that's a little brighter. :) Thanks for reading, sorry it's so dark, hope you'll stick with it to the end. :)
Voices came in snatches through the drifting dark.

"...said Caleb... not telling me?!

"...friend... close... just confused... help..

"...hiding somethi... little runt!"

Movement, struggle, a choked cry. Through the fog, it stirred anger.

"...dead..."

"...what?"

"Caleb's DEAD!"

The shout ripped through him, shook his wounded mind deeply.

Dead...

I'm dead...

Sinking deeper still, to somewhere earthy and dank.

A smile, fleshless, in the dark.

"... hello again..."

With a strangled cry, he jerked up, throwing his hand out in front of him, and immediately crumpled over as the world crushed in, heavy and loud - rustling blankets, a startled gasp, then a voice, anxious yet relieved.

"R! R, you're okay, I'm here," the voice said, a girl... familiar. "Relax... you're okay..

A cool hand on his forehead - wonderful and soft, he pressed into it because it felt so good. Who was that speaking? His head felt broken, his mind a scattered mess...

He opened his eyes slowly, but shut them quickly again. Too much light.. it hurt.

"Rowan? Hey..."

Rowan? Something about that was important.

"Rowan, please look at me." The voice was warm, and pulled him like his favorite song.

Slowly, very slowly, he opened his eyes.

The girl sat by the side of the bed, looking at him with eyes puffy with tears and anger and worry. Her face was darkly bruised, her blonde hair drawn up in a tight bun, and she was wearing a long dress of plain blue.

His gaze was drawn to the room around them. Pale yellow light from the windows behind her filled the room wanly, dully illuminating furnishings that were old and dusty. Reading glasses sat
on the bedside table, next to a book, laying face down. Charles Dickens.

He did not recognize this place. His eyes flicked back to the girl, and he felt lost.

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"R?" she said quietly, her brows drawn in.

R.. Something about that was important too.

"What's your name?" she asked, her eyes growing terribly sad.

The question was simple, but nothing came up. Fear lapped at the edges of his mind.

"What's my name?" the girl asked, her eyes growing wide.

His mind wasn't offering anything. He felt empty and disconnected, like wires had fallen loose somewhere, from something important.

"Oh Rowan..." the girl said plaintively, and her eyes welled with tears. "Why don't you remember..."

She dropped her head to her hands, and her tears turned to weeping.

It pulled at his heart, and he leaned forward again, drawn to her.

She was important to him. She was... everything to him.

He slowly drew his legs from the bed, and carefully, gently, he folded his arms around the girl, drawing her to him, squeezing her close.

Her cries grew longer, deeper, and she squeezed him desperately back, burying her face in his chest.

He pressed against the soft skin of her neck, drawn by her scent, by her warmth. His lips trembled there, then pulled back from his teeth as he drew in her taste.

She stiffened against him. "R..?"

He held her, possessively, knowing he needed her, knowing he would never let her go.

"Rowan... please," she said quietly, and she pressed her hands against his chest, trying to push him off.

He pulled back then, dazzled by their closeness, by the tears dew-like on her lashes, by the spice of her scent, the heat of her skin.

The girl looked up at him, and a smile played hesitantly at her lips, even as she pressed a hand against his chest.

He grasped that hand in his own, as he smiled back to her.

Then he lunged forward and bit into the warm, soft skin of her throat.

She did not have time to scream, as he tore the gristled tube free in a gush of hot blood, and dived in deeper, gnawing up to the little bone that floated, as she gurgled and bucked and slammed at his
head, clawing at his eyes.

But that was okay, he didn't need them, and he drove deeper still, through to the jagged bones at the back of her neck as her arms twitched at her sides then hung still, and he pressed further up, his face smothered in a river of blood as his teeth sought and freed the thick mass of muscle in her jaw that she'd used to say that name so wonderfully... that name that was important...

The name... Rowan.

"Rowan."

Sighing, he pulled back, blood dripping from his jaw, feeling truly satisfied for the first time in a very long time. Julie's vacant eyes stared up at nothing, her jaw hung open, torn and blood-soaked, her throat was a ruin.

"Rowan?"

He blinked. How was she making a sound if she had no tongue?

"Rowan!"

A raw scream ripped from his throat as Rowan woke, jerking away, eyes wide, from the sound of her voice... Julie's voice... beside him. The bed... oh god the same bed!... ensnared him in a cocoon of sheets and blankets, and he thrashed against it, as Julie stared at him in shock, lit by the wan yellow light of a single lamp...

...on a bedside table, with reading glasses and a book laid flat and open.

Dickens.

"Rowan! It's okay!" Julie cried, reaching for him.

"NO!" he screamed, flinching from her touch, and scrambled desperately away from her, falling off of the other side of the bed entangled in sheets, only dimly aware of his body's complaint at the sudden motion.

"Oh fuck... oh fuck..." he whispered, and curled up into himself then, horrified, saturated still by the scent of Julie's blood, the sounds she'd made as he'd eaten her life away, his face buried in her neck.

Jesus... CHRIST!

"Rowan? What's wrong!?" she called to him, and he heard her moving around the side of the bed.

"NO!" he roared at her with wild eyes, pulling back into the far corner of the room as his hand jerked up defensively. "DON'T COME NEAR ME!"

She stopped in place, her eyes wide and afraid, and a rational part of him realized she wasn't wearing the horrible blue dress from his dream, just shorts and a pale blue t-shirt, her arm properly set in the new cast and sling. Her hair hung in a gold cascade around her pale face.

Not the same... not the same... not going to hurt her... oh god

"R," Julie said gently, wincing as she held out her good hand, "It's okay, you're alright, this is-"

"STOP CALLING ME R!" he snapped at her angrily, "I'm not dead anymore! Stop calling me
that!

Julie stiffened, looking as if she'd been slapped, and her hand fell down by her side.

His heart sank as he saw how much he'd hurt her. "I... I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I just... oh god..." he stammered, and squeezed his eyes closed, wrapping his arms around his head. The dream hung around him still, pinned to the real world by the terrifyingly similar room, the book, the glasses on the bedside table...

God, why would he have a dream like that? Where had it come from? The last time that'd happened, he'd been back in the hospital in the city... the dark thing had said it was... a gift...

A chill passed through him like a ghost as he remembered the skeletal smile in the dark. But he shook his head frantically to himself. It wasn't like before... that thing couldn't reach him anymore, they'd defeated it...

*Just a nightmare, that's all.. just a horrifyingly real nightmare...*

"Rowan," came Julie again, closer, her voice breaking, "Please... talk to me..."

He raised his head sharply, and winced as it throbbed wickedly with the motion. She was coming closer still, and he pushed away against the wall, because she was starting to cry, and he couldn't... do... what he'd done...

"Please.. stop," he whispered. "I don't want to hurt you."

Her eyes widened again, as a tear wended its way down her cheek. "Why would you hurt me?"

Rowan dropped his head to his knees.

*Because I just tore your throat out in my dream... and it felt... oh fuck...* At the thought, his throat closed up, and he wrapped his arms tight around his head again.

Would he ever be fucking free of this? He'd been doing so well, going to that group with M, he'd come to terms with what he'd done... there'd even been a single day - a whole day about a month ago - where he hadn't thought about the fact that he'd killed people, that he'd been dead, where not a single memory ambushed him, where he was wonderfully just Rowan. *It was huge.*

Then they got stuck in this horrible place. He was falling back down... he'd killed someone else. Now he was dreaming of killing. The one person he would never, should never, hurt... and had, so many times.

The bruises on her face were mottled dark.

Rowan's throat tightened further still, and he swallowed against a sudden swell of despair.

A warm hand folded gently over his own as it clenched in his hair.

"No, Julie, god.. don't..." he whispered, and curled in further, though his stomach stabbed him in protest.

Her hand drifted down, to cradle the back of his head, and rested there, warm and soft.

Rowan loosed a shuddering breath, and his hand shifted slightly, edging towards Julie's. Their fingers touched, tentatively, then urgently laced together, and another breath left him, shaking.
"I'm sorry," he said desperately, "I'm sorry."

Julie sighed. "I know."

She sank beside him, rested her head on his shoulder, and started to cry.

Rowan opened his eyes under his arms and took a deep breath. He couldn't let a dream do this to him. To them.

Uncurling slowly, his nerves jangling, he turned and wrapped his arms around her gently, then pulled her close, being mindful of her ribs and arm. She stiffened slightly at the motion, watching him with hurt eyes, then relaxed, resting her head against his chest. And there she shook, sobbing quietly, as he pressed his chin against her head and slowly stroked her back.

His nerves unwound, and his body's aches and pain slowly drifted away as they held each other.

"Never should have yelled at you," he said softly down to her. "I had a horrible nightmare... scared the shit out of me."

Julie nodded slightly against him, and didn't say anything for a little while.

"Was it about me?" she finally asked, in a very soft, flat voice.

He sighed. "Yes."

"You attacked me."

She wasn't asking.

He didn't answer, just nodded against her head, then his eyes roamed the room, desperate for a distraction.

"Julie... where are we?"

She didn't take the bait. "You were dead again? Like in the hospital dream?"

Rowan sighed again, heavily. What to say? He wasn't dead. But what did that mean? What the hell would have brought something like that out of him?

"I don't really want to talk about it anymore."

"And you don't want me to call you R anymore."

He looked down at her, but she wouldn't meet his eye.

"Shouldn't have snapped about that. I'm sorry Julie, you call me anything you want."

"I don't want to call you R if it bothers you, Rowan."

"It doesn't really bother me..." he said, and struggled to find the right words, "It just... reminds me sometimes of what I was before."

She looked down at her hands, and he quickly sought to reassure her. "But it's a part of me. It's a part of us. It just hit me bad because of the dream."

Julie gave him a sour smirk. "Because you killed me in it?"
Wincing, he made a small noise of irritation and looked away.

"Was I tasty?"

He frowned deeply at her. "That's not even remotely funny."

"Nothing that's happened lately has been remotely funny Rowan," she said with a sigh. "I've got to find the humor in something, or I'm just going to start crying and never stop." She pulled away then, and winced as she rose to her feet. "I do too much of that as it is."

Rowan watched her, his heart aching. He wanted desperately to make her feel better, but he had no idea what to say... his own hope was in short supply.

Then a moment came to him. A moment by an ocean.

"I'd rather talk about the dream I had of you the other morning," he said, a soft smile spreading on his face. "Now THAT was a good dream."

Julie turned and raised an eyebrow. "Why? Wait.. you tried to tell me about it, up on the hill, and you had the same goofy grin on your face that you do now."

"It was a good dream," he said. "We were on the beach. The sun was warm, breeze was cool." He paused, his grin growing wider. "You were sexy."

She laughed then, and he felt a flush of relief. It was really good to hear her laugh.

"I was sexy, huh?"

"Very," he answered emphatically. "Couldn't keep my hands off you."

Julie giggled and slowly sat on the corner of the bed. "That sounds nice." She sighed then, and looked away at nothing. "God, I haven't been to the beach for ages."

Holding his stomach, Rowan got to his feet, and walked over to sit beside her. "It was amazing. The sun was just going down, everything was gold. Salt in the air, soft white sand, waves sparkling in the sun."

Leaning against him, Julie smiled. "Wow... I wanna go there now."

Rowan brushed his lips against her hair. "When we get back, we'll go to the beach, first chance we get."

"When we get back," Julie echoed hollowly.

He looked down at her, then shifted to catch her eye. "Yeah, when we get back. They're coming to find us Julie, you know that right?"

She shook her head. "No, Rowan, I don't know that. You heard what Joshua said - there's no plane for them to find. They don't know we're here."

"Julie," he said softly, feeling terribly sad that she had so little hope. "Someone might have seen it that first day, they're just having trouble getting to us."

When she looked up at him, he found himself looking away, as if he didn't quite believe what he'd said. Letting out a sigh, he waved his hand at the room. "Still don't know where we are."
Julie's mouth grew thin. "Joshua said it was the doctor's home. That it's ours now." She gave a tiny shrug. "Apparently their doctor died. Kinda morbid to take his house. I mean, all of his stuff is still here. Guess it makes sense, since they see you as the..."

Her voice trailed off but he barely noticed.

*Oh god...*

Everything around him belonged to the man he'd killed. The book on the nightstand, opened to the page he must have been reading that day, the closet of clothes that the man would never wear again.

"Fuck," he whispered, and stood up quickly.

"Rowan?" Julie asked, watching him. "What's wrong?"

"I have to get out of here... it's my fault Julie," he said quickly, and headed to the doorway, still clutching his bruised stomach.

"What? What's your fault? Rowan, please don't walk away... I can't take that anymore."

He stopped, his hand on the knob. Then he pressed his forehead against the cool surface of the door and closed his eyes.

"I killed him Julie," he said in a whisper-thin voice.

"I can't hear... hold on." Julie pushed up from the bed with a sharp breath and walked over, resting her hand in the small of his back. She rubbed there gently with her thumb. "What did you say?"

"I killed the doctor," he said quietly, and swallowed hard.

Julie's thumb stopped its slow circling.

"Rowan..." she said softly, shocked. "Why?"

He squeezed his eyes tight with the memory. "It was an accident. Didn't mean for him to die. He was trying to kill me, trying to put me to sleep so I wouldn't wake up again."

Julie squeezed his side. "What?!

Rowan turned his head slightly to look at her. "He knew I'd killed Caleb, he knew I'd been a corpse. He offered to save me from what they do to the dead here, but I think..." He sighed. "I think he was angry at me too."

Lacing her fingers through his, Julie leaned against him, her eyes lined in pain. "Rowan... that's horrible, I'm so sorry."

Nodding, he looked down at their hands. "Yeah. He almost succeeded. Joshua ended up saving my life."

Julie blinked. "Seriously?"

He nodded at her. "He was just saving Caleb. Same reason he..."

Rowan let it trail off. He'd been about to tell her about his ankle. But that wouldn't serve any purpose except to make her even more horrified. He was so done with horror right now.
Julie frowned. "Same reason he what?"

"Nothing," he answered, and shrugged lamely. Then he glanced around the room again. "Can't stay here right now Julie, I need some air."

She tried to cross her arms. "What aren't you telling me?"

Rowan smirked thinly. "Something that won't help anything, okay? Just... I need to get outside?"

Her eyes were sharp for a moment, then slowly softened. "You do what you need to do, just eat something first? You've been unconscious all day."

It suddenly occurred to Rowan that the world outside the windows was black. It'd been morning when he'd gone out to face Samuel.

Jesus.

His head felt fragile, and ached terribly, and his gut felt like... well, a punching bag. Turning his attention to his body was a bad idea, everything amplified, and his stomach growled as the need to pee hit him in a sudden rush.

"Oh crap, uh..." he mumbled, and bouncing back and forth, quickly opened the door, heading out into the dimly lit hallway, where he tried the next door down. Thankfully, it was the bathroom.

But... he knew that. Somehow. And it wasn't until he was groaning in relief over the bowl and staring at the stack of books beside the bathtub, the painting on the wall at his side, that he realized he'd been here before, staring into that painting, too many times to count. It'd always puzzled him, what the girl was doing at the bottom of the hill, staring up at the grey house like that, where the crows were flying, as if they'd just been startled.

She looked like she'd just turned her head too, turned to look up at the house, at the crest of the hill.

He'd always wondered... what was happening on the other side of the hill? What noise had made her turn? He'd asked the Doc a couple of times, but the man had just given a small smile and told him to use his imagination.

So he did, he imagined walking up that hill, up to the bleached grey walls of the house, with its sharp shadows and the whispering rush of spooked crow's wings, and he imagined looking over the hill.

But all he ever saw was darkness.

Glancing away, he winced at the sharpening ache in his head and felt the warm trickle of something on his upper lip.

Bringing his hand up, he was shocked at the sudden vivid smear of red across his fingers.

A bloody nose? What the hell?

Wrapping up, he turned quickly to poke his head out the door, and gasped at a sudden wrenching pain in his abdomen.

"Ow.. what... hey Doc?" he called out to towards the living room, "My nose is bleeding, can you take a look?"

He'd expected the creak of the sofa chair springs and the answering voice of Doc Adams, but
instead heard the soft voice of a woman.

"Oh no."

Frowning, holding his stomach, he moved into the hallway and out in the living room, and standing in the opening to the kitchen, was...

Caleb staggered back, as memories shifted inside his head at the sight of Julie.

The truth hit him hard as everything settled into place. Doc Adams wasn't going to answer. Ever. He was dead. Caleb's closest friend was dead. For some reason he'd forgotten that, but then everything felt loose inside his head. Why was that?

A foggy memory of his father standing over him as he slipped away, came and went, and he stared around the house, trying to piece moments together.

But it was futile. Half of his moments were Rowan's.

Julie was just watching him, absolutely frozen, her mouth lopsided and thin. Briefly, her eyes flicked to his mouth, and he knew she could see the blood. The telltale sign that he'd taken over.

"Caleb."

Ignoring her, his heart drowning in his chest, he walked slowly over to the cabinet against the far wall of the living room and picked up the plainly framed photo of Doc Adams with him and Joshua. Bright smiles and ice cream cones, as they sat out on a picnic bench by the lake. Such an old picture, and one of the happiest moments of his life. The Doc had taken them both on a camping trip, away from Samuel, away from the town, over to Clear Lake. Caleb wasn't sure how the Doc had managed it, spending time outside of their community was frowned on, but somehow he'd convinced their father it was the thing to do, and those had been the most amazing days.

Smiling, he ran his - Rowan's - thumb over the Doc's image, and started to feel a rush of tears.

"You were close?" Julie asked.

He looked up. She was still standing in the doorway, just watching.

Ignoring her again, he moved to the corner of the room, to the big old radio the Doc loved tinkering with, and reached behind it. For the Doc's old guitar.

And at that moment the door opened, and in walked Joshua.

Caleb straightened and gave his brother a smile. "Hey, Josh." The smile dropped as his brother turned to him. "What happened to your face?"

"Caleb?" Joshua's voice was as surprised as he looked. "What... how'd you come up?"

Caleb shrugged, then winced at the ache in his gut from the motion. "Dunno. Guess 'cause I know this place so well." He gestured to his brother's face. "Someone hit you?"

"Nevermind," Joshua sighed. With a quick glance at Julie, he walked over to Caleb. "How're you feeling?"

"Sore," Caleb answered, and felt the back of his skull gingerly. "Head feels real tender." Looking down, he lifted his shirt and let out a startled noise. "Look at this!" Pressing against the bruised skin of his abdomen, he looked up at his brother in shock. "What the heck, Joshua? Who'd Rowan
pick a fight with?" Then he blinked. "You? Did you fight?"

Joshua shook his head. "No Caleb, we didn't fight."

"Then... no, hold on, I remember... dad? Leaning over me? What was that about... he... he..." Caleb swallowed hard. "He was angry, Josh, real mad."

Joshua placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, "Don't think about that right now Caleb. Look, I prom-"

Caleb sucked in a sharp breath and his eyes grew wide. "Joshua, I told him I was Caleb, oh Lord above, I didn't mean to, but I was so afraid..."

His brother squeezed his shoulder. "It's okay Caleb, I cleared it up."

"How?"

"You- I mean Rowan, had been hit on the head so many times, I just said you were real confused. That you'd been Caleb's close friend, that you'd been there when... Caleb died."

The words hit Caleb funny, and he stared down at the ground. "Don't like hearing you say that."

"I know, brother. Now, as glad as I am to see you, and not Rowan, you need to get him back."

Caleb frowned. "But I just got here!"

"I know, I know. But I promised him he would have the day and night with Julie," he flicked his hand her way. "He did something hard today, and I owe him. You owe him."

"I don't owe him anything," Caleb spat, glaring over at Julie.

"Yes, you do," Joshua said firmly, squeezing his shoulder again. "Has to do with the beating he got, Caleb. He kept you from it, and we owe him for that."

Caleb rolled his eyes, "He didn't keep me from it - I'm feeling it now, and I sure as heck felt it when dad was looming over me."

"That wasn't Rowan's fault, Caleb. Now, please, do this for me? And I'll see you tomorrow?"

Caleb stared at Joshua for a long moment, angry. It wasn't right, having to share with Rowan. He needed to work out how to access the memories the kid was using, work out how to do the medical stuff on his own.

Then they'd never need Rowan again.

And he could stay Caleb all the time.

"Please?" His brother's eyes were deeply apologetic, and worried too, and the bruises on his face brought back some ugly flashes from Caleb's childhood.

Dad. Dad had probably hit him. And maybe... that's who hit Rowan too.

So maybe he did owe him.

With a heavy sigh, he finally lowered his head.
"Fine."

Then he squeezed his eyes closed, and giving a small grunt, held his hand up by his nose.

And pretended.

Because Rowan could just wait.

It was an impressive performance. He blinked in confusion, glared at his brother like he hated him, and then he did the worse thing.

He swore.

It'd always been absolutely forbidden growing up, and any references to swear words in any book he'd ever seen had been blocked out in thick black marker.

Except for doc's books. Doc had hid some of his books from being marked, and Caleb had found a small stash of them in the attic when he'd helped his friend move an old cabinet. Doc had protested at first, then gave in, and let Caleb come read the books whenever he wanted to. He'd absorbed a whole bunch of swear words then, and incredible stories about people, struggling to live, struggling to do right, pursuing dreams and failing, but never giving up, and he started seeing outside their town with those stories, and started dreaming about the world. About the city the doc talked about only when they were alone, and made him promise not to share with anyone else.

People struggled, and people swore in the city too, when he finally got there. He'd tried to fit in by using the same words, but it always made him feel shameful and wrong. And now was no different.

But, he had to hide that, had to act like he swore all the time, because that's what Josh had said about Rowan - the kid never stopped swearing.

So he stared his brother down, he walked back towards Julie, holding his arm out protectively, because that seemed like something Rowan would do...

... and he told his brother to get the hell out.

Joshua didn't go immediately. He actually came and said thank you, for 'keeping Caleb away from it', and Caleb almost screwed up then, almost asked him 'away from what'? before he clamped his mouth shut, and gave a quick little nod, still glaring, still angry. But inside, his brother's concern for him made him feel real good.

He almost jumped when Julie's fingers closed around his own, and had to fight not to pull his hand away quick. Instead he held on, watched his brother's eyes dart to their joined hands and saw something interesting pass in that gaze, before Joshua gave a small smile, and walked out the door.

Caleb watched him until his brother disappeared into the darkness beyond the porch, then he straightened, letting out a heavy breath.

Julie moved to his side, and squeezed his hand.

"You okay?" she asked.

He turned to look down at her, at her eyes filled with worry, then past her to their folded hands.

Then he smiled, and she smiled, and the whole thing struck him as so funny, he started to giggle.
Then he had to stop, because his stomach hurt too much.

The effect on Julie was immediate, as the smile slid from her face and her eyes grew wide and spooked.

"Oh god," she whispered, and she started to back away.

"What's wrong?" he said in a lilting tone, and then he laughed, because it was still so very funny, and it hurt a lot, but he laughed anyway, and Julie looked at him in horror as she wrenched her hand away.

That made him angry.

She made him angry. The laughter fell from him as he stared at her bruised face, her puppy dog eyes, at the anguish he could feel rolling from her as she stood there watching him, when he was so clearly not who she thought he was.

Not Rowan.

That's what made him angry. She loved the monster who'd torn his throat out. Who'd killed him in a garbage strewn alleyway. She loved him.

"Why?" he asked suddenly, his thoughts spilling from his mouth. He didn't understand it at all. "Why do you love him?"

Julie's face grew more haggard, and she looked away as a tear spilled down her cheek.

That annoyed him more. Caleb moved towards her and she quickly stepped back, her eyes snapping to him. Fearful and angry.

"I don't get it," he said. "He killed people. He's a monster. Why are you with him?"

Another tear spilled down her cheek as she looked up at him. "Rowan... listen to yourself. This is just like Jack. Please... remember who you are!"

Caleb frowned. "Jack?"

"Yes," she answered, stepping towards him then, perhaps feeling as if she were reaching him. "The medic?"

His eyes grew wide. "The medic? Jack's the doctor?"

Julie nodded, though she looked uncertain now, "You got lost in him Rowan, just like now, you're lost in Caleb. But it's still YOU Rowan. You're not Caleb, you just think you are."

Her words washed over him and away, as his mind turned over what she'd said about the medic.

This was perfect. If he could just access Jack's memories, he'd be the doctor, and Rowan could be shoved behind the wall, and forgotten.

A smile stretched on his face, and Julie echoed it, her eyes flicking back and forth between his own.

Searching for Rowan.

He felt a little sorry for her then, as she stared up at him hopefully. What would happen to her,
when he took over? Then he remembered how Joshua had looked at them before he'd left, and it all made perfect sense.

"Joshua likes you," he said, still smiling. "He'll marry you when Rowan's gone."

Julie looked as if she'd been slapped. "What?"

"Once I can use Jack's memories, then I'll be the doctor. We won't need Rowan anymore." He watched as her face grew in shock, and felt a tug of pity. "I'm sorry, Julie, but that's just the way it is."

"You can't do that," she whispered, as her eyes grew angry again. "I won't let you."

Caleb blinked and gave a quick laugh. "You won't let me? How're you gunna stop me?!"

"Like this," she said.

And she kneed him hard in the groin.

Caleb shrieked as he was blasted by an agony that stole his breath, obliterated his thoughts, and he crumpled to the ground cupping himself with a moan.

Suddenly Julie was in his face, and before he could pull himself out of the pain and react to stop her, she'd pressed her lips against his, urgently, deeply.

"I'm sorry Rowan, I'm so sorry," she said in a rush as she pulled away from the kiss, stroking the hair from his forehead. "I had to get close enough to bring you back."

He groaned again, trying to pull up from the pain.

"I could get some ice? Would that help? God, I'm sorry."

"G-going... to.."

"What?" Julie asked, still cradling his face and searching his eyes. "Going to what?"

His brows curled in anger as the pain slowly settled to a level where he could move, and he struggled to get his arms under him.

"Oh shit," Julie squeaked, and tried to jerk away from him, but he made a grab for her, latching his hand on her sling.

"Going to... kill you," he growled, beyond thought with rage, and hissing in pain he got to his knees, snatching out for her other arm.

"No! Oh god!" Julie cried, struggling and kicking as he pulled her in, and closed his hand over her throat.

Eyes wide with terror, she sucked in a breath to scream again, and he squeezed hard, cutting off her cry.

"You DARE touch me! You DARE do that THING!" he yelled, squeezing harder with both hands as she gurgled and thrashed beneath him, clawing at his fingers, his arm. Unable to reach his face, she kicked uselessly as he pinned her down.

"You don't DO THAT!" he roared, shaking her hard as her eyes bulged, her mouth stretched
soundlessly wide, and her free hand twisted frantically in his shirt.

Only after she stopped fighting and grew still, her arm falling from his shirt and sliding heavily to the floor, did the rage slowly fall away from him. With an irritated sound, he gave her one final shake, then finally let her go, expecting her to gasp, to scramble away from him yelling and cursing.

But she didn't.

She didn't move at all. She just looked up at him, through him, her eyes wet with tears that weren't going anywhere.

Something inside him was howling.

"Hey," he said, trying desperately to hold the howling thing back. "Julie, get up." He shook her shoulder and her head rolled to the left, her eyes still staring strangely as her tears finally fell free.

"No," he heard himself say, which was strange, cause he hadn't meant to say anything, and then suddenly he was screaming, as his hands moved frantically on their own to her face and tears fell from his eyes like rain.

And then Caleb slid away to nothing.
Joshua felt like something was wrong. He couldn't quite put a finger on it, but the feeling hung in his gut like lead, and he found himself pacing in his living room, back and forth in front of his windows as he glanced out towards the doc's house. He couldn't see it of course, he was on the other side of town, but he knew where it was, and for some reason, he wanted to be there right now.

But he'd promised Rowan he'd give them the night. He couldn't go barging in on them in the middle of it. They might be doing something he had no business interrupting. The idea made his gut take another strange turn he didn't quite understand.

His gaze turned towards the dark hall leading to his bedroom, where Adeline lay in bed waiting for him.

He should be going to her now.

Something hit him then, a ghostly echo of pain, and he found himself doubling over, completely surprised by what he was doing.

Then his mouth went dry.

Caleb. Something was happening to Caleb.

But, he'd left Rowan with Julie, not Caleb. His brother had agreed to let Rowan come back up. And Rowan had looked at him and told him to leave, and...

...and he'd flinched when Julie took his hand.

Joshua's mouth fell open.

That... wasn't.. Rowan.

"Oh dear Lord no," he whispered.

He'd left Julie alone with his brother.

Turning, feeling too slow, he ran out the door and down the road, through the center of town that was quiet and still. The doc's house was in the distance now, he could see it, the living room windows lit with a soft light.

And someone was screaming, crying out...

Rowan...

"No!" Joshua yelled, and he raced the last few steps, and burst through the door, and then stopped as if he'd met a brick wall, his eyes wide with shock.
Because Julie was spread on the floor, her face turned towards him, but she wasn't... seeing anything.

Rowan was above her, screaming, his hands cupping her cheek, feeling at her neck, and blood was dribbling from his nose, mingling with tears streaming from his eyes.

"NO! FUCK NO!" he screamed, and moved off of her, shifting to her side, feeling again at her neck and shaking her hard.

"Julie! PLEASE!" he sputtered through blood and tears, and leaned over her then, pressing his lips against hers and breathing for her. He did it again, holding her face, shaking her still, then his forehead fell against her chest and he roared.

Joshua had never heard a sound like that before. It tore through him, breaking him from his shock, and he rushed around to Julie's other side.

Rowan had lifted himself, still crying, and was doing compressions, pressing rapidly against Julie's chest.

"Julie, god, COME ON!" he yelled, and leaned down again to breath for her twice, adding to the smear of blood on her ashen lips.

"NOoo" he moaned pitifully, his eyes squeezed tight in pain, and started pumping one more time. Julie jerked in time beneath him, pale and still.

"Rowan," Joshua said softly, and he reached out to grasp the kid's shoulder.

Rowan started at his touch, jerking away as he continued to pump, then he seemed to focus on Joshua, truly seeing him through bloodshot, frantic eyes, and his face twisted in hate.

"Help me!" he screamed, and he dived down again, delivering two more breaths. His fingers curled desperately through Julie's, squeezing and twisting there as he hovered over her.

"God.. I'm here Julie, I'm holding on... please, Jesus Christ, come back!"

Joshua started to pump then, saying his own silent prayer, as Rowan broke down, his hand twisting in Julie's hair as he cried.

The feel of something grating beneath his hands, what must have been a broken rib, twanged against Joshua's nerves, but he kept going, even as the hope petered out of him.

Julie was gone... this was useless. How had it happened? There were dark marks around her throat... had Caleb made those?

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, as he slowed and stopped, and the girl's body lay terribly still between them.

"I am so sorry Rowan," he said again, and placed a hand on the back of the boy's neck.

Rowan pressed his lips against Julie's once more, giving two deep breaths, then shaking against her, he broke off crying again.

He lifted Julie then, pulling her into his arms, and rocked her lifeless body as he roared - a tortured sound that filled the room and made Joshua want to curl up with Adeline and never let her go.

"Shouldn't have taken you," the boy finally mumbled, his voice reduced to a hoarse whisper as he
rocked Julie gently. "Should have left you alone. I should've died... he should have killed me Julie, he was supposed to kill me. He'd still be alive, you'd be... you'd be happy with him. He loved you so much, he never meant to give up, he just couldn't... take it... anm..."

The kid stopped rocking and grew very still.

Joshua swallowed heavily, and squeezed Rowans arm, wanting to give comfort, though he knew there was none to be had.

Slowly, Rowan looked up at Joshua, and fresh blood dribbled from his nose.

And he smiled.

"Wow," he said softly.

Joshua jerked back, shocked by the complete change in the boy, and watched in astonishment as Rowan quickly lowered Julie to the ground and started compressions again, no longer crying, but completely focused on CPR.

"Caleb?" Joshua asked.

Rowan shook his head, and kept pumping, then bent down and gave more breaths, each measured, calm and quick.

"Jules," he said softly into her ear, "time to come back now."

Joshua stared at him as he worked, stunned.

That's not Rowan.

"Who are you?" he asked, as the boy resumed pumping.

Rowan smiled, radiating calm as he delivered brisk thrusts against Julie's chest. "A friend."

And under his hands Julie suddenly arched, her eyes wide as she sucked in a gasping breath and lashed out, coughing violently. With a low moan, she clutched at her chest with her good hand and blinked up at them, still gasping, her eyes confused and glazed in pain.

When she finally focused on Rowan, she gave a hoarse rasping cry of anger and fear, and swung at him, catching him with a glancing blow on the cheek, then another weak punch to the jaw as she tried to push herself away.

Rowan simply took the punches, his eyes soft, then shook his head gently at her. "Caleb's gone. He'll never hurt you again."

Joshua started. "What'd you mean, gone? What'd you do to him?!"

The boy turned to look at Joshua calmly. "This isn't the time. Julie needs your help."

"My help?" Joshua blurted. "You're the doctor!"

Rowan shook his head, still maddeningly calm. "I'm just a friend. You need to-"

"Then bring Rowan back!"

The kid looked down as Julie rolled away from them both, grabbing her side with a soft hiss. As he
moved to help her, she lashed out again, her face twisted in pain and fear. Her mouth opened as if to yell, but only a thin rasp emerged that quickly turned to coughing as she grabbed her throat.

"Rowan's not exactly rational right now, Joshua, he can't help." The 'friend' turned back to him. "Take Julie to the bunker, give her oxygen, something light for pain. You can do that, right?"

"Sure I can," Joshua said, nodding, "but-"

"I'm going to stay with Rowan, stop him from doing something stupid," the kid said, and nodded to Julie. "Help her, Joshua."

Frowning at the kid, confused as heck, Joshua moved towards Julie, his hands up defensively.

"I'm not going to hurt you-oof!"

Seeing him through glazed eyes, she'd kicked out, catching him in the chest before falling back, her mouth a grimace of pain.

Recovering quickly, he took his chance and quickly scooped her up, catching her wrist as she tried to swing again, and held her close. She struggled hard, hissing through her bruised throat, before the fight left her in a rush and she collapsed against him.

And she started to shake. And it wasn't until he looked down at her that he realized she was crying.

It broke his heart, and he turned towards the door, to find Rowan staring up at him.

"Be gentle with her," Rowan said softly. "And don't let anyone in this house. No matter what they hear."

"What?" Joshua asked, pressing his chin against Julie's hair as she grew quiet against him. "Why?"

"Going to let Rowan out," the kid said, and there was something wild behind his eyes. Something sharp and frantic. "He's not calm."

Joshua stared at the kid, feeling seriously spooked, and pulled Julie closer as he pushed backwards through the screen door. The spring squeaked as he nudged it open, and he stopped halfway.

"I'm sorry Rowan," he whispered. "I'm real sorry for what he did."

The kid made a choked noise, and shook his head as his eyes grew wider. "Not.. s-smart. G-go n-nowww.." As new blood streamed over his lips, his mouth opened in anguish.

And he screamed.

Joshua jerked away, his heart jumping in his chest, and stumbled backwards through the doorway, kicking the screen shut, and slamming the door behind him. Something crashed inside the house, in the midst of Rowan's constant cries, and Joshua walked backwards, holding Julie tight, looking around for anyone on patrol. He spied a group of men standing just off the street, guns up and staring at the house, and he yelled at them to head over.

Julie jerked in his arms at the sound, and he pressed against her forehead as the men approached. "Shhh, it's okay girl."

Jeb got to him first, his eyes open a little too wide and still focused on the house.

"How long you been standing there?" Joshua snapped at the men.
The young man flinched at another loud crash. "Since the screaming, sir."

Joshua glowered at him, and the other two soldiers walking up behind. "And you didn't see fit to go in?!!"

"You did sir," the boy said, "as soon as it started. Figured you were in control."

"You didn't hear anything before that?"

The oldest of the group, Dempsey, shrugged. "Just the new guy yelling at his woman." His eyes fell to Julie. "Looks like he laid out a little discipline."

Joshua glared at the man, glared at all of them. Hating them so suddenly and completely at that moment he could have struck them all down. "You damned fools."

There was another sudden crash of something heavy breaking on the floor, and they all jumped as something shot through the living room window on the cusp of a roar, spraying glass in a wide arc.

One of the soldiers started towards the house, but Joshua barked at him to come back.

"Don't go in and don't let him out," he told his men. "Just keep people away, you got it?"

Jeb nodded, looking somewhat relieved. "Sure thing Josh."

At Joshua's sigh, Jeb tried again. "Yes Josh sir."

Joshua glared at him before turning to the older soldier. "Dempsey?"

"Got it sir."

The other soldier nodded sharply at him, and Joshua rushed away, looking back over his shoulder at the house one last time before reaching the bunker door.

The living room light blinked out with the sound of a shattering bulb, and drifting from the dark jagged hole of the window came a long, low wail of despair.

Joshua shook his head against the sound, and quickly pushed into the bunker, taking the stairs as fast as he could and turning the corner into the medical wing. The few soldiers preparing for their posts stared at him in astonishment, but Joshua just shook his head at them as he rushed by.

He finally shouldered his way through the door into the first hospital room, and quickly moved to the bed. Then he hesitated for a moment, realizing he didn't really want to let Julie go. She was warm and quiet in his arms, and he closed his eyes, dwelling for the briefest of moments on the feel of her, the light brush of her hair against his cheek, the press of her soft skin against his chin.

Then he snapped out of it, frowning to himself as he set Julie down gently, feeling her spill loosely onto the bed. Her hair fell over her face as she slumped on the mattress, and he brushed it aside, cradling her chin gently, watching the tremble of her brow as she started to stir.

Her eyes fluttered open, glazed and bloodshot, and she blinked slowly at him for a moment as he cupped her cheek.

Without meaning to, he found himself pulling forward, leaning in closer as he stroked her soft skin with a calloused thumb.

Her brilliant blue eyes narrowed as he neared, then suddenly shot open, and she jerked, throwing
her arm up to knock his hand away, catching him on the jaw.

"Ow!" he yelled, and pulled back, scowling at himself for being so damnably dumb. What the heck had he been thinking, leaning in like that?!

Julie lashed out again, her eyes wild, and he quickly moved away from the bed, his hands up again, hoping to calm her down.

"I'm sorry, that was an unintentional thing," he found himself babbling, and quickly got angry with himself again, shaking his head. "I'm here to help you girl, not hurt you."

Grimacing, Julie pressed back against the mattress, holding her side again, clearly in a lot of pain.

Joshua stared at her for a moment, then looked around the room. Oxygen, the mystery 'friend' had said - she needed oxygen and a painkiller. Why couldn't he focus?

The canister was propped up against the wall, and he rushed to it, dragging it over to the bed before lifting the mask to her face.

Julie immediately knocked his hand away again, her mouth opening with an airy gasp, but he ignored her and her blows and quickly secured the mask as she scrabbled at his fingers.

He had to stop her from removing it twice, before she finally seemed to understand what was happening, and stopped fighting, her hand moving to her throat as she swallowed painfully.

"Keep the mask on," he said slowly, holding her gaze. "Going to get you something for the pain."

She turned her head aside, but nodded, and he quickly got up to search the nearby shelf, finally finding the pills he'd given Rowan. Darting out the door then, he filled a cup in the outside sink before returning to the room.

Julie hadn't moved. She was still staring at the opposite wall, a distant look in her eyes. He panicked for one moment until she glanced briefly to him and away again.

"Here," he said softly. "Take these."

Her good hand opened and he tapped two pills out onto it, before handing her the water. She nudged the glass aside, and reached for the bottle, then stared at it hard, blinking.

"Ibuprofen, girl," he said, seeking to reassure, "that's all. The kid said something light."

Julie glanced up at him again, nodding slightly, then gestured for the water as she handed the bottle back. With a pained swallow, she downed the pills and drained the cup, her hand trembling.

"More?" he asked when she'd finished, and she nodded back at him.

After two more glasses, she finally shook her head and lay back against the mattress, her gaze traveling away from him again. Her mouth moved then, but very little came out, though he read the intent well enough.

"You're welcome," he answered, and sighed heavily as he stood by the bed, feeling unsure of what to do or say.

The girl's throat was circled in bruises, and the sight cut through him hard, enough for him to reach out for her hand.
She pulled away, then frowned, and her mouth worked again. He caught the faintest whisper of a name. She was asking after Rowan.

Joshua pulled back to himself, and felt his mouth set in a thin line. Because she wanted to talk about Rowan. But why wouldn't she? She was the kid's woman after all.

It hurt though, and he had to make a heavy effort not to spit an answer out.

What in God's name was wrong with him?

"He's back at the house," he said, after a moment. "He's... not calm."

The kid's own words worked good as any, and his thoughts turned to the strange exchange with the boy. To the oddly calm person within Rowan who seemed to know exactly what was going on, and what to do.

Julie's expression crumpled. She reached out for Joshua's hand and whispered something as loudly as she seemed able.

"..help him..."

Joshua frowned. "He told me to stay out no matter what. Least, whoever he was at the time said that."

Julie frowned back at his words, obviously confused, then shook her head quickly, and her breath clouded the mask as she spoke again.

"..hurt.. himself.."

Joshua stared at her, at her blue, bloodshot eyes pleading from above the mask. The kid had been a wreck, before whoever that was had come over him, and he'd lost it as soon as Joshua left. Man in that kind of distress could well do what she was saying.

But the 'friend' had said he'd stay with Rowan, stop the kid from doing anything stupid. Maybe that's what he'd meant?

Julie's cool hand connected with his own, and he looked down at her thin fingers, at the nails rimmed in blood, then back up at her.

"..please... help him..." she whispered, and she squeezed his hand.

Joshua squeezed back, and felt the faintest of smiles tugging at the corner of his mouth. Right then and there he'd do anything she asked.

"I will Julie," he said softly, but he didn't move until she pulled her hand from his and her gaze drifted to the wall once more.

Then he turned and left the room, locking the door behind him and taking the steps two at a time to the bunker exit.

Because he wasn't thinking straight.

Because Rowan was Caleb. And if Rowan took his own life...

He was running full bore when he caught up with Jeb and Dempsey. The other soldier had
apparently taken up a post on the other side of the house, watching the back door.

"Any gunshots? Anything happen?" he asked, panic chasing his heels.

Jeb shook his head slow. "No shots. Been some yellin', lots of crying, that's about it. He's been moving around a lot, and the kitchen light's been on for a few minutes now."

Joshua raised an eyebrow. "The kitchen light?"

"Yep," Jeb answered, nodding. Then he added a hasty, "Sir."

Turning away from the men, Joshua walked closer to the house. The living room was still mostly dark, save for the light spilling from the kitchen doorway and down the hall from the bedroom. Though he craned his neck, Joshua couldn't see much else, so he moved around the side of the building, towards the kitchen window.

When he got there, and finally saw inside, he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Rowan was sitting at the breakfast table inside the kitchen, eating a sandwich.

As he watched, the kid shifted slightly, and the cover of a book came into view then sank again, as Rowan turned the page and took another bite.

Joshua stood and stared, his jaw falling open. The last time he'd seen Rowan, the kid was screaming at the top of his lungs. Screaming like he was never, ever going to stop.

Rowan looked up.

Joshua ducked down. An automatic reaction that made him feel like an idiot.

There was a tap on the glass above his head, and slowly, Joshua rose back up.

Rowan was standing there, smirking at him, eyes swollen with spent tears, upper lip smeared with blood. The kid pulled the window up. "What?"

"Rowan?"

The kid shook his head and closed his eyes as his brow trembled. "Better if you don't say his name, makes it hard." After a deep breath, he opened his eyes again. "How's Julie?"

"She's as well as can be," Joshua answered, finally realizing the 'friend' was back in charge. "Talking a little, worried about Row..um.. you. Resting now."

"Oh good. That's..." The kid froze then, his brow crumpling, his eyes pinching tight. "Oops... shouldn't have asked... get away from the window, don't let him see you. Now Joshuaaa..." The name stretched out in a heavy moan as Rowan staggered back and turned away, his hands rising to his head.

Joshua ducked to the side of the window, then skirted around into the dark shadow of the shed, where he could see deeper into the kitchen.

Rowan's hands were falling slowly to his sides again, and the boy was turning in place, looking completely disoriented as he wiped his hand under his nose and stared at it, then stared down at the table, at the book and half eaten sandwich. The kid reacted badly to that, stumbling back against the wall, then he crumpled completely, sliding down to the floor with his head in his arms.
The sound drifted to Joshua then, through the open window. Horrible, hopeless, a deep sound of utter despair.

Rowan was crying.

Joshua felt the rise of the panic again, the feeling that maybe Julie was right, that Rowan was at the point of hurting himself. And at that moment, Rowan reappeared. Walking on his knees to the utensil drawer, he wrenched it open, rummaged loudly, then slammed it back in and moved to the next one down. Again he tore through the contents, throwing a spatula and a couple of whisks on the floor, before finally pulling up something long, thin and sharp that flashed in the kitchen light as he tested the edge.

Joshua's breath caught, and another sob drifted from the window as Rowan squeezed his eyes closed, and sank from view.

With a strangled cry, Joshua raced forward, his heart hammering, ready to climb through the window to stop the kid.

Rowan reappeared.

Carrying himself tall and straight, looking almost bored, the kid walked to the kitchen window and threw the knife outside.

Joshua came to a sudden stop as the knife bit into the dirt at his feet and looked up to find Rowan staring down at him again, his eyes wet with new tears, his hands on the sill of the window.

"Missed that one," Rowan said quietly, and his gaze grew hard. "No more saying his name, or hers. No more talking. Go away." And with that, the kid slammed the window down, walked back to the kitchen table and settled in for another bite of his sandwich.

And Joshua stood there for only a moment more, before he finally turned away, and returned to the bunker.

Shaking his head the entire time.
Rowan came to himself slowly, gradually aware that he was lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

He didn't bother moving. This was the third time he'd come to lying here. Every other time he'd woken with a start, realizing yet again that someone inside had taken him over. He'd panicked, yet again, and tried to run out of the house, or tried to break his own head against the bathroom mirror. Or was it the other way around?

No point trying to fight whoever was doing this any more. He couldn't win. He couldn't do the one thing he'd been trying to do all night. Every attempt had ended with a blackout, and he'd come to a few minutes, or an hour later, somewhere else. Or in the same spot, holding something that most certainly wasn't what he'd been about to kill himself with.

Like a comb.

He'd been almost happy, finding the shotgun under the doctor's bed. The shells were in the nightstand, and he'd sat on the edge of the bed, his hands trembling, his vision blurred to uselessness by tears, and broke the gun to load it. He remembered lifting a red cased shell from the box, knowing it would be all he needed, and then...

...then he'd blinked, and the shotgun was gone. The shells were gone. And in his hand was a comb.

That'd been the first attempt. He'd spent the next few minutes screaming, sobbing, and searching for the gun and shells, in the bedroom, then the hall and the destroyed living room, and that's when he'd gone into the kitchen and grabbed the butcher knife in the wood block. The thought of doing himself in with a knife terrified him, that's why he'd gone looking for a gun in the first place, but at that point he was so far gone, so far beyond okay that he'd swung the blade around, pointed the tip over his heart, over the same scar Julie had made a year ago which felt apt, and then...

...then he'd come to sitting at the kitchen table, and on the table was a note, written in a hand he didn't recognize.

But he was holding the pen.

The pen fell from his hand, but he grabbed the note and read it, over and over.

_Julie's alive. She's fine. Stop trying to kill yourself._

_P.S. Eat something. You're starving._

_Julie's alive..._

He'd shaken his head at the note, not understanding, not believing, not trusting whoever was doing this to him. Was it Caleb?

The thought made him violent again, and he'd pushed himself up, knocking over the chair, before grabbing it and throwing it at the wall.

_Julie's alive?!_
How? How could she be alive? He'd killed her. He'd tried to bring her back, and he'd failed, and he'd picked her up... and...

...and his head wasn't right after that. But last he'd seen, Joshua was carrying her body out of the house.

Despair washed over him like a wave again, and he moaned, drowning in it, and fell back out of the kitchen, into the hallway, and against the wall. There he'd slid down to the floor and curled up, and cried until he passed out.

When he came to again, he was back in the kitchen, and his head was pounding, and his nose was bleeding, yet again. And the chair was back at the table...

Where somebody had been reading, and eating a sandwich.

And his eyes widened as he realized... he had.

Because bits of it were stuck between his teeth.

It shook him hard. Someone else - someone he'd killed, was controlling him, doing things he couldn't stop.

At the time he wasn't thinking straight, otherwise he might have seen the wisdom in someone making him eat and stopping him from blowing his own head off, but then, he'd been devastated.

Even if Julie was still alive, even if he believed in that little offering of hope... this would never stop. He could never rely on who he was, or what he would do. He couldn't keep her safe.

After all, he'd killed her.

So he'd crumpled again, fell apart again, despair, hopelessness and anguish strangling his heart as surely as he'd strangled the life from Julie.

And while the block of knives was gone, he knew there had to be something else he could use in the kitchen, and he was determined to find it. He'd dived into a couple of drawers, finally found something sharp, and sobbed as he brought it to his wrist, and then...

And then he was lying in the bed. In the same place he was lying now. Holding another note.

---

_Seriously, stop it. Get some sleep, you're exhausted._

- _a friend_

---

He'd run into the bathroom then, and started stammering at the mirror, trying to pull the person out, just like he'd talked to himself as Jack. But nothing happened, and he'd ended up screaming at himself, hating every molecule of his face, and slammed his forehead against the glass. It'd staggered him, but he'd pulled himself up and was about to do it for _real_, when...

... when he came to on the fucking bed again, staring up at the ceiling, just like he was now.

And that's when he was so spooked, he got up, squinting against a splitting headache, and ran for the door. He was ready to run outside, and keep running, and if they shot him down while he was making a break for the gate, all the better.
He'd reached the door, his hand had fallen on the knob... aaaaaaand...

Rowan sighed.

Turning his head to the left he noticed a bottle of painkillers and a glass of water. Which was probably why his headache was so slight.

His nose was still bleeding though.

He ignored it.

Then he stared down at himself, and realized there would be no running out of the house again.

Because his mysterious friend had stolen his clothes.

"Fuck," he finally sighed.

Pulling the blanket over his body, his head, he curled up tight, and closed his eyes, feeling empty and terribly spent.

And fell to a welcome, mindless sleep.
"JOSHUA!"

Joshua jerked awake with a start, and almost fell off the chair he was sprawled on across from Julie's bed. Standing quickly, he caught her wide eyed gaze, and followed it.

Samuel was scowling at him from the open doorway. Morrissey stood in the hall just behind him, talking to another soldier before sending the man on his way. His cool blue eyes turned to Julie then, and something in the look he was giving her made Joshua want to punch him.

He focused back on his father.

"Sir?" Joshua said, hoping the salutation would give him a little buffer against his dad's obvious anger.

"You explain to me, boy," his father said, growling the word out, "what the hell happened here last night?"

So much for a buffer.

"Dad, I-"

"SIR."

"SIR," Joshua corrected, "we had an incident with the new doctor. A domestic that got violent. Had to separate them, Eric wouldn't cooperate, had to keep him under watch."

He'd been thinking up a good story for his father since he'd returned to the medical wing last night. It sounded right, and domestic troubles were grey areas when it came to their involvement. A man could do to his woman what he would, short of maiming or killing her, so his father shouldn't feel too inclined to push further.

Samuel's eyes darted to Julie, narrowed, then returned to Joshua.

"That so?"

"Yes sir."

His father stepped into the room then, and walked over to the bed. Joshua's nerves grew taut as Samuel drew closer to Julie, and he could see the apprehension in her face as the man neared.

When Samuel extended his hand towards her head, Joshua clenched his hands into fists, driving his short nails into his palm. The pain kept him where he was, and he watched as his father pulled the hair back from her face and neck.

Julie shrugged away from his touch, but Samuel had apparently seen enough as he straightened up and walked over to Joshua.

"Throw the man in a cell next time, let him sleep it off," his father said, drawing level with him. "And you check with me before you waste any of my men on a babysitting detail, understand?"

Joshua nodded back at his father, his eyes angry. "Yes... sir."
"Good." Samuel turned and headed back to the door. "Have some drills I want to do with the men this afternoon, get 'em ready at one."

Without waiting for a response, he turned and left. Morrissey nodded with a small smirk, and followed.

Joshua walked to the door and closed it slowly, letting out a long, slow breath.

"You're.. right," came Julie's rough voice behind him. "It is.. hard."

He turned to face her. She'd pulled the mask from her face, and was drinking from the glass he'd left beside the bed.

"What?"

"Military father," she said hoarsely, flicking a finger towards the door.

Joshua stared at her, not understanding for a moment. He'd forgotten their conversation from before. Shrugging, he turned back to the door, not really wanting to talk about his dad right now. He needed to see if Caleb was okay.

"My dad treats me... like one of his soldiers," she rasped, replacing the glass on the tray. "Gets.. old."

Joshua looked back at her again.

"He's arrested me," she continued, playing with the mask in her lap. "When I wouldn't... fall in line."

Joshua smirked at that. Seemed about right.

"I get the feeling," he said, walking back to sit down again, "That falling in line's not something you're much inclined to do."

A small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth at his words, and the sight made his heart stumble.

Still staring down at the mask, she shook her head, and her flaxen hair fell around her face in lazy waves. "No.. it's not."

Joshua smiled, and his eyes wandered the gentle curves of her features. Her smooth, pale skin, soft lips pulled in a fragile smile, the dark lashes framing her downward gaze. The bruises on her face were yellowed and fading, but dark shadows still held sway around her lowered eyes.

She looked so vulnerable, it made his heart ache, and he felt pulled to help her... protect her.

Joshua realized he was leaning so far forward in his chair, he was about to fall off. With a small cough, he leaned back quickly, crossing his legs as casually as he could.

*I'm acting like a fool...*

"How're you feeling?" he asked brusquely, scratching the side of his nose to tame a sudden itch.

She turned to look at him, and her blue eyes locked onto his with an intensity that he felt through his chest.
"Homesick," she said bluntly, and held his gaze.

Frowning, Joshua took in a deep breath and released it slow. Crossing his arms again, he pointed to her glass.

"Need more water? Food? Painkiller?"

She sighed and looked away, and when she spoke again her voice was deflated. "I don't want anything from you."

The words cut into him, and he found himself groping for something to say to make her feel better.

"Julie.. I.. I'm..." Frustrated, he looked down at his hand, at the crooked knuckle of his right pinkie, where his dad had slammed a cupboard door on it when he was a kid.

"Never been arrested by my father," he said finally, still staring at his hand. "He tends to be more... physical.. when I don't fall in line."

Julie turned to him slowly, and her brow wrinkled, though she didn't say anything.

Emboldened, he kept talking, and as he did he was surprised by what was spilling out of his mouth about his father, his childhood. He was sharing things with her that he'd not shared with anyone but his brother, and as he did, he knew the truth of his honesty, knew what drew the words from him as easily and swiftly as the nimble fingers of a thief.

Love.

He was falling for Julie.

Damnation.

Joshua leaned back in the chair, finally done with speaking, and glowered at the far wall as he wrestled with the implications of what that meant. He was so focused on his own thoughts, he missed what she said next.

"What?" he said, his eyes flicking to hers.

"I said, your dad's an asshole."

He blinked, then his brows drew down hard. "You watch your mouth, girl."

Julie glared back. "Stop calling me girl."

They glared at each other for a moment more, then her eyes softened, and she leaned towards him, grasping her ribs. "Seriously Joshua, your dad's been abusing you. Horribly. And you don't deserve it, no matter whose name he does it in."

Joshua looked away, his gut twisting, his mouth curling angrily. He'd shared too much, and now she was somewhere she didn't belong.

"That's no concern of yours," he said.

Julie made an exasperated noise. "You just laid it all out in front of me, Joshua, I can't help but be concerned!" Leaning forward again, she sought his gaze. "That's not normal, Joshua. It's not good. Certainly nothing to do with God. For some reason your whole town seems willing to take his abuse, because he keeps saying it's from 'God'." She framed the word sarcastically, making quotes
with the fingers of her good hand.

"Woman," he growled, leaning up from the chair abruptly. "I swear, you keep talking like that and I'm going to-
"

"Going to what, Joshua?" she shot back, glaring at him defiantly. "Beat me up? Just like your dad beats you up?"

The muscles in his jaw tensed up as he tried to swallow his anger, tried to ease back down from the rage prickling over his skin. Because it was true, what she was saying. That he was quick to strike out, and it was something he'd learned from his dad.

"No," he said finally, on the cusp of a long breath. "No." Then he looked away, taking another steadying breath as he sat back again.

When he looked up again her eyes were wide and guarded, and it struck him that she'd really expected him to hit her.

And yet she'd said these things anyway. Her spirit impressed him no end.

I want her.

Frowning against the intrusive thought, he eased his shoulders down, and tried to sound as reasonable as he could. "Julie, you need to understand and respect something here."

She just watched him coolly.

"My father is a hard man. No, don't roll your... LISTEN TO ME!" Julie flinched at his outburst, and he winced inwardly and tried to lower his tone. "Listen. He's a hard man, because he's had to be. He's led us through this trial Julie, and to do it, he's had to be the flame that tempers the sword. We'd all have broken years ago, if it wasn't for him."

He leaned back. "And he's proven his role as Herald. For years he'd been telling these people that God's time was coming. Telling them of the great Reckoning. The battle between the men of the Devil and the men of God. He kept trying to get them to join his army. Had his own bunker made too, small, as was all he could manage. But people wouldn't listen. Grew lazy in their faith. Grew away from God."

Joshua looked down at his hand again, at the crooked knuckle. "Caleb left. Doc had some play in that, dad knew it, and he raged. I felt the brunt, 'cause he couldn't lay it on Doc. Doc had always tried to find a space of reason 'tween everyone you see. The common ground. He'd listen to my dad, as no-one else would, and keep him connected to the town. Think that's the only reason the folks here didn't just run my father off his own land."

He smirked, shaking his head at the thought.

Then the smile fell away.

"And the day finally came. The Reckoning." He sighed. "Started small at first. Man came into town, sweaty and shaking, said he'd escaped some madmen just up the road. He changed, fell to the Devil, as you've seen yourself. Took the wife of the family who'd given him a bed for the night. Would have taken more, if Dad hadn't stopped him. Didn't hit true the first time though, my dad's hands were shaking so bad. Whole town saw it then, saw a dead man walking with a hole in his chest. And finally saw him drop with a shattered skull. When the wife came up, Samuel did her in quick. And by then, everyone knew."
"Everyone knew?" Julie whispered.

"Knew he'd heard God's word true," Joshua said, nodding, his eyes bright. "And he had new words for them then. Guided them in building a wall, as high as they could. Guided them in taking up arms, for defending what was theirs and claiming what should be, as God decreed. And he put their backs into building a bunker fit for an army of the Lord."

Joshua smiled. He'd told the story right, done right by his dad. Shame his father hadn't been here to hear it. Might of made him proud.

"Jesus Christ," Julie muttered, her eyes spooked.

The smile faltered and fell.

"Julie," he said darkly. "You can't use that language around me."

"The people, Joshua," she rasped, her eyes growing angry. "The people on the wall... was that your dad's idea too?"

Joshua's mouth twisted. She didn't understand at all. "The ideas don't come from my dad. They come from God."

"Holy crap!" Julie cried hoarsely, then clutched her chest, wincing in pain. "Ow..." Shaking her head, she released a slow breath. "Joshua... your father doesn't have a direct line to God. Want to know how I know?"

He glared at her.

"I know because God would never ask you to kill," she said, her eyes earnest. "It's in the bible for fuck's sake! Thou shalt not kill!"

Joshua spoke as evenly as he could, "Those we kill are not His, Julie. They've fallen from His grace, like the Devil fell. We give them a path back to Him, a redemption through death. It's good work."

She stared at him, her face frozen in something between anguish and disgust.

"They're people, Joshua," she whispered. "They're not devils, they're not 'the fallen', they're regular people. You are killing people who've just started to live again."

"You are blind, girl," Joshua muttered. "There's nothing regular about people who used to eat the living. They're damned, and they deserve what we do. The Devil's clouded your heart so you can't see that truth."

Julie shook her head again, looking away to the bare wall. "Hopeless," she whispered.

Joshua closed his arms over his chest again as he glowered at her. You got that right.

What the heck was he doing, sitting here talking? It was pointless. He had to check on Caleb, make sure his brother was okay.

As he got up from the chair, she turned back to him, and her gaze was sharp.

"How about me? Am I damned?" she asked, her voice strangely casual.

He frowned, his hand on the back of the chair. "Pardon?"
"I was one of the dead Joshua," she said. "You going to put me up on one of your crosses? Do you think I deserve that?"

Joshua's frown deepened. "You weren't Judged, Julie, I found no Mark on you."

"What?" Julie squeaked, her eyes bulging. "You examined me?!!"

"Course I did," he answered casually. "Everyone new gets checked here."

"Like, all over?!!" she yelped.

A smirk played at his lips. "Yes, girl. Did nothing but look for the Mark, so don't fret."

"Jesus CHRIST Joshua! You can't-"

"WOMAN, SHUT UP!" he yelled angrily, tossing the chair back hard. It slammed into the shelves, causing a cascade of medical supplies before clattering to the floor.

Julie's eyes were wide, like a deer's caught in the path of a car, and it only fueled his anger as he stabbed a hand at her. "You have the FOULEST MOUTH of anyone I've ever met! STOP taking His name in vain, and you LISTEN to me!"

Slowly the rage ebbed, replaced with pity, as the weariness and pain in her eyes pulled at his heart. With a heavy sigh he neared the bed and sat down on the edge of the mattress. Julie pressed away as far as she could, just watching him.

Reaching out, he grasped her good hand, holding it firm as she tried to pull it away, and gave it a warm, reassuring squeeze. Julie froze and stared at him, her lips tight.

The feel of her skin made his mouth tug back in a small smile, and he looked down at her fingers, so slender against his calloused, thick digits.

"I like you, Julie," he said quietly.

Then his face started blazing, as the smile stumbled, because that hadn't been what he was about to say.

"I mean.." he said quickly, "I mean that you're good person." He looked up at her, but her expression was hard to read. Tight and guarded. "I know you're trying to make me see the way you see, trying to open my eyes." He held her gaze earnestly. "But my eyes are open Julie. It's your eyes need opening. We need to pull you from the Devil's shadow."

Julie's gaze fell as she flopped her head back with a sigh, turning to look at nothing.

Joshua echoed her sigh. This wasn't working. She wouldn't see, not while she was still attached to Rowan.

But... if I took her from him...

The thought stirred a hopeful burst of warmth in his chest, and he looked at her, watching the play of some heavy thought across her brow.

He'd do it right, wouldn't claim her until Caleb had truly taken Rowan's place. And then the way would be clear. He could take Julie in as his own, as his second, and give her a place here. A purpose.
He'd open her eyes, and bring her back to the Lord.

"I was bitten," Julie said suddenly, interrupting his thoughts, her face still turned away. "I died... and I turned, Joshua. You can't see the bite because it was healed by the cure."

The warmth in his chest faded.

Her gaze fell to her hands, as she played with the frayed edges of her cast. "I ate..."

Julie seemed to struggle to say the words, as her fingers worked erratically and started to tremble. "I.. ate.."

Shaking her head quickly, she looked up at him, and her eyes were wet with tears. "I didn't kill anyone, Joshua. But I know I would have, if there'd been... time." Her expression grew haunted for a moment, and she looked past him. Through him, wandering through some dark memory it seemed, before she looked back at him. "Doesn't matter. I was dead. So tell me, do I deserve it?"

Joshua stared at her, stunned. He didn't know what to think. He didn't want to believe her, but she was very clearly telling the truth. There was no falsehood about her at all, and her pain was very real. But he still... didn't know what to think.

"But Rowan has the mark," he said with a dry mouth. "If he took the same cure, why did his still show?"

Julie frowned and looked down at her hands again.

"He had the mark Julie," Joshua said, chasing her eyes, "I found it."

She looked up at him, her features tight with fear. "Don't hurt him."

Joshua shook his head. "Girl, I've told you many times, I would not hurt my own brother. He's safe. The mark's gone."

Julie frowned at him. "Gone? How?"

"Nevermind," he said, looking away.

"What the hell did you do to him?" she gasped.

"I said nevermind girl," he muttered, glaring back at her. "Why did Rowan still have a bite, if you have a 'cure'?"

She glared back at him, then her gaze fell to her hands. "Because he was the cure. It wasn't something he took, because he wasn't dead at the time, it was something he gave us all."

"What you're saying makes no sense," he said flatly, and leaned back against the chair, watching her closely.

*How could she be one of them?*

Julie shrugged, and quickly wiped across her eyes. "Maybe not... but it's true." With that she let out a long, slow breath, and turned away again.

Joshua's mind was spinning.

If she was one of the Judged... if she was one of the fallen... God's kingdom was closed to her.
Just as it was closed to Rowan...

*To Caleb.*

Julie kept talking, but he wasn't hearing her anymore. His heart was squeezed tight in his chest.

He'd been ignoring his brother's true plight. He'd pulled his eyes from Rowan's true form, and he'd done an even worse thing - he'd sought to hide it from everyone else.

As his gut folded in on itself with the thought, he leaned forward with a grunt, eyes squeezed tightly shut.

*But, I couldn't let him go. I can't let him go. He's my brother.*

His eyes opened slowly.

*Isn't he?*

"Joshua?"

Pushing off of the chair, he stood up straight, staring down at Julie with cold eyes.

This was all a deception. That's all it'd been. A test. God was testing him. And he was *failing.*

Joshua's brow drew down deep as he walked to the door. Julie was calling out behind him, but he'd closed his ears to her.

He had to set this right.

He'd confront Rowan. He'd tear down the deception.

And then he'd redeem them all.

---

*Well that's probably not good. Thanks for reading!*
"... the only way, Rowan..."

Rowan stirred slowly, shaking his head as the voice trailed off in his own throat, his hands twisting in the sheets wrapped tightly around him.

"n-no," he whispered.

He woke up.

Blinking through puffy, bleary eyes, Rowan stared up at the bounced sunlight on the bedroom ceiling, his own voice echoing in his head.

He'd been having a dream. Incredibly vivid, now just on the edge of memory and slowly sliding away.

He'd been talking to someone, a man he knew, whose face was a blur now.

Talking about...

... hope?

Tilting his head on the bed, Rowan tried to remember. It'd been important, whatever it was. Something about setting people free... having faith...

The light shimmered on the ceiling and the sound of a voice passed nearby. The sounds of life outside the window, a community busy with making the most of the morning. He couldn't make out the words.

He didn't want to move. Could barely move anyway, he'd twisted himself up in the sheets pretty tight.

*Julie.*

The night came back to him in a rush, and he groaned, pulling the blanket over his head again.

Was she really okay? Were the notes real? Was any of last night real?

If he got up, would whoever had taken control just put him back down again?

Untwisting himself from the sheets, he got up anyway, swiveling to the edge of the bed, wincing at the ugly pain in his chest, his head.

A mass of marks in a kaleidoscope of colors covered the bare skin of his abdomen.

Lifting his right arm, he noticed the angry red lines of scratches.

A flash of borrowed memory then, of Julie squirming desperately beneath him, clawing at his arm. Dying beneath his fingers.

With a heavy groan, he crumpled over himself, and the black despair threatened to swallow him once more.
Shaking his head, he stood up quickly, too quickly, and he had to steady himself with a hand against the wall.

No.

No more wallowing, no more useless pity.

It was time to find Julie, make sure she was okay and get her out of here. Then...

Rowan frowned again, as the dream whispered to him, a flash of vivid comprehension that quickly faded.

Then he had to do... something important.

He looked down.

First, he had to find some clothes.

He was busy pulling on a grey t-shirt and a loose pair of trousers of the old doctor's that were way too short - the only things he'd been able to find - when a sharp knock sounded on the front door.

Freezing in place, he waited, and it came again, before the door creaked slowly open.

"What the hell?"

The voice made his nerves stand on end.

Samuel.

"Eric, get out here, right now!"

Shit!

Could he crawl out the window? Hide somewhere? Heart hammering in his chest, he swiveled in place, but his mind had locked up with Caleb's fear, and he was still standing there as Samuel stomped heavily down the hall and into the room.

Rowan stood as tall as he could, and kept his eyes averted from Samuel's, looking instead at the tag on his vest. Riggs, it said. The guy's last name was Riggs.

"Boy, you break the window in the living room? You break that chair?"

Rowan blinked. He'd done a hell of a lot more than that.

"Answer me!"

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"Fighting with your woman?"

His mouth went dry, but he nodded again.

Samuel pressed further into the room, and Rowan found himself taking a step back without meaning to. A light sweat had broken out across his brow.

Caleb was close.
"This place is not yours to trash!" the man growled. "You got a problem with your woman, you handle it civil - you don't break what's not yours. You understand that?!!"

Rowan lifted his gaze till he was staring at the man's mouth and nodded.

"Okay," Samuel said, then released a heavy breath. "Those bruises look to be healing good. Let me see."

Rowan stayed where he was, struggling to remain himself as Caleb thrashed under his skin.

"They're fine," he said under his breath.

Samuel stepped closer, and Rowan stepped back again, and found himself backed up against a desk. There was no where else to go.

The man stopped then. "Don't be afraid," he said, his voice surprisingly gentle, and he reached out a wide hand with stout fingers and a scar down the webbing of his thumb. "Just want to see, boy, that's all."

"D-don't touch me," Rowan stammered, as Caleb's fear strangled his speech.

The hand stopped, and withdrew, and there was a heavy silence between them as the man's mouth grew tight.

"I heard.. you knew my son." Samuel said finally. "That you were his friend, that you were there, the day he died."

Rowan's heart was pounding so loud he thought the walls would shake with it.

"That true?"

What the hell should he say? Who'd told him that?! Rowan struggled to stay focused on the man's mouth, to not let his gaze drift to where it was drawn. To those dark eyes, framed by scowling brows. To stay Rowan, and not slide into frantic Caleb.

"Boy, answer me now."

"Y-yes," Rowan said, his voice dry, almost a whisper. "I was there."

Samuel nodded, and pulled back, moving to a dresser against a far wall. "Joshua said it was quick," he said, as he started picking at the coins nestled in a little dish on top. "That the car killed him instantly."

Rowan looked up, without thinking, his jaw falling open in utter confusion.

"A horrible sight, I'm sure, for such a close friend."

Something in the man's voice made his skin itch, and he was still staring when Samuel turned and their eyes locked.

"Just how close were you, Eric?"

The man stared him down, his eyes dark and deeply set. There was anger there. Limitless. And something sad down deep.

But fear as well.
Rowan swallowed and quickly looked down as the headache grew, and his thoughts started to dislodge and slide away, like loose cargo on a sinking ship.

"Seem reluctant to hold my eye boy... why is that? What'd he tell you about me?"

With a strangled grunt, Rowan shook his head and pushed forward, hoping to get to the bathroom, to pull himself back together in the mirror's reflection.

But Samuel grabbed him by the arm as he tried to pass, and held him in place.

Nonono...

He could not be this close. The hand was a brand on his arm, burning against his skin, Caleb was crawling just under the surface - he had to get away from this guy now.

"Let go of me," he grunted, trying to shake the man off as he squeezed his eyes shut against the throbbing of his head.

Caleb, for fuck's sake, stop being so afraid!

"He talk to you curled up close, did he?" Samuel growled in his ear, and the man's hot breath buffeted his cheek. "What'd he say about me?! What did he tell you?!!"

Rowan shuddered as Caleb's thoughts consumed his own, and blood dripped quietly over his lip. His eyes rose to meet Samuel's.

And for the first time in his life, Caleb saw fear in his father's eyes.

Something changed. The fear inside Caleb changed. The little kid who'd cowered before his father for so many years stood up, and his mouth twisted in a bloody smirk.

"Everything," he whispered, his voice shaky at first, then growing in strength. "He told me everything. All of the things you did to him, he remembered, and he told me."

Samuel's eyes widened, and he pulled back, releasing the grip on Rowan's arm.

"And if you ever touch me again," Caleb snarled, "I will tell everyone here. Starting with Joshua."

"You piece of," Samuel growled, his eyes livid, and raised his hand as if to strike him, but Caleb stood his ground.

And he opened his mouth and roared.

"GET OUT!"

The soldier before him froze, with such a look of shocked surprise, that Caleb froze too. He'd never, ever seen that expression on his father's face before.

Caleb set his shoulders and stepped forward, something exultant rising up inside, and for the first time in his life, his father stepped back.

"Get out of my house," Caleb spat. "Right now!"

For a moment, he felt violence in the man before him, the potential in his father for murder, and Caleb's heart started pounding even harder.
Then the front door sounded with a heavy knock.

"Come in!" Caleb called, staring his father down.

"It's me," came a heavy voice from the front room.

_Joshua._

Samuel's eyes narrowed darkly, then he turned without another word and walked down the hall. Voices followed from the living room.

"Dad? Didn't know you'd be here.. but.. that's good, we need to talk."

"Not now. Get out of my way."

"But dad, I have to tell yo-"

"Joshua, MOVE it."

"Sir, it's impor-'," Joshua's words cut off oddly, followed by a sudden crash from the front room.

Caleb shot down the hall, catching the slam of the front door as Samuel left, and saw his brother lying in the remains of an old chair, holding an forearm that bled profusely. The bloody tip of a shattered chair leg stuck up from the floor like a spear trap.

"Josh!" he cried, diving forward.

Joshua jerked back from him, his face twisting in anger. "Don't touch me!"

Caleb flinched, and looked at his brother, his face falling. "What? I'm just trying to-"

"I've been a fool," Joshua spat, cradling his arm as the blood trickled through his fingers. "You're one of them, you're not my brother! Tried to tell dad.. he just..."

The words felt like a punch to his chest, but Caleb drew closer, reaching out to his brother's forearm. "Is this because I hurt her? I wasn't... thinking, Josh, I didn't mean... Lord, your arm, Josh, it's bleeding real bad, we need to-"

"You're not him!" Joshua yelled, and his eyes were wild with hurt. "It's all been a lie! Why wouldn't Dad listen? He never... listens..." the words trailed to a hiss of pain, and he lifted his hand from a jagged gash up the inside of his arm, close to his wrist.

Caleb wasn't hearing his brother's words anymore, his eyes were fixed on the wound, at the steady flow of dark blood spilling from the gash, over Joshua's fingers and onto the floor.

"Get up," he said, standing quickly and looping his hand under Joshua's shoulder.

"Said, don't TOUCH ME!" his brother spat, and tried to jerk from him again. "Liar! You deceived me! Made me believe! Made _me_ lie!"

"Stop fighting me Josh, get up NOW!" Caleb roared back, and Joshua finally stared up at him, his face twisted in anguish.

"You're damned Caleb, God's judged you, and there's nothing I can do.."

Caleb clamped his hand over his brothers wound as best he could, and pulled Joshua to his feet in
one smooth motion, swinging the arm over his neck, as he started towards the door. Joshua tried to pull away again, but Caleb held him fast.

Then something horrible happened. Joshua started to cry, something deep and choked that had a hard time coming up.

Caleb pushed through and out onto the road, and squeezed his brother's side, hating the sound of his brother's tears.

"You don't cry now brother," he said. "You're the strong one who doesn't cry. Not even when Moses died. You be strong for me now, okay?"

Joshua made a choked sound, but nodded, then tried to pull away again. "Can walk myself Caleb, stop draggin' me."

Caleb held him tight anyway, and wrenched the bunker door open as they reached it, then pulled Joshua down the stairs as quickly as he could. They turned the corner, and Joshua stumbled, dragging down on Caleb's neck.

"Sorry," Joshua mumbled, as Caleb pulled his brother down the hallway, and went to open the door to the first room.

Joshua immediately turned away, pulling Caleb further down the hall. "No, not that one."

They stumbled into the next room, and Caleb helped his brother over to the bed. Joshua sat on the edge of the mattress and refused to do anything more.

"Leave me alone," he muttered, wincing as he pressed against his arm. "I can take care of myself."

"Josh," Caleb sighed, pushing his brother's chest down gently. "Shut up and let me take care of you for once."

Joshua stared up at him then, and Caleb stared back, and slowly the anger seemed to melt away from his brother's face, and Joshua's brows arched in sorrow. "I'm sorry Caleb. I'm... so sorry. I know it's you. I feel you in there." Then he sank back against the mattress, squeezing his eyes shut as his face crumpled.

"Your arm needs stitches Josh. You're bleeding real bad."

His brother nodded, and drew a bloody hand over his brow before looking back up at him. "Get Rowan, I'll bring you back fast."

Caleb shook his head. "No Josh, we don't need him."

Joshua frowned, "But, he's the doctor, Caleb."

A smile spread on Caleb's face and he shook his head again. "No, Josh - Jack is, and I'm going to use him."

His brother's frown grew deeper. "What d'you mean? Who's Jack?"

"He's the medic, Josh. I'm going to bring him up, but stay in control," Caleb whispered, and his eyes lost focus for a moment as he went inside, searching. "You were right brother... I am strong. I'm stronger than Rowan... stronger than dad too. I can see that now."

So many minds behind the wall, and Rowan, pushing to return, but Caleb focused on the look he'd
seen in his father's eye, the shock and fear, and he pushed back.

But he couldn't find Jack.

Where was Rowan hiding him?

Caleb pulled back from the wall, and his thoughts turned to Rowan. And he opened Rowan's mind like a book and peered inside. The man's memories flooded him, overwhelming him with moments laden with sorrow and joy, and he reeled, temporarily losing himself in the waves.

It hurt. His head felt like it was being torn apart, as if someone were grabbing the sides of his skull in clawed fingers and prizing it open.

"Caleb, your nose..." Joshua mumbled from somewhere else.

Caleb surfaced and slumped forward. His brother reached up to support him, but he caught himself in time and straightened up tall.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I'm okay... I'm still... me."

Diving back in, he struggled to keep Rowan's memories accessible, but not overwhelming. To keep Rowan at bay. It was hard, but he kept flashing to his dad's face. The weakness he'd seen there...

*I'm strong. I'm stronger than him, and I'm stronger than you, Rowan. Now where's Jack?*

He found him. Almost tripped over him in his searching. Jack was a part of Rowan, the entirety of the man's life shoved off in a corner of the kid's mind. But the personality was gone. There was no soul attached, not like the rest.

Hungry, Caleb drew the man's knowledge in, and it was a new kind of hurt. The soldier had seen the most terrible things. Death and suffering beyond anything Caleb had ever experience... even his own.

"Caleb?!" his brother's voice again, snapping him back. There was someone yelling over him, deep agonized cries.

As his body returned to him, the outside world pressing back against his senses, he realized he was the one crying, and he stopped abruptly, feeling the damp trail of tears down his face as his mouth closed.

"God above," he whispered, and took a long, slow breath.

Joshua was staring up at him with panicked eyes. "Are you okay?!"

Caleb nodded, and slowly looked down at his brother. Joshua's pale face sent alarms off in his head. He looked down at the deep gash in his brother's arm and suddenly, he *knew* exactly what had to be done.

And he did it.

The back of his brother's head had started bleeding again, so he sewed that up too, and when he was done, and his brother was sleeping under the light sedative he'd been given, Caleb pulled up a chair and finally sat down.

A smile spread on his face and stayed there.
He'd done it. He'd saved his brother. He'd been the strong one for once. Even faced up to his dad, something he'd never ever been able to do before.

It felt real good.

And the best part was...

... he'd never need to be Rowan ever again.
Mark was done with following the Colonel's plan.

He'd been faithfully sticking to his assigned route along the projected flight path Rowan *may* have taken when they encountered the storm, and he'd spotted and checked a few wrecks along the way.

But none had belonged to his son, and he no longer believed they were searching in the right place.

The Colonel wanted to make small adjustments, continue in logical broadening increments, and there was a time when that sort of approach was one he could stick with.

But he couldn't do it anymore. They'd been missing for almost six days now. There was no longer any time for being methodical, for being logical.

If he'd had Julie along with him, he'd ask her where Rowan was, and this time he'd listen. And he wouldn't turn around and drag her back to the Colonel like he had that horrible winter. He'd follow her instincts and stay on the trail like a goddamn hound.

That's what he needed right now. An instinct, something beyond logic to pull him like a beacon to his son.

"Claire, I don't know if you're here with me honey, but I could sure use a nudge in the right direction."

The plane did not magically turn its nose, and no voice spoke to him inside his own head, which would have been creepy, but he did get the sense that Claire was there. And it was a huge comfort.

It'd started happening ever since that moment in the garden all those months ago, when he'd found her note with Rowan's help. The note itself, and the strange circumstances surrounding its finding had been enough to make him doubt his own doubt, and the sudden scent of flowers where there were none, had clinched the deal, and he'd started to believe.

Not about everything, mind. He didn't believe in some bearded guy in the sky overseeing everything, didn't believe in Jesus, Buddha, any of the multitudes of Hindu gods, or anything else. He just believed that there was more to life than just life, and left it at that.

It'd do. No need to get complicated. Claire was somewhere, and while he couldn't see her, he could *feel* her, and that was wonderful enough, at least until he joined her... somewhere.

But he had no plans on doing that any time soon.

At that moment, his eyes turned to the west, to a smaller mountain range on the other side of Mt. Marcy that he was currently above. He turned back, shifting in his seat slightly as he scanned the eastern slope below, for the hundredth time it felt like.

Then, he looked west again.
And wondered why. Why that particularly ridge? There wasn't anything particularly interesting about it, it didn't look much different than those nearby.

So why?

Then his eyes grew wide as he realized.

This was the nudge.

Mark pulled the headset mic to his lips and pressed the comm switch.

"Piper Seven Four Three to Ticonderoga, over."

"Ticonderoga ready, go ahead Mark."

"Ed, current position overhead north slope Mount Marcy. Heading change to 250, over."

Without waiting for confirmation, Mark turned the nose of the plane towards the far ridge, and the shadows shifted around him in the cabin as he groped for his map.

"Request received Mark, Colonel advises no go, continue on heading 340 to SLK."

Mark smirked. "Wasn't a request, Ed. Heading changed, destination..." He brought the map up and did a quick calculation in his head as he glanced out towards the ridge, "Long Lake or thereabouts. Altitude steady at 8500, over and out."

There was a brief burst of static, and the Colonel's voice came over the station, loud and annoyed, "Give me that... Mark, you are NOT cleared for the heading change, continue on-"

Mark pulled back from the comm switch and sighed.

"Shut up," he said to the dead line.

He'd hook back in once he'd done a quick sweep, and the Colonel had some time to get used to the idea. Not that John had any choice. Wasn't like the man could do anything about it. Mark felt bad for Ed though, he was probably getting an earful right now.

The flight to the ridge was uneventful and quick, and as he neared, it didn't take long to spot the settlement on the far side, what with the huge wall encircling it, bouncing a fierce glare from the sun just starting its decent from midday.

Big place, alive and kicking, with smoke coming from scattered burn piles, and people moving like ants throughout the town.

*True survivors. Good on them.*

Something on the ridge line above the town caught his eye, and he did a slow wide turn and dropped a thousand feet to take a closer look.

And his heart jumped in his chest.

There was a scar on the ridge. A long, straight scar, like the one a plane might make coming down on a bad landing. Only it'd been softened somehow, like someone had been digging around it, or filling it.

He did another arc, and dropped down another thousand feet, and the engine whined as he took a
sharper turn, angling for a better look.

There was a scar, but no plane. But there was something... odd... about the area at the end. More disturbed earth.

Mark pulled up, went out a few miles and swung in again, dropping five hundred feet.

Was the disturbed area large enough to hold a plane?

Heart hammering, Mark nodded to himself. Absolutely.

"Holy crap," he whispered. This wasn't old, it was recent, and it looked as if someone had gone to a lot of trouble to cover something up.

He grinned. This had to be it!

Fumbling for the comm switch, he swung the plane around, preparing to circle the walled in town at the base of the ridge.

"Mark to Ed, come in Ed!"

At the lower altitude he could see a large gathering of people on the side of the town closest to the ridge. Obviously he was causing a stir.

The closer he got, the more he noticed there was something odd about the wall...

"Ed here, Mark," came the reply. "Colonel wants you to turn around and come back, now."

"Ed! Tell him I've found it! I'm ninety-nine percent sure! There's a town of survivors here, walled in..."

Mark's eyes bulged as he finally realized what the black shapes on top of the wall were.

"Jesus Christ!"

"Mark? Please advise - what's your position?"

"Those are people, Ed! What in holy hell?! They've got people hung on their..."

Mark's voice trailed off as he watched, on his third pass, a large group of people in black military gear pouring from some kind of shelter, pointing up at his plane.

"Position, Mark!" Ed yelled, his voice squeaking through the headset.

The men were armed.

"Oh Christ!"

Mark pulled back hard on the yoke and rolled the plane to the west as a small puff of smoke came from the ground below, and the soldiers rifles cracked in quick succession as they opened fire.

"UNDER FIRE!" he roared into the mic, just as something long and fiery zipped by within a few feet of his wing. "Firing fucking rockets at me!"

"Mark!" It was the Colonel. "Get the hell out of there!"

"I'm TRYING! Jesus, they've-"
There was a dull thunk, followed by two more. A fine spray of blood spattered the windscreen in front of him as a small hole opened up in the fuselage at his feet.

The pain followed then, and he yelled, grabbing at his thigh as blood pulsed from a ragged hole just above his knee.

"Mark?!" the Colonel shouted. "Report!"

"Fuck..." he hissed, and hit the throttle with a bloodied hand, giving the Piper a boost of speed as he straightened the nose.

"I'm hit," he whispered, his hand returning to the wound, trying to stem the flow of blood. It pulsed between his fingers and spattered to the floor of the cabin.

Oh shit... that's... that's really bad.

He had to get on the ground now.

"Mark, please repeat, we did not copy!"

Mark stared out over the nose of the plane, his mind racing over possible landing sites, as he groped for a hand towel from his kit.

"Hit in the leg, bleeding like a stuck pig. I'm in trouble!"

Setting the trim to free up his hands, he raced to tie the towel around his leg as tight as he could, and the bleeding slowed somewhat.

As he grabbed the yoke again, and focused beyond the nose, he saw the narrow but lengthy expanse of Long Lake miles ahead. There were a few straight roads in the vicinity, but none long enough and clear enough to land a plane on.

"Mark... dammit," the Colonel growled over the comm. "Can you land?"

"Going to have to. Long Lake's my best bet. Wish me luck."

He pulled back on the throttle and started a steady descent, groaning at a sudden swell of dizziness.

Christ.

"We're prepping the chopper Mark, you hang in there!"

The lake was coming up fast, his heart was thundering in his chest, and he felt detached from it all, as if he was floating somewhere just behind himself. His leg didn't even really hurt anymore, and that scared the shit out of him.

"John," he said quietly, blinking to clear his eyes, "Tell my boys tha-"

"Mark, just focus on landing now," John snapped over him. "Tell me where you are."

"Tell them I love them," Mark finished, as the plane hit the water with a shuddering splash, and he jerked forward in his harness. It glided then, eerily smooth, and Mark's head dipped as the world pulled back for a moment.

"MARK! Mark, answer me!"
The Colonel's voice snapped him out of the dark, and he took in a gasping breath, coming to as cold water lapped at his ankles. The blue surface of the lake stretched out before him, level with the nose of the plane, and the water was lapping noisily against the doors.

And rising.


"You keep moving, and you get the hell out!"

Mark finally caught the clasp of his harness and freed himself, giving a short cry as he shifted his wounded leg.

"Jesus," he grunted, grabbing at it again.

"Mark, repeat? Did not copy! Please repe-zzzt"

The radio died in a sputter of static, and wincing, Mark ripped the headset off his head and cast it aside.

The water was up to his knees now, and the lake was level with the bottom of his window.

He'd have to open the door, and swim to the shore. And opening the door was just going to bring the lake in faster.

At least the cold water was keeping his mind sharp. Taking a deep breath, he looked out across the peaceful stretch of lake, his mind distracted by a quick flash of memory. Canoeing over summer break with his boys, laughing as they tried to dump each other then swearing as they all went over, sharing dumb stories and baking fish over hot coals under a brilliant star-studded sky...

*Good times.*

Shaking his head to clear it, he focused on the door again, and pushed it open.

The water surged in and slammed it shut in his face.

His breath caught in his throat. *Oh god.*

The lake water was up to his waist now, swirling red, and as he slapped a bloody hand against the window, the plane started to list, dipping down on his side. He could see into the lake through his door, the bottom not even visible through the thick murky blue. Small fish swam by, darting quickly out of sight again.

"Okay. Okay." he muttered, realizing time was running out and that he wasn't thinking straight.

The plane was sinking, and he needed to get out. He stared at the far door, now directly over his head.

*Nope.*

And now the water was rising to his shoulders. Time for something stupid.

Fumbling in the bag floating beside him, he pulled out his .45 and aimed it at the windscreen.

"Goodbye," he said quietly, his voice strangely hollow in the shrinking space.
Sucking in as deep a breath he could, he pulled the trigger, and the window exploded.

And the lake rushed in to claim him.
Okay, you know when I said come back for something lovely at chapter 27, well, make that chapter 28. Decided to keep this to its own chapter as the viewpoint changes for the next. I promise, the story does get brighter (eventually).

Caleb gave a loud, satisfied burp, having just crammed his face full of a sandwich of crusty bread and thick slices of ham and cheese. Embarrassed, he peeked out through the serving window to the seating area, but most of the soldiers had left, apparently off to some training exercise Samuel had ordered.

The thought of his father soured the taste of the sandwich, and he sighed. Despite his victory, he'd been fearful of seeing his dad, wary of the last look Samuel had given before storming out and hurting Joshua. A look of utter hate and the promise of violence. Violence was something Caleb was used to from his father, but hatred... that was new. Even when his dad had been slapping him around, there'd been some kind of pity in his father's eyes, never hate. There'd been something else there too, something dark and horrible at the worst times, but Caleb didn't dwell on that. He couldn't, not without trembling.

Bastard.

Caleb's skin flushed at the word and he immediately felt bad, following it with a quickly mumbled prayer for forgiveness.

Releasing a heavy sigh, he started preparing another sandwich for his brother, still sleeping in the hospital wing.

Joshua was going to be okay. The cut on his arm had been bad though. Caleb had to wonder if his father had meant to hurt his brother that badly. Was it his fault dad had lashed out like that?

He shook his head, not wanting that guilt.

Knowing he'd been the one to save his brother made him feel good, and that's what he was going to focus on. Smiling to himself, feeling proud, he walked out of the mess hall, and through the locker room to the medical wing.

And he stopped at the first door.

Joshua had finally told him that Julie was in there, that she was okay, but that he'd hurt her very badly, and couldn't go near her anymore.

Caleb didn't like that. He should be able to see her any time he wanted. They were supposed to be together, and they had to keep up appearances, at least until they found a way for Joshua to marry her.

And while it was true he'd hurt her, she'd hurt him first. And then she'd actually kissed him.

The thought brought a quick rush of anger that he fought hard to stuff down again.

He needed to set her straight on that. She had to understand that that was unacceptable and intolerable, and if it ever happened again, there'd be consequences.
Caleb raised his hand to knock sharply on the door.

And then froze, as something reached up and pulled him down, into the dark.

A drop of blood splashed on the plate.
The Guide

Well, here's a big one to make up for the tiny chapter before. ;) This one is rather pivotal to the whole story. Thanks for reading, and enjoy. :)

Julie was sitting up in bed, staring at the far wall, her mind lost in strange memories, when a knock sounded at the door.

Stirred from her thoughts, she frowned and looked over.

"Yes?"

The lock was pulled back with a loud click.

And Rowan stepped inside with a small smile.

"Hello Julie."

Julie tensed. When she finally spoke, her voice was a rough whisper. "Caleb?"

Panic seized her as her mind flashed on Rowan's face, twisted in a terrifying rage above her, as his hands crushed her throat. No air, no breath, no hope. She'd fought with everything she'd had, and none of it had mattered, and the world had just shrunk away to a tiny dot...

"No," Rowan said softly, and shook his head. "Not Caleb."

The panic eased somewhat, but something was still... off.

"But... you're not Rowan," she whispered, her eyes wide.

The man she'd fallen in love with shook his head again slowly. "No, sorry."

Then he looked down at something in his hand and smiled as he lifted it.

"I brought you something to eat."

Julie watched him warily as he stepped forward, glancing only briefly at the plate to see what was on it. Just a sandwich, though it looked really good. She looked back up at him.

The smile he wore was genuine, and she could almost imagine it was Rowan walking towards her. But his eyes told her he was lost again, in someone new this time.

Shit.

"Who are you?" she asked, frowning, as her fingers clenched the thin mattress of the bed.

He stopped, gaze flicking to her fingers and back, and smiled again.

"A friend," he answered, his eyes soft. "Is it okay for me to come near, or do you want me to put the plate down and leave?"

Julie didn't answer for a moment. A friend? That's annoyingly enigmatic. At least he was sensitive enough to pick up on the fact that she was freaked.
That strange something in his eyes, felt... familiar. And that was weird.

Finally, she gave a small sigh. "It hurts to move, so I don't mind. Just... don't touch me."

With a quick nod and slight frown, he moved forward, and placed the plate on a nearby tray before wheeling it over the bed.

Yet again, it was strange to have Rowan physically close, but know he wasn't himself. Same face, eyes, same form, just... worn differently.

*Oh, that's disturbing.*

Red lines from her fingernails stood out against the pale skin of his right arm as he pushed the tray across, and she looked up at his face, suddenly afraid.

But he pulled away very quickly, as if he knew, crossing to the shelves against the adjacent wall.

"Need a painkiller?" he asked, looking back after rummaging through the supplies.

She shook her head, and her gaze drifted down, where her hand cradled her belly.

"I had one not too long ago. I don't want to push it."

Suddenly self-conscious, she looked back up to him, and caught him gazing at her hand with a soft smile.

*Does he know?*

She was about to ask, when he gestured to the sandwich.

"You should eat," he said softly. "You had a rough night."

Julie grimaced at the understatement, but reached out and pulled the sandwich off the plate. The bread was soft - her fingers sunk into it as she held it - and the thick crust crumbled over the tray. She had to work to get her mouth around it, but finally managed a bite.

She smiled. It was delicious. The ham and cheese was salty-savory in her mouth, and her stomach gurgled for more. She hadn't realized how hungry she was.

"It's really good," she said softly. "Thank you."

His face broke into a big smile.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "What?"

"I missed that."

"Missed what?" she asked, taking another bite. Chewing thoughtfully, she looked at the sandwich. "Why does everything here taste so good? Do crazy people just make better food?"

He laughed at that. "Probably."

She smiled up at him. "You laugh like Rowan."

"I'd have to wouldn't I?" he said with a smirk. "I'm using his laughbox."

Grinning, she glanced sideways at him as she took another bite. "Laughbox?"
"Sure."

Her thoughts turned to Caleb, and the smile fell from her face as she shook her head. "Don't think that matters. Caleb has a very different laugh."

The person wearing Rowan's face pulled the chair over from the corner, and sat in it, straddling the back.

"Who cares about him," he said with a smirk and a dismissive wave. "We were talking about me, remember?"

Her gaze darted from his mouth to his eyes, and she felt herself smile again. "I guess we were..." she said softly, and she rested the sandwich for a moment. "Okay, I have a question for you."

"Shoot."

A frown crossed her face briefly as the strange familiarity visited her again. She shook it off.

Taking another bite, she studied him as he sat there watching her, then finally spoke.

"You know you're not Rowan."

"You know you asked that question already?" he said, giving her a lopsided smirk. "Thought we worked that out."

Julie grinned despite herself. This guy was cracking her up. "Yes, we did, give me a minute."

With a bright smile, he started counting, as his gaze traveled around the room. "One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three..." His voice trailed off as he looked back at her. "What?"

Julie stared up at him, frowning, feeling the familiarity again, the echo of a past moment with... someone else. But she didn't want to go where that led, and she shrugged it off again, though the frown stayed on her face.

His smile grew a little sad as he watched her, so she looked away, staring down at the sandwich instead.

"It's just weird, because you seem to know who you are, where you are. You do, right?"

"I do."

"So you know you're... dead.. you know how you died?"

He gave a small sigh, and looked down briefly. "Yup."

She stared up at him, suddenly sad. "That must have been terrible. It must be terrible, knowing that."

He shrugged. "I've come to peace with it."

Julie cocked an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yeah," he said, nodding. Then he smiled. "I think it was meant to be, as corny as that sounds."

"Meant to be," she echoed flatly.
"Yes."

"Why in the world would you think that?"

He shrugged, and the smile he gave her was strange.

"Because it led to the world changing, Jules."

Time ground to a halt, and the beat of Julie's heart against her chest became thunderous.

"Oh god..." she whispered faintly, as her face fell.

"Please don't... freak out," he said quickly, and held his hand up. "It's okay. Everything's okay."

Anguish rose within her as she stared at him, her eyes flicking back and forth between his own. Rowan's wildly blue eyes. Rowan believing he was Perry, her old boyfriend, lost in him so completely he couldn't tell the difference between himself and a man he'd killed.

"Oh god..." she moaned, and slowly drew her hand over her mouth as she turned away.

"Jules," he said quietly, reaching out for her as he shifted closer. "It's okay."

"It's not okay!" she snapped then, jerking away from his hand, "It's so NOT okay! Don't touch me!"

"Alright," he said gently, and she felt him retreat. "I won't."

"God, how could you do this..." she moaned at him through her hand, as the tears started to well. "Why him, Rowan?!" She looked away again and shook her head. "I can't take this R, you've got to stop... I can't take it."

As much as it hurt, she drew her knees up to her chest, and covered her head with her good arm. Her hair cascaded over her legs.

"Jules," he said softly.

"STOP IT!" she yelled, and started to cry, no longer able to hold it in. "You aren't him!"

"It's me, Julie."

"No, you're not him!" she cried out, trying one last time to reach him. "You're just lost in his memories, that's all! Just lost... god... please..." She broke down again, and looked at him, her eyes desperate and pleading. "You have to stop baby, I can't handle this..."

"Jules, I'm possessing Rowan," he said firmly. "It's really me."

Julie's mouth fell open as the tears slid down her jaw.

"W-what?"

He leaned forward on the chair. "This isn't something he's lost in, or doing because he's confused. He's not doing this to you, Julie, he's truly not here." He smirked then, and glanced to the side. "Scratch that, he is here, I'm just doing the driving for now."

Julie stared at him, her mind stuttering over what he'd said, her arms prickling in goosebumps.

"Possessing?" she whispered.
He nodded.
"You're... a..." she stumbled over the word, not believing, not wanting to believe. "You're a... ghost?"

He stared back at her, the gaze of those blue eyes intense, and the smile slipped. "We're all ghosts in here, Jules."

She recoiled from him, feeling a sudden swell of horror.

All?!
"Crap," he said, straightening up. "Didn't mean for that to sound so spooky, sorry." He took in a deep breath and let it out slow. "But, it's really me, Jules. I'm really here."

Julie looked up at him, as if seeing him for the first time. Blue eyes, not brown, looked back, warm and gentle, but the smile he wore, crooked just a little to the left, was Perry's.

My god... it's really him.
"Pear?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

The smile grew brilliantly wide. "Yeah." His eyes glistened as he looked away briefly. "Wow, haven't heard you say that for ages."

As the tears flooded her eyes, his face disappeared in a blur. "Pear, god, I'm so sorry..."

"Jules," he said in the soft, familiar way she used to love, "It wasn't your fault. You've got nothing to be sorry for."

"Yes I do," she mumbled through choked sobs, "I never meant for any of this... I tried to tell you we had to leave, but you wouldn't listen... then you were gone..."

"Jules," he said again, and she felt him near the bed. "Can I at least hold your hand?"

Julie nodded through the tears, and felt him sit on the bed beside her. Warm fingers engulfed her own, and a fresh rush of tears overwhelmed her as she pressed close to him.

"Wasn't your fault I died, Jules," he said softly, and his arm gently wrapped around her, drawing her close. "It was all me. I was an idiot." He smirked. "Didn't even follow my own advice about headshots. Didn't help I'd been thinking about ending it for months."

The revelation hit her hard, and her throat tightened. Of course, she'd known this, she'd felt it, but to hear him say it...

"Why?" she cried, "Why would you do that, Pear? Give up like that?!"

He sighed, and the breath swept warmly across her scalp. "You know why, Jules. You told him why. You were right on the money."

"But..." she mumbled through the tears, "I loved you... I needed you."

Why wasn't that enough?

"I know Jules. I know."
"You gave up on me, Pear," she whispered, the sound almost angry. "You gave up on us."

"Yes, I did." His voice grew hollow, and she looked up at him. His eyes were dim as he looked across the room, the smile gone. "I knew where I was headed, and I didn't want to drag you down with me." His gaze flicked to hers, and the smile touched his face again. "You were too bright for me, Jules. You're like... sunlight bouncing off a thousand waves. So incredibly bright... Everything is drawn to you, you know that? Everything in this world, the next... the place inbetween."

He laughed suddenly. "Rowan never had a chance. Even dead, he never had a chance."

Julie looked up at Perry, looking out through Rowan's eyes.

"I love him," she said softly, knowing he knew, but it felt important that she say it. That it came from her.

"Yes," he said simply, and smiled.

"That's it?" she said, wiping her hand across her face. "'Yes?'"

Perry smirked. "What else do you want me to say?"

"I don't know," she babbled, "That it's good? That you understand? That it's okay?"

"All those things," he said gently, smiling down at her.

Her voice grew small. "That you forgive me?"

He frowned, and pulled his head back. "Why do you need forgiveness?"

She swallowed hard. "Because I fell in love with the man who killed you."

Perry's brow drew down deeper, trembling for the briefest moment, before he closed his eyes.

Oh my god... I've hurt him... I didn't mean...

"Perry, I'm sorry.. I'm sorry, I-"

"Jules, wait," Perry spoke over her, his voice rough, and squeezed his eyes shut hard. Taking a few deep breaths, he shook his head, and his voice came as a whisper. "Not now Rowan, just a little longer..."

Saying nothing more, she just watched as he released a long slow breath, and opened his eyes.

He gave a sad smile. "Rowan's got so many regrets. One of the biggest was me, Jules. He hates that he took me from you." With a small sigh, he shrugged a little and his smile grew. "There's nothing to forgive, Jules. He's a good guy. And the two of you changed the world."

Julie smiled back, feeling a sudden release of something that she'd been carrying for a while. A guilt, buried somewhere deep... and a little shame.

"Thank you Pear," she whispered, and nestled against his chest. "Thank you for saying that. I... needed to hear it."

"I know," he sighed, and his chin rested against her head. It felt comforting and good. She wanted to hold onto it for as long as she could, but a wise part of her knew it wouldn't be very long at all.
"Jules?"

*Dammit.*

Julie nestled closer, ready to hold onto the moment by force. "Yeah?"

"Promise me you won't lose hope."

Her eyes opened.

"What?"

"Some terrible things are about to happen," he said quietly above her. "And it's going to feel as if
everything is coming to an end, that there's no hope."

Julie looked up at him, dread tightened around her heart. "What things?" she whispered.

He didn't seem to hear her. "Do what you do best Jules, okay? Have faith, have hope. BE hope.
Can you do that?"

Her mouth had gone incredibly dry, and when she opened it to respond, nothing came out.

Perry smirked. "Geez, there I go again. I'm sorry. I just... wanted to prepare you I guess."

"What things, Perry?" she finally managed, pulling away from him completely.

He looked at her awkwardly and shrugged. "I can't... say exactly. I'm not allowed."

Julie frowned at him. "What do you mean 'not allowed'?"

He sighed. "I'm not like the other ones in here Jules. The other ones trapped in Rowan."

"The other ones...?" she asked. "Wait... you said that you were 'all ghosts in here'. All of those
people, the ones that come up... they're all ghosts?"

"Well... ghosts is a funny word," he answered, smirking. "Souls is more appropriate."

The goosebumps returned, and her skin prickled uncomfortably.

*Souls?*

Julie stared at him. "I don't understand... I thought he just had the memories of people in his head?
Like, it was all just data in a way, moments and feelings recorded somewhere?"

Perry shook his head with small smile.

"There's a record, sure, but it's not all in his head Julie, at least, not physically. He couldn't hold all
of it at once." He laughed brightly. "Over five hundred souls worth of memories? He'd have a head
the size of a football field!"

Julie's heart lurched. "What?"

"Your brain has a hard enough time holding one life's worth of memories, it can't."

"No," she snapped, interrupting him. "How many?"

The smile slid from his face. "Oh shit."
"Perry," Julie said, her voice rising, "You said... you said over five hundred people? He killed..."

Perry's eyes fell, and he pulled his arm back. "Shit. That wasn't mine to share."

Julie was reeling. So many people? Rowan had said hundreds to her once, during that terrible time when they fought on the plane, but she'd never connected it with a real number, she'd never thought...

*My god.*

"Jules," Perry said softly, catching her eye, "he was a corpse, he couldn't help himself. None of them could."

"I know that!" she shot back, feeling defensive, feeling *horrified*, and more than a little sick.

"He was one of the old ones, too," Perry added, "It's a surprise he didn't harvest more."

Julie stared at him numbly. "Harvest?" she whispered, and the word fell oddly between them.

Perry nodded. "That's what all of this was, Julie. One dark thing, sucking the life from the world. Taking the big souls first, getting to the small ones soon enough." His gaze grew distant, and she knew he wasn't looking at her anymore. "The infected ones crawling like its fingers over the earth, taking, claiming. Never satisfied. Always hungry, always empty."

Julie's mind flicked back to the terribly emptiness she'd felt when she'd been dead. How horrifyingly *hollow* she'd been.

"I know," she said quietly.

Blue eyes sharpened on her for a moment, then softened. "That's right. You do. I'm sorry you had to go through that Jules."

"At least I didn't kill anyone," she said, feeling no victory in that at all.

He nodded. "But you know why you would have... why he did."

Her eyes drifted away. "Yes."

Perry nodded. "We were bound to the one who took us Jules," he said with a sigh. "Taken and tethered through him to the thing that started all of it. And even though Rowan and so many have come back from that, the souls are still linked to them. Still bound. Still stuck. Oblivious, lost in a void. It takes a reliving of our death to make us wake up to what we really are, and sever the link."

Julie looked back at him. "So it's all real? Jack was real?"

Perry nodded, "Yeah. Jack only saw his death from the outside, detached, from Rowan's dead point of view, and he was too focused on his wife's passing to truly understand. So he was still stuck, but aware, as you know." He smirked. "It was quite the speech Rowan gave Jack at the end. He has no idea how close he came to Jack blowing his head off, ending all of us at once. But he effectively cut the tether himself and freed Jack, sending him off to his wife."

He smiled softly. "It was kind of sweet actually."

Julie stared through him, thinking of the moment she'd walked through the broken door at the old hospital, and saw Rowan, gun at his side, against a wall sprayed with dark blood.
She shuddered. Jesus, that'd been anything but sweet.

Shaking the moment from herself, she pressed against him again, needing Rowan's closeness... even if he wasn't really Rowan.

"Where do the memories come from then?" she asked, nestling against a shirt that smelled faintly of mothballs. "You said they weren't all in his head?"

"They come from us."

She looked up at him again, cocking an eyebrow.

"When you die, you remember who you are, even though you leave your body behind." Perry looked down at her, his eyes soft. "Right Jules?"

The strange memory returned, of finding herself standing at Rowan's side as his screams filled the room, and staring in utter confusion at herself, lying beneath him, glassy eyed and empty. And then, she'd turned, because there'd been a voice...

"Souls hold the memories of the life they've lived," Perry continued, pulling her mind back from that moment. "And we're linked to Rowan, so he feels all of our memories. Just as all of the returned dead feel the memories of those they've killed."

Julie frowned. "But... none of the other dead I know lose themselves like Rowan does..."

Perry smirked. "Rowan isn't like anybody else, Jules. That time with Jack? The first time? He was trying to do something impossible. In the midst of shock and terror, he reached out, and literally pulled the entirety of Jack in. And that's the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"You know how I said your brain, this zombie snack up here," he tapped the side of his head, "can't hold more than the memories of a single life?"

"Yes?"

"Well, that's basically true, it's how we evolved, it's all we need, here." He gestured around the room, and it took her a moment to get what he was saying.

"Okay?"

"Rowan pulled Jack's memories into his physical mind when he brought him in. He literally restructured that mess of neurons up here," Perry pointed to his temple again, "to hold it all. And when he severed the link and freed Jake, it stayed. He didn't know he was doing it, he thought he was integrating himself. It's how he's able to work at the hospital without thinking too hard about it. Jack's life is in here, but Rowan knows how to separate himself from the man's memories, and he keeps everything else behind a wall. At least, that's the mental construct he uses to deal with it all."

Julie stared at him. "That doesn't sound so good."

"It'd be fine if it was only Jack. But he'd already done it with somebody else."

"Who?"

Perry stared at her with Rowan's blue eyes.
"Me."

Julie froze, watching him, while her stomach twisted uneasily.

"I've been a part of him since the day you two met," he said softly.

Julie swallowed, not liking where this was going.

"Rowan was always different Julie, but you know that. Always seeking for something more than what he had, but never quite understanding what it was. Then he saw you." Perry smiled. "And he knew, in that moment, what he wanted. Course, I got in the way. I saw him heading for you, and I shot him. So he came for me."

"Pear..." Julie whispered, remembering the moment she turned to look for him, and saw noone, just a mop of shaggy hair dipping behind one of the counters.

Rowan.

*Eating.*

"He didn't know how connected I was to you when he killed me, but he found out pretty quick, and he drew me in like a kid cramming for an exam. I was the roadmap, the guide... to you, Jules. He didn't just eat my memories like any corpse, experiencing them as they flashed and flared in dying sputters, then moving on. He took them to heart, he committed me to the sorry state of his own memory, devoured and fractured as it was, and we effectively merged."

Her mouth went dry. "Merged?"

"Yep," Perry said, nodding. Then he smirked. "You say I laugh like Rowan. Have you ever thought that maybe, Rowan laughs like me?"

Julie frowned, and quickly shook her head. But something nudged her inside, something that whispered... *yes.*

Perry slowly squeezed his eyes shut as his brow trembled again, and he sighed, wiping his hand across his face.

"He can sense a little of what I'm saying. He doesn't like it," he said quietly. "It's always been a fear of his, that everything the two of you feel is because of me."

"Is he right?" Julie asked, whispering again, because her throat was too dry.

Perry sighed and shook his head. "It won't matter soon."

Julie raised an eyebrow. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I can't say, Julie."

She glowered at him. "Jesus, Pear, could you stop being so damn enigmatic? What's going on?!"

"Rowan's in trouble."

Julie glared at him, irritated. "I could have told you that Pear. We're stuck in a town full of crazy people and he can't stop turning into dead people - no offense. And he basically killed me! He's about as far from okay as you can get, and I'm not too far behind."
"Julie," Perry said softly, and he reached out and squeezed her hand. "Rowan's dying."

Julie's heart stuttered in her chest. "What?!"

"You've seen the nosebleeds, you know about the headaches?"

Eyes growing wide, she nodded. "The nosebleeds are new, but he's had the headaches for a while? Why?!"

"Jack and me up here?" he said, tapping his temple again, "It's been hurting him, and things have been slipping through when he hasn't meant them to. Like when he spoke that language to you without realizing. You remember that?"

Julie nodded numbly.

"Now he's pulled Brett in too - the farmer's son? He drew him in hard and fast, out of complete desperation. The kid was young, but with Jack's life, my life, and Rowan's own... he's brought in too much. Others have slipped through, taken over when he hasn't wanted them. And every time anyone comes in or out, things have to be changed, remapped to make it work, and it just makes it worse. He's getting torn apart up here."

"Oh my god..." Julie whispered, her heart clenching. "Caleb, he keeps..."

Perry nodded. "I'm not helping either, but I had to come in Jules, or you would have stayed dead. And that wasn't allowed."

"There you go again-" Julie cut herself off and stared at him. "Wait... you brought me back?"

Perry smiled gently. "Yeah. Rowan was in shock, he wasn't thinking straight. But let's talk about Caleb."

"Fuck Caleb!" she said, panic jumping along her nerves like sparks. "Can't you just kick him out?"

He shook his head. "I have no power to do so Julie. And he has a part to play in what's to come."

Julie rolled her eyes. "Pear! Seriously, stop it with the mysterious crap - how do you know all of this stuff? How are you so aware?"

"Caleb, Julie."

"Ugh," she groaned, and flopped back away from him, wincing at the motion. "I don't want to talk about him."

"But you need to understand something about him, Julie, it's important."

She sighed.

"Caleb experienced his death through Rowan," Perry said, pressing on. "But instead of leaving, he reattached himself, because he didn't understand what the release meant, he thought it was some demon dragging him down again."

"Because he's insane," Julie snorted, wrapping her good arm across her chest.

Perry shook his head. "He's not crazy, Jules. But he has been very, very badly hurt. Visiting his mind is a bit like walking through a field of broken glass. Everything cuts. Everything hurts. His father was... is an extremely violent man, and did things to him that no father should ever do to a
Julie stared up at Perry. "Joshua was telling me about that. I had no idea it was so bad for him."

"How could you? Every time you and Caleb have been together, he's hurt you."

She nodded, and her thoughts went back to the moment just before he'd strangled her, when she'd leaned in and kissed him.

"Why didn't it bring him back?" she asked suddenly.

"What?"

"I kissed him, before he... I tried to bring Rowan back. I thought it would work, why didn't it work?"

Perry sighed. "He doesn't give women much due, like most of the men here."

"Oh, no shit," Julie snapped. "Backwards ass basta-"

"And he's gay."

Julie blinked.

"What you did couldn't reach Rowan in that way, because it would never reach Caleb that way. It had the opposite effect actually. And I don't mean disgust at being kissed by a woman. He's been abused Jules, any kind of intimate touch without his permission is devastating."

"Oh... god..." she mumbled, and her hand raised to her mouth. "I had... no.. clue. I didn't mean..."

The words fell away as her throat closed up tight.

"See?" Perry said softly. "You'd cry for someone who took your life, Jules. This is why you glow like the heart of the sun. This is how you've changed the world, and you're about to do it again."

She stared at him, as a tear started a damp trail downward.

Perry laughed, strong and buoyant.

"Just like Rowan."

"Sorry, that was really melodramatic," he said, as the laughter eased and he gave an easy smile. "True though."

"Pear," she whispered.

"Yeah?"

"What about... you?"

Perry shook his head quickly, "Haven't finished talking about Caleb, Jules. He's learned how to access Jack's memories, he's getting stronger."

Julie's mouth fell open. "Pear... I did that. That's my fault!"

Perry shook his head. "It was inevitable Jules, don't blame yourself."

"But I'm the one who gave him Jack's name," she said, her gut twisting sharply. "That's what
they've been trying to do - access the doctor, so they won't need him anymore. Oh my god... I...

"Jules," Perry said sharply, pulling her back. "Focus for a minute, I'm running out of time."

She blinked, "Time to do what?"

"Well.. this," he said quickly, giving her a sudden, blinding smile, before leaning in, gently cradling her cheek, and pressing his lips against hers.

And suddenly, he wasn't Rowan anymore. He was Perry - the feel of his hand, the smell of his skin, the warm press of his lips in that crooked little smile, just as she remembered. And it made her so terribly sad, another tear loosed its way down her cheek as she melted into the moment.

And just as suddenly, he pulled back. The smile softened as he brushed at her tear with his thumb. "Sorry. It's just... I won't see you again, not like this... and I needed..."

Her eyes flicked back and forth between his own, Rowan's blue eyes again. "Pear?"

"Just don't give up, Jules," he said with his small crooked smile. "Do what you do best... hope. And talk to him... you might-"

His gaze dropped suddenly, and she didn't understand, and was about to ask him what he meant, when his gaze lifted again.

And angry blue eyes glared at her from under furrowed brows. "Perry? What's wro...

"S-shuttup," he stammered suddenly, as the frown deepened. "S-stop.. t-talking..."

"Oh god."

"S-shuttup," he stammered suddenly, as the frown deepened. "S-stop.. t-talking..."

"Shit.. Caleb!

Julie sucked in a sharp breath, and tried to pull away, but his hand tightened hard over her own.

"No, you.. stay," he growled, and sliding his legs off the bed he stood beside her, glaring down angrily.

Her heart pounded as she stared back up at him, trapped in his grip, and having no idea what he would do next.

"Caleb, you don't belong in him, you know that," she pleaded, without much hope that he'd listen. "You have to leave! I command you to leave!"

"Oh god, that sounded so stupid!"

"SHUT UP!" he yelled, eyes blazing, and swung his free arm back as if to strike her.

Then he stopped, his hand frozen at the height of the swing as she flinched back into the mattress. His eyes softened, and his arm fell in stages to his side.
"I'm... I'm sorry, Julie," he said, his tone more gentle than she'd ever heard from him before. "I'm sorry I hurt you before, I didn't mean to do what I did." Sighing heavily, he released her. "I don't want to hurt you anymore. Please don't make me."

Julie stared at him, stunned to silence.

"I heard what you said about me," he said quietly, and shook his head. "I'm not crazy." His eyes dipped to the floor, and he stood awkwardly. "I... saw your tears too, saw how much you cared. I forgive you your trespass before."

Before she could answer, he spoke again, his voice raising so sharply she flinched back.

"But what's gone on in my family is no concern of yours, girl. My sin is no business of yours either. You keep your nose out of it, and we'll get along fine."

Bizarrely, he smiled. And it was sincere, but tentative, tugging at the corners of Rowan's mouth like a curtain being pulled wrong. "My brother likes you. You seem to have his respect, and that's a rare thing for a woman to have. I know you'll be happy with him."

Julie felt the tears threaten again, and struggled to choke them down. She couldn't cry in front of him, she wouldn't give him that.

"Caleb," she said, as evenly and as calmly as she could, "you can't take Rowan's place. It isn't right. You're supposed to pass on. You're supposed to go to... to..." She tried to finish the sentence, but the word wouldn't come out of her mouth.

The smile slid from his face. "To? To what? Heaven?"

"Yes," she said, nodding quickly. "That's where you belong. Not here, Caleb. Not stuck in someone else's body. Not taking someone else's life! You're going to ki-

"He took MY LIFE JULIE!" he roared over her, thrusting his face in her own, and his breath rushed hot against her skin.

With a startled cry, she lashed out at him, trying to push him away, but he merely caught her wrist and squeezed.

"You can tell me he didn't mean it," he snarled in her face, "That he wasn't himself. Doesn't change a thing. He killed hundreds of people, girl. He's the one who deserves to die. NOT ME!"

He threw her wrist back at her and turned away, storming towards the door in long strides.

"Caleb, please," she cried, finally breaking down, "You can't do this... I... love him, he's the fa-

"You keep quiet or I'll keep you under till it's done," he snapped over her words, turning back from the door. His brow was trembling, and she had the feeling that he was wrestling with something inside.

Rowan?

"You'll learn to love Joshua, Julie," he said in a voice that was rough, strained. "That's your fate here now. Rowan's got no further part to play in your... life... sooner y-you a-accept... that..."

Caleb grunted sharply then, squeezing his eyes closed as he grasped at his head, and Julie leaned forward from the bed. "Rowan? I know you're there, fight him! You can push him out!"
Frantically, she pushed herself off the bed, holding her side with a cry, and stumbled to the door, but he ducked through and slammed it shut behind him. Her hand reached the handle just as he clicked the lock over, and she slapped her palm against the hard surface, screaming at him through the crack.

"LET HIM GO CALEB! YOU LET HIM GO!"

His voice crawled to her through the door. Faint and breathy. "That's exactly what I'm going to do Julie... I'm going to set him free. It's time... to let... him go..."

And then he was gone.

And Julie slid to the floor, slowly crumpling to her knees.

And cried.
A Second Chance

Caleb stumbled back from the door and down the hallway, out of the hospital wing, desperate for air, for somewhere open, where he could regain control. Rowan was roaring inside of him, clawing up through his mind, and it was taking every bit of will he had not to lose his grip, his hold on the kid's body. He'd heard Perry, felt what Perry had said to Julie, and things felt clearer now. The boy was no demon. He'd been taken by a demon, but the evil had let him go, and he was just a kid now. There was nothing about him to fear. Just to prove it, Caleb made himself stop at the bathrooms off the locker hall, made sure no one was near, and found a mirror inside.

The kid stared back at him, cuts healing on his face, the gash freshly taped, his upper lip dark with blood.

And those eyes.

Crystal blue, piercing.

Haunted.

They were his now. His beautiful eyes. Caleb felt it inside as a truth as he stared at the face in the mirror, and a smile spread slow and wide.

He had a good smile now too. Even and bright. And while he used to have blonde hair, now he had hair so dark it was almost black.

His face, his smile, his eyes. Caleb stared back, owning what he saw, and slowly, the kid inside fell to silence.

Caleb straightened, and his smile grew into a grin, one that made his eyes seem almost feverish. He'd done it. Stuffed the kid down. Shut him up. Now, how could he make it permanent?

Dipping a cupped hand under the tap, he quickly splashed the cool water over his mouth, and wiped the blood away, gently, almost tenderly. It fell in weak pink puddles against the porcelain as he stared at himself.

This time it would be very different. He wouldn't let himself get hurt by anyone. He'd look after himself, treasure this second chance God had graced him with. He'd help people too, and it'd be a meaningful life, a good life, not the pathetic, lost life that'd ended in blood and crap and gurgling screams in a dead-end alley.

Gratitude swelled in him, and he felt his eyes sting with tears as he turned away from the mirror and headed back into the locker room, meaning to climb the stairs to the exit.

But he stopped dead at the sight of at least a dozen men rushing past, donning body armor and pulling rifles from the cages along the south wall.

He grabbed the arm of one of the men passing, a guy he didn't know, who must have come to town after he left, and nodded to the room.

"What's going on?" he asked, and the man frowned at him before shrugging out of his grasp.

"Someone's flying overhead," the guy said, and his voice held a trembling edge. "Flying real low, circling the town. We're to bring him down."
Caleb stared at him, his mouth falling open. Another plane? It couldn't be a coincidence... it had to be someone from the city... someone searching for Rowan and Julie?

His heart fell. If they shot this one down, it'd only bring more, and he'd seen the city through Rowan's memories, he knew what kind of military force they had.

They'd just keep coming.

He pushed through the assembling group, and joined the stream of men racing up the stairs. The light was blinding outside, and he blinked against a surreal scene of almost forty soldiers raising arms against a lone aircraft low in the sky, it's engine whining as the pilot banked sharply and away.

"STOP!" he screamed, desperate to reach through to them, to make them see how stupid it was to attack.

But it was too late.

There was a jarring percussive blast from the front of the group, and Caleb watched in horror as a rocket shot up towards the plane, and the world exploded in sound as the men around him opened fire.

The rocket missed by what seemed like inches, but some of the shots hit true - black holes appeared on the underside of the fuselage and along one of the wings, and the plane almost seemed to shudder at that moment, as if it were truly some wounded airborne creature, before straightening and disappearing from view.

Who was flying? Who was in there?

As the men around him froze, as if waiting for a fireball of a crash, Caleb wrestled with something deep inside. A terrible, fearful dread that did not feel like his own.

Who was in the plane?

The crackle of static burst from somewhere ahead of him, and there was an exchange of voices. His father, and someone on a radio.

"Morrisey!" came Samuel's voice from the front of the group, and every head turned his way. Caleb looked too, seeing his father over almost everyone else's head, and it struck him, how tall he was now. God hadn't seen fit to grace him with height in his old life.

Who was flying?!

Caleb took a deep breath and tried to calm the fear inside. Why did he care? Was it someone Rowan knew?

"Jeb's on the wall," Samuel continued, "says the plane looks like its going to land on the lake. Take two squads, track the plane, recover what you can."

"Got it, sir," Morrisey answered from the right. "Taking the doc too, just in case."

Caleb stared at the soldier in surprise. Why do I have to go?

Samuel waved them off. "Good, go."

Morrisey came for him then, and pointed at the bunker door. "Go get your kit, might need it."
Caleb shook his head. "I don't thi-"

"Don't make me wait kid," Morrisey said, giving him a not-so-gentle push. "Move it."

Glowering at the man, Caleb headed back in, and despite his intention to take his time as he pleased, he found himself rushing, his heart thrumming hard in his chest, his limbs jerky with nerves as he checked on his brother, then grabbed some triage supplies from the shelves in the hall. One improvised kit later, he raced back upstairs in time to catch the last jeep spewing a dark smoke as it idled waiting for him.

They tore down the road as soon as he was in, leaving a dusty, smoky haze behind them, and soon reached the main gate where they were waved through by the guard. Above them loomed the wall, and the dead, offered back up to God. The sight disturbed him, as much as he tried to convince himself of the justness of the act. Joshua had explained why they did it, and he'd nodded along as he'd listened, eager to be a part of his family again, to be a part of the community. But it just didn't seem right, every time he looked up, and the doc's words came back to him...

_They've gone wrong here boy._

It sat badly, and he tried to shake it off, blinking against the wind, and the dust left by the jeep ahead as they made their way down the hill road to the paved highway. Dodging downed tree limbs, abandoned wrecks and gaping cracks in the asphalt, they took the next highway straight through the middle of town and across the lake bridge.

Caleb's eye was drawn back to the main center of town, where sparse store fronts lay shattered and gaping. A skeleton lay stretched against the side of a red sedan outside the ransacked supermarket, its skull in pieces against the pavement. Inside the car there'd been another skeleton, and the sight had twisted his gut as they passed. A tiny mummified corpse, still strapped securely in a bright red car seat.

Squeezing his eyes against the memory, he turned back as they pulled off the highway onto the lake road, and tore down the cracked asphalt under the rapid staccato flashes of sunlight through the trees.

"There!" One of the men yelled, his arm raised towards the body of water they were just starting to see through the thinning forest.

Caleb strained to see what it was, and finally spotted something sticking out of the water, not too far from the shore, about half a mile ahead. Maybe part of the wing? The lead jeep had already pulled off the main road and was ripping across an open stretch of meadow toward the shore, and he gripped the roll bar tight as they bounced off on the same path. As they got closer, he could see it was definitely the tip of the wing.

_Lord above... the whole plane's under..._

There was something horrible about this. He needed to get to the plane RIGHT NOW.

Even before the jeep had come to a complete stop, he was out, pulling his bag with him as he ran towards the thin muddy shore, to join the other soldiers gathered there.

Two of the men were dragging someone from the water. The figure was limp in their arms, clothes hanging heavy and dripping from his frame.

The clothes, the man's build, the hair dripping wet over his sagging head, triggered a sharp, horrific recognition.
Caleb's head and heart wrenched violently, and suddenly Rowan was rushing forward, the taste of his own blood salty on his lips, as the soldiers dumped the man on the shore.

"DAD!" he roared, falling almost on top of his father, who hadn't moved. A muddy, bloodsoaked handtowel was wrapped tight above Mark's right knee, and Rowan saw in a panicked instant the bullet wound that had passed through just below, and knew that something vital had been cut.

His father was cold, terribly pale, and unresponsive under his hands as Rowan turned him over, shaking him, calling his name. Beyond terrified, his eyes wide in shock, Rowan checked for a pulse, for breath, and found nothing.

"No no," he whispered, and tilted his dad's head back for a rescue breath, as Morrissey barked something above him at the other soldiers. A few men detached and started back into the water as Rowan tried to breathe for his dad and couldn't - something was blocking the air.

Water.

His father had drowned.

"DAD NO!" he yelled, the sound a sharp angry bark of a command. He thrust down just under his father's sternum, pushing the diaphragm up hard, and water gushed from Mark's mouth in a sudden stream. He did it again, rolling his dad over as water spilled from his lips in a thinning trickle, then pushed him back and finally tried another breath.

It went in, his father's chest rising and falling. Stilling. One more breath, and Rowan moved to compressions, hard and fast, his eyes burning with tears, his nerves live wires just under his skin.

He would not accept this. This was not going to happen. He was going to keep his head about him this time and bring his dad back.

"Dad, you come.. back.. for me now," he grunted, in between compressions, "I.. came back... for you, you... have... to... do it... for ME!"

His dad's body jerked in time beneath his hands, then fell still as he stopped to give two breaths. Rowan's skin was itching with fear as he gave the last breath and rose to pump again. Nothing was happening. NOTHING.

"Dad, I fucking MEAN IT!" he roared, "MOM! You get HIM BACK HERE!" The tears rushed to close his throat, but he swallowed them hard, gritting his teeth as he pumped angrily, defiantly at his dad's chest. He wasn't going to stop, he was going to do this until his dad sputtered and opened his eyes. He stared down at his dad's face, watching for that moment, but there was nothing there, just a cold, waterlogged corpse jerking with each compression.

"YOU CAN'T... HAVE BOTH... OF THEM!" he screamed, looking up through the gathered soldiers to the blue above, before diving for more breaths.

There was a hand on his shoulder, then, firm and warm. Morrissey's voice came to him softly as his blood pounded in his ears.

"God takes who he wishes, son," he said quietly, and the hand on his shoulder squeezed. "Ain't nothing can be done if it's His will."

"You shut the FUCK UP!" Rowan snapped back, the heel of his palms on his dad's chest again,
"It's.. MY WILL.. here! MINE! Dad.. you hear.. that?! You're.. COMING BACK!"

And he kept pumping, he kept breathing, even as the soldiers returned from the water carrying what they could scavenge from the plane, and Morrissey ordered them to return with the first jeep. He heard it all, but his eyes stayed frozen on his dad's pale face as he worked, even as it blurred away with the tears that had started to spill.

"Son."

Morrissey's voice again, gentle, deep, reaching him through the brittle panic.

"Eric," the man said again, and Rowan scowled back at him, coming up after two more breaths. "He's gone, boy."

"NO!" Rowan roared, and it gave him new energy to keep fighting, even as his arms started to shake, and his breathing came hard and fast.

But his thoughts were sliding into drowning despair. His dad lay an empty shell beneath him, and it'd been over fifteen minutes now... the chance he'd come back, let alone with normal function was stupidly low.

"Dad's.. gone.

"NO!" he screamed, shaking his head as he kept pumping. Whatever it took, he couldn't let his father go. Not when it was all his fault. His dad couldn't die because of his mistake... he couldn't take that!

God, or whatever was up there... could take him instead. He'd died before, he'd cheated death so many times... maybe it was time to pay up.

"Take me," he whispered, and that's when arms locked around his shoulders and pulled him away.

"Get the body in the jeep," Morrissey barked, just behind his head.

"NO! GET THE FUCK OFF OF ME!" Rowan roared, kicking and thrashing in Morrissey's arms as two soldiers gathered Mark's body and pulled it from view. Adrenaline tore through him like a wild thing, and screaming, he wrenched himself free, swinging at Morrissey before he caught up to the men, and pulled his dad back to the ground to start CPR again.

"DAD! YOU COME BACK!"

The world exploded in agony as something struck him hard in the back of the head, and he fell to the ground beside his father as his limbs forgot how to support his weight. Blinking slowly, he rolled back, looking up at a man standing over him, rifle butt raised as if to strike again.

"Pick him up," Morrissey said wearily. "Put him in the jeep."

"..dad.." Rowan whispered, trying to reach for his father, but his limbs stayed leaden and still. Hands grabbed him, lifting him from the ground, and a heavy despair smothered him as they pulled him away.

Voices came to him in snatches as they hefted him over the side of the vehicle and lowered him against the wheel well.

"...kid nothing.. trouble..."
"...get him in... have to... town..."

Rowan surfaced and sank, drowning under a black void, heavy with grief. Motion came to him, the vibration of a rough idle, then a distant pressure against his cheek, again and again.

"Eric, hey," Morrissey's voice from somewhere above. "Damn this, shouldn't have hit him so hard."

The light slapping renewed, and Rowan jerked away from it, trying to raise his hand to stop whoever was touching him. His skull was a pounding mess of hurt, his heart a tight ball of pain in his chest. His dad was gone. They'd shot him out of the sky, and stopped Rowan from bringing him back. Tears choking him again, he slipped back to the dark.

"..just go."

His body shifted with a sudden momentum, and sensation reached him slowly through the void. There was something cold, wet, pressing against his leg.

The wrongness of it leached into his awareness, and frowning, he struggled to open his eyes.

The pale body of his dad was wedged against the opposite wheel well, an outstretched leg, the wounded one, pressing up against Rowan's own. Mark's head lolled with the motion of the jeep, and his pale hands lay limp, curled to the sky.

A deep grief crushed Rowan, squeezing his heart, pulling out a long, agonized moan.

Which was cut suddenly short, as he saw his father's hand twitch.

"..dad.." he called, meaning to yell over the sound of the jeep's engine and tires on the road, but it came out as a hoarse whisper.

Leaden body betraying him, he tried to move to his dad's side, but the jeep's erratic motion threw off what little balance he had, and he landed awkwardly, falling to the floor beside his dad's hand.

Which twitched once more.

Rowan reached for him then, as he tried to push himself back up, fingers seeking his dad's throat. He needed to know that it wasn't just the motions of the vehicle, wasn't just a body's random electrical glitches.

The flesh beneath his fingers was cold. Still and cold.

Dad... no...

As he struggled and failed to keep his head above the dark, struggled and failed against deadening limbs to hold his dad close, he fell back against the floor of the jeep, and stared up at his father's chalky face as the world shrunk away.

To nothing.

 Thanks to everyone for reading. Let me know what you think if you have a moment. The above chapter wasn't a happy one, but has a big impact on the direction of the story from here, one that surprised the heck out of me when I was writing. I wonder what everyone thinks will happen next? ;)

"MARCUS!"

Marcus jerked up from the thin canvas cot at the sound of the deep, urgent voice coming down the hall.

"Marcus, wake up!"

"M'up.. what's goin' on?" he answered thickly, twisting his legs off the cot and onto the cold concrete floor. Rubbing the heel of his hand against his eye, he blinked up as a soldier rushed into the small storeroom, flicking on the overhead light.

"Sir, you're needed in the radio room," the soldier said, standing stiffly to the side of the door. "Colonel's waiting."

Marcus grimaced and scratched the back of his head. "What time is it?"

"Sir, I'm to escort you right now, it's an emergency."

The soldier's words made his heart skip a beat and he stood up fast. "Did we find them?!"

The man indicated the open door. "The Colonel will brief you, sir, we need to hurry."

"Sure," Marcus said quietly, and returned to the cot to pull on his socks and shoes. "Really appreciate all the 'need to know' crap by the way."

"Time is of the essence, sir."

Grumbling, Marcus got to his feet again, grabbed his jacket and indicated that the soldier should go first. The man did, but glanced back at him constantly as they moved through the hall and into the large hanger fitted out as a repair shop. The radio room was a small enclosure off the main room, and Marcus could see the Colonel bent over the communications panel with Ed, his body language agitated, volatile.

As the soldier pushed the door open, the Colonel's voice came through, just as agitated.

"Mark! Do you copy? Please respond!"

Monotonous static poured from the speakers set above the desk.

"Goddammit!" the Colonel yelled, wrenching the headset off.

"What's going on?" Marcus asked.

The Colonel ignored him, handing the headset back to Ed as he addressed the man, "Get Dale, tell him to bring whatever armed force he can gather from Davis here, then have him return to the city for additional troops and any artillery he can squeeze in. Tell Murphy to bring his squad to Long Lake asap."

"Got it," Ed said with a nod, donning the headset and flipping a switch on the receiver.

"And keep trying to get Mark," John added. He turned to Marcus, "How soon can we get in the air?"

Going to Something
"Uh," Marcus sputtered, a little rattled, "Ten minutes? Mind telling me what's going on?"

"Make it five," the Colonel said firmly, "I'll brief you on the way." Then he looked over Marcus' shoulder at the soldier standing behind. "Tim, is Webber still sleeping?"

Marcus shifted back awkwardly, trying to get out of the way of the conversation.

Tim nodded. "Yes sir."

"Get him up, get him armed, bring extra mags for the three of us, med kit and night gear, got it?"

"Yes sir," Tim answered again, and left.

"Jesus Christ," Marcus muttered, looking back at the Colonel, "What the hell's going on? We going to war?!"

John looked at him coolly. "Mark was shot down by a hostile settlement. One that may, or may not, be holding Julie and Rowan. We're going to something. You have four minutes left."

"Fuck," Marcus whispered, his mind reeling. Mark, shot down?! What the hell?!

The Colonel's deadline hit him then and he snapped back to himself. "Sorry, sorry, on it."

Nerves jittery, he backed out of the room and headed for the strip, figuring he had everything he needed in the clothes on his back. Racing out to the 412 across the sun-baked tarmac, he climbed inside and sped through the pre-flight checks as he brought it up to full revs.

His mind raced as he worked, his imagination making a mangled, smoking mess of Mark's Piper, and translating that to the chopper he was prepping. What the fuck were they heading into? If Mark had been shot down, what would stop them from getting blasted out of the sky? And why the hell had Mark been fired on in the first place?

A minute later the Colonel was jogging under the blurring blades with two soldiers in tow, both carrying a crate of gear. The Colonel climbed into the seat next to him while Tim and Webber loaded into the main cabin, and Marcus watched them buckle up over his shoulder.

"Everyone in?" he yelled.

"Go," John barked, after adjusting his headset and nodding back at his men. Spreading a map on his lap, he tapped the western quadrant. "Heading 168, Long Lake, push it."

Marcus glanced down at the map, up at John, then out over the small airfield. "Pushing it," he said, with a heavy breath, and got them airborne, sliding forward as he gained altitude rapidly. The blades chopped the air over their heads as they rose above the mountains and pressed hard to the west.

After a couple of minutes flying, John adjusted the mic over his mouth and flicked a switch by the radio. "Ed, this is the Colonel, you read me?"

"Yes sir. Murphy is enroute, ETA fourteen four five due to bad road conditions. Dale's coordinating with Davis, he thinks he can get two squads here in just under two hours. Over."

The Colonel stared at the map as Ed spoke, then glanced out the window. "Copy that, anything from Mark?"

"Negative."
Marcus frowned at the news, as the Colonel gave a small sigh.

"Copy that Ed. I'll rendezvous with Murphy at the lake for retrieval and attempt contact with the settlement. If you don't hear from us by eighteen hundred hours, you authorize a full retaliatory response with whatever ground force Dale musters. Confirm, over."

Marcus stared at John, his stomach sinking.

*Jesus Christ.*

Ed's voice crackled over his mic. "Copy that. No contact by eighteen hundred, go for full ground assault."


Marcus stared out over the green slopes of the Adirondacks mountains, as his stomach continued to sink through the floor.

The Colonel stared at him a moment longer.

"Your placement tests showed you could handle a gun."

"Yep," Marcus agreed, nodding. "But I can't aim for shit."

"They showed that too," John said with a smirk, before the smile dropped. "You'll remain with this vehicle, I'll lend you a side arm. You don't hear from us by seventeen thirty, or they move on your position, or you come under fire, you head back to Ed to coordinate troop transport under Dale's command."

Marcus let out a heavy breath. "Christ. You really think it's going to come to that?"

The Colonel gave him a look he could not read. And that disturbed him.

"Yes," the soldier said simply, and looked out across the undulating stretch of forested hills.

Marcus followed his gaze, his blood pulsing at his temples.

"Fuck."

Shimmering lakes and ponds stretched out underneath them as they neared their target, and Marcus noticed something large and unusual catching the light at the base of a bald ridge to the south. He pointed to it.

"I see it," John said quietly. "That's the settlement."

Marcus nodded, frowning, and pushed the Bell northward, over the stretch of Long Lake. The abandoned town and cross bridge slipped away quickly beneath them as they made their way along its length, scanning for any sign of Mark's plane.

"Oh shit," Marcus whispered, easing back on the throttle as they neared what had to be the Piper, near the northernmost rim. The plane was almost completely submerged, save for a wingtip, a pale ghost in the water about a fifty feet from the shore. The surface of the lake blurred as they hovered over it. "Is that him?!"

The Colonel immediately turned from his window, gesturing for Marcus to descend. "Get us down, right now!" Then he unbuckled his harness and yelled back into the cabin. "Webber, need
you on a recovery dive! Tim, you're on guard duty!"

The soldiers shouted some kind of affirmative as Marcus brought the chopper down as quickly as he could, landing hard in the meadow just beyond the slim muddy shore, and then they were out, Tim doing a rapid scan of the area, rifle raised and ready, Webber stooped and headed towards the bank.

"Keep it running till I give a signal, got it?" the Colonel yelled, ditching the headset as he jumped to the knee-high grass and rushed to join Webber.

Marcus disengaged the throttle and sat back, feeling useless, and a little sick. That was definitely Mark's plane. He watched as Webber ditched his armor and jumped in, swimming out with powerful strokes towards the wreck, and his chest grew tight.

Was Mark still in there? Were they seriously about to pull the corpse of his friend's dad out of the lake?

Jesus, Rowan...

Within a few minutes, Webber surfaced and pointedly shook his head, then dived again, and Marcus let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Then he frowned. Wait... was that a negative, he's not in there, or, he's in there and didn't make it?

Then the soldier broke the surface again, shook his head again, and started to swim back to shore.

No Mark. Mark wasn't in the plane.

"Thank god," Marcus breathed, and then frowned yet again. What if the body had floated off somewhere? What if Mark'd been caught in weeds somewhere just off shore? What if...

"Jesus brain, shut up," he snapped at himself, and watched as Webber met with the Colonel on the shore. There was no way for him to hear what they were saying, not with the whine of the engine and the blades chopping the air above his head. But the Colonel was gesturing to the shore, then up off the muddy bank to a bald strip of meadow.

And Marcus suddenly realized what the man was pointing at.

Tire tracks.

Somebody had been here. And maybe, they'd taken Mark.

The Colonel's waving caught his eye then, and he looked over to see John drawing a line across his neck. Cut it.

Marcus did, sitting for a few seconds in idle before bringing the blades to a standstill and hopping out.

"Where is he?" he yelled.

The Colonel was checking the mag of a dripping pistol that Webber had handed him as he glanced up. "Looks like they dragged him out, took him."

Dragged him out?

"Was he alive?" Marcus asked, and immediately felt stupid. How the hell would they know that?
But apparently it wasn't that stupid a question, because the Colonel gave him a sour look. "I don't think so."

Marcus felt his mouth go dry, and the bottom fell out of his stomach. "What? How do you know?"

John pointed to a long, damp depression on the sand, then two deep divots alongside it. "Right size for a body, deep around the chest, person was kneeling beside, lots of action at the knees. CPR."

"Oh crap," Marcus whispered, then looked back up at the Colonel. "Did it work?!"

Okay, that was stupid. Inwardly he kicked himself as John fixed him with an irritated frown. "I'm not a fucking psychic Marcus, I have no idea." Then the man's expression softened and he released a heavy breath. "Odds aren't good. But there's one benefit."

"What the hell kind of benefit could there be to that?!" Marcus snapped, getting angry at the man.

The Colonel glared at him. "Means we don't have to rush into this. They bothered to try and bring him back, which means they'll tend to him if they did. Likely they didn't, which means our tearing into them without a solid understanding of their numbers, their munitions, their defenses, is pointless."

Marcus blinked. "Because he's dead."

The Colonel nodded, and his eyes were sharp and cold. "Yes Marcus. Because he's probably dead."
Rowan woke sluggishly, groaning as his head thundered and the back of his skull pulsed in a sharp pain.

Why was everything moving?

Wait... he was moving. Someone was shaking him roughly.

"Wake up!"

Hissing as he reached for his head, he blinked up blearily at the face of whoever was shaking him. But he couldn't make out any features, everything was blurred and sliding, so he shut his eyes again.

"Wake up Rowan."

Dad?

The thought shot through him like a rocket, sharpening his mind and the sensations flooding his body. His eyes snapped open and he looked up at the figure again, aware that he was lying on something soft, something familiar?

Hospital bed?

Jerking up suddenly, he groaned and grasped at his head again, squeezing his eyes tight against the pain of the sledgehammer someone was slamming around inside his skull.

"Dad?" he said roughly.

"No Rowan," came the voice again, heavy with regret. "I'm sorry."

Joshua.

Reality hit him then, and he sucked in a breath, strangled by shock, blinking furiously as he tried to make everything clear. He needed to see clear.

"Dad!" he yelled, and tried to push the figure in front of him away. But strong hands held him tight.

"Rowan, I'm sorry."

"DAD!" he roared, as he finally saw clear. Joshua before him, staring with a pity that twisted Rowan's stomach. Beyond was...

"Nnno.." he moaned, and lurching awkwardly, he pushed Joshua away, and stumbled to the other bed, where a figure lay, under a white sheet. The fabric was damp and stained red where the figure's leg would be.

No. No, it can't...

Maybe it was someone else under the sheet? Maybe... maybe he'd been wrong? What had he seen
before he'd passed out? Wasn't his dad smiling? Dad was okay.

He had to be okay.

A hand closed over his shoulder and squeezed. "Rowan, I'm-"

"SHUTUP!" he roared, twisting to pull the hand from his shoulder. With a wild punch, he tried to drop the man to the ground, so he could beat his head in. Smash his head in until the man's skull shattered, and everything inside spread in a pool at his feet.

But his body wasn't working right, and Joshua just grabbed his wrists and twisted him back, holding him still as he spoke in a low rush in his ear.

"I'm so sorry boy, I truly am. But this wasn't personal. We were a people defending our own, that's the truth of it. You'll see that in time."

Rowan thrashed against him, rejecting everything Joshua said, perched on the edge of a grief so deep and suffocating he didn't think he'd survive the fall.

Joshua just held him in place, until, exhausted, Rowan slumped forward, facing the body under the sheet.

And it came to him then, that that's all it was.

A body. It didn't have a name. It was nobody. Nobody he knew.

*Dad's okay. He's back in the city, hanging out with Brandon.*

"No Joshua," he whispered, feeling a strange tremulous relief inside. Fragile and stupid. "It's not him."

The man behind him released a heavy sigh, reached out, and flipped the sheet back.

Rowan sucked in a frantic breath, yelling "NO!" and then he just kept yelling, as he stared down into the pale, almost waxen face of his dad. The features slack, like a mask that didn't fit right, stretched just a little too far.

Dead.

*Dad... he's dead. Dad's dead.*

"No," he whispered, and his legs gave way beneath him. He landed awkwardly, as Joshua tried to hold him up, growling something in his ear about Samuel coming, about being strong, showing the bravest face he could.

"No," he said one more time.

*Julie's dead.*

*Dad's dead.*

*I can't... I won't.*

Closing his eyes, he focused on the one he'd killed, the one who wanted so desperately to live again. *Fine, it's all yours.*
Focusing on him hard, he yanked him through. And then he let go, embracing the welcome, thoughtless dark as it drew him down.

Pain crushed the new one, his head pounding anew, and he crumpled around it, as the blood fell from his nose, splashing to the bare concrete below.

He stared down at the spatters, through bloodshot eyes, not understanding.

"Rowan, you have to get up! He'll be here any minute!"

Hands tugged under his shoulders, trying to pull him to his feet.

"Josh?" he asked, bewildered.

The hands froze. "Caleb?"

Caleb twisted, to look up at his brother through eyes squinted in pain. "Josh? What..." He looked around the room then. He was back in the hospital? Somebody on the bed above him...

"Why... why am I on the floor?"

Joshua pulled at him again, and this time he went with it, struggling to push himself up. God above, he felt horrible. His head was splitting, pulsing in a steady tempo of hurt. Groaning, he fought the urge to throw up, covering his mouth with a shaking hand.

His brother's gaze was piercing, sharp with confusion and concern. "Caleb... how in the world did you come up?"

Caleb stared back at him, completely disoriented. "I... don't know. Last thing I remember... is running..." He groaned again, clenching his teeth against another wave of nausea. "Josh, need painkiller or something... quick."

Joshua led him over to the bed against the wall, giving him something to hold onto before running over to the shelves.

Caleb turned back, and stared at the other bed, at the person lying there.

Frowning, he took careful steps forward, until he was standing next to the body, and he looked down into the pale, still face.

Without even thinking about it, he reached out and pressed his fingers against the cold flesh of the man's neck.

Nothing.

"He's dead," he said softly, his eyes roaming over the man's face, taking in every detail he could.

He knew this man.

"Here," Joshua said, suddenly at his side, holding out a bottle of something. Caleb jerked back, startled at first, then took the bottle gratefully and quickly swallowed a few.

They looked down at the dead man.

"It's Rowan's father," Joshua said quietly, moving to replace the sheet over the man's face.
Caleb stopped him, closing his hand over his brother's wrist. "No, leave it. Please."

Joshua frowned at him, but gently laid it out again. And at that moment, the body jerked sharply, sending them both back away from the bed with a cry.

Caleb quickly checked for a pulse again, this time on the man's wrist, but again felt nothing. Gently, he laid the man's arm back, and lingered, threading his hand through the chill fingers.

"He's done that a couple of times," Joshua said, frowning down at Caleb's hand. "Almost put a bullet in him the first time, thought he was one of the Judged. But he's done nothing else, and carries no mark."

"Happens," Caleb said quietly, remembering something of Jack's experience in medical school. "Had a stiff almost sit up in front of me once in school. Dead as a doornail. Scared the living crap out of me."

Joshua was suddenly in his face, pulling him back from the corpse. "What?!!"

Caleb stared back at the man in front of him, then blinked and shook his head. "Sorry... sorry. The medic's memories, got a little lost."

"Don't do that again," Joshua said sharply, his brow drawn down hard. "You didn't sound right at all."

Caleb nodded, the moment already slipping from his mind, as his gaze was drawn back to the body on the bed.

"He was a good man Joshua," he said quietly, returning to Mark's side. "A very good man." As he spoke, his mind filled with more memories, bright and warm. Hearty laughter and bear hugs, kind brown eyes over a wide grin, rough fingers tousling his hair, resting on his shoulder, a touch of reassurance and support.

I love you son.

"Caleb?!!"

Joshua's voice broke him from the movie running through his head, and he came back to himself, catching the trail end of tears as they ran down his face. Wiping at them furiously, he sniffed and turned to look at his brother.

"Sorry Bran, just got caught-"

"What?!" his brother snapped, cutting him off as he leaned in close. "What'd you call me?"

He frowned. "Bran?"

Then his eyes grew wide. "Oh shit! No, Josh!"

"And now you're swearing?!" Joshua snapped, incredulous.

Caleb's mouth fell open, and it was a moment before he could speak again. "I.. didn't do it on purpose Josh, I'm sorry. I'll do penance for it, I promise." He grasped at his head, wincing as the pain intensified suddenly, punching through the painkiller.

"Something's... wrong Josh," he whispered. "Hurts. An I'm all.. mixed up."
His brother's hand fell to his wrist. "Maybe," he said under his breath, "if you stopped holding the dead man's hand..."

"I'm not..." Caleb's voice trailed away as he looked down, and saw his hand - Rowan's hand - wrapped around his father's hand. Frowning, he looked up at his brother, then his gaze fell again.

Drawn to his dad's face.

"He can't be gone Josh," he said in a strained voice, his throat closing in anguish. "It's my fault... and I can't..."

Joshua wrenched him away suddenly, tearing his hand from the cold grip of the corpse, and dragged him towards the door.

"We're getting you out of here Caleb," he muttered. "It's messing with your head."

Caleb sucked in a sharp breath as something lanced through his temple, then let out a short, bitter laugh. "S'not my head Josh."

With a wide swing, Joshua wrenched the door open, and caught Samuel turning the corner to enter. As he stopped in front of them, his gaze flicked between them both, before falling on Caleb, and something hard crossed his eyes.

"Bleeding again, Eric?" he said, and his mouth curled strangely. "You'll bleed out, you don't get that under control." His gaze darted away then, into the room, and he pushed forward, forcing them both to step back.

"Eric's taken ill," Joshua said quickly, standing up tall. "I was just-"

"There's a bed there," Samuel said, pointing a thick hand to the one against the wall. "Use it."

"But sir, I-"

Samuel said nothing, just stared at his son, until Joshua turned with Caleb and drew him over to the bed. Mumbling an apology, his eyes pained, Joshua helped Caleb up.

"What happened to your arm," their father asked flatly, gesturing at Joshua.

"I... fell," Joshua answered, after a long moment.

"You pushed him," Caleb snapped from the bed. "YOU hurt him."

Samuel fixed him with a cold look. "What's that?"

Josh swiveled back to Caleb, his eyes wide. "No, don't-"

"You PUSHED him," Caleb roared, twisting off the bed as his brother tried to push him back down again. "You HURT him! YOU'RE ALWAYS HURTING HIM!"

Samuel's expression shifted slightly, as something dark took firm root. "Is that so?" he asked, his voice surprisingly light, his eyes sharp on Caleb.

Caleb didn't care, and he fought forward as Joshua desperately tried to get him back to the bed.

"Stop it! This isn't-"
"You don't CARE about him! You don't GIVE A SHIT ABOUT EITHER OF US!" Caleb spat, as he drew level with Samuel. The soldier looked at him evenly, his eyes reflecting a deep, brittle anger.

"STOP!" Joshua cried, trying frantically to pull him back, but Caleb wasn't having it any more. With an angry cry, he shoved his brother away, and pushed himself into his father's face.

The man stood tall before him, glaring at him with a growing, vivid rage.

But Caleb couldn't stop, not even as his eyes filled with tears and the words spilled in a rush that he couldn't control.

"THAT MAN," he roared, one hand stabbing down at the still figure on the bed. "Is worth a HUNDRED OF YOU! He was a GOOD MAN! A TRUE father! He never hit me! He never HURT ME! NOT LIKE YOU!"

He swung then, a sharp and sudden strike that surprised him, but Samuel must have seen it coming, seen some telegraph of the move, because the man's meaty hand caught his own with a loud slap and closed over it tight.

And squeezed.

Caleb winced, then doubled over, trying to pull away, but his dad held him firm.

"I HATE YOU!" he spat, striking out with his other hand, but his father merely leaned aside, dodging the blow. With a sudden wrench, Samuel twisted Caleb's arm back, pulling his forearm up so sharply he felt his elbow pop.

With a wild cry of pain, Caleb tried to pull free, but his dad only wrenched his arm back further, drawing another cry from him as he was shoved forward, and over Mark's corpse.

Samuel growled near his ear, twisting his words with spite, "Maybe he was good man, a true father. But he's dead now boy, so now he's worth NOTHING."

Caleb roared, Mark's death mask filling his view as his eyes blurred with grief and rage, and he tried once more to pull away, to free himself from the soldier so he could lash out again.

Kill him...

Thick fingers suddenly curled around the front of his throat, and pulled him back. Struggling, he felt himself drawn back against his father, even as he clawed at the fingers tightening around his neck.

"Joshua," Samuel said in a eerily calm voice, "Leave us."

Caleb's eyes grew wide, and he pulled at his father's arm, as the fingers closed tighter still. Desperately, he sought his brother out. Joshua was staring back and forth between them, his face pale, his eyes wide.

He looked afraid.


"What are you going to do?" Joshua asked in a small voice.

Samuel twisted Caleb's arm, and he squirmed in pain, unable to make a sound.
"What business is that of yours?" Samuel asked.

"He's our only doctor, we need—"

"JOSHUA!" Their father roared, and Joshua jerked back, flinching with the sound. "NOW!"

Joshua moved stiffly towards the door, his lips thinned to a tense line, and Caleb's heart punched through his chest.

His brother was leaving him with dad.

And dad... was going to hurt him.

Real bad.

*Just like... before.*

The thought crushed him. He'd meant to start anew, do this life right. But he was back here again. The truth hit him hard. He hadn't escaped it, and he never would.

As his chest squeezed in despair, Caleb started to cry, though no sound left him, and the tears slid down his face. He had no way to hide them, no way to cover up the shame of crying in front of his father. It wasn't the first time.

His brother reached for the handle.

And stopped.

"No," Joshua said against the door, so low it was almost inaudible.

Caleb felt Samuel freeze behind him.

"What?!" the soldier barked.

Joshua turned back, his eyes downcast, still pale. Still afraid.

"No, Dad," he said quietly.

One moment Caleb was caught like a trussed up turkey, the next, he was stumbling too hard and too fast to the other bed, thrown there by Samuel. He slammed against it, his head glancing the metal frame, and fell to the floor. The cold concrete met him hard, and he lay there, dazed as painful pulses lanced up his arm, through his skull.

"What did you say to me?" Samuel's voice reached Caleb through the murk of his mind, and he struggled to get up again, to turn his head towards his father.

"Nothin' Dad," he mumbled, even as Joshua spoke over him, his voice rushed and carefully reasonable.

"We need him dad, we're under atta—"

There was a sudden shuffling sound, a strange noise from his brother, and something was slammed against the door, hard.

"No... is not a word.. you use.. with me boy," his father grunted, his voice low and dangerous, breathy from action. "Thought that lesson... sunk in.. years ago. Do we need to repeat it?"
Caleb tried to rise, to push himself up and come to his brother's aid, but nothing moved, nothing worked. "Stop," he whispered, but Joshua spoke right over him again.

"Under.. attack," his brother said in a thick, mangled voice, "Town needs.. doc ready for what's.. to come."

There was a long, heavy pause, and all Caleb could hear was his own breath brushing the concrete. Once again, he tried to push himself up, and once again his body decided that enough was enough.

"You're right," Samuel said finally, and Caleb heard the sound of shifting footsteps and Joshua's frantic coughing. "You're right." Their father released a heavy sigh. "See to him then."

Caleb heard the scrape of footsteps nearing before hands grabbed him and pulled. Somehow he managed to get his feet under him, and looked up to see his brother's deep frown. Angry red marks lined his throat.

"Get up," he sighed.

Nodding sloppily, Caleb struggled up with his brother's help, and pressed back against the bed, needing to stay upright, needing to look strong. Samuel was looking at him impassively, and Caleb glared back, hating the man so completely he was shaking.

Joshua's face filled his view, and his eyes were just as angry.

"You stop it right now," he growled, low enough for only Caleb to hear. "This fixes nothing. It changes nothing. Just going to get us both HURT."

Caleb stared at him, his eyes livid, angry at his brother for not fighting back, for not helping him hurt their father, to give just a little of what they'd been given back.

Then he sagged as the anger left him in a rush, leaving him exhausted, and wrapped in a heavy blanket of grief.

Because his brother was right. They couldn't fight Samuel. They couldn't hope to win.

Nodding, he looked away, and his gaze was drawn back to the figure on the bed.

"He's fine," Joshua said back to their father as he turned away, releasing Caleb's arm.

Caleb didn't really notice. He was wandering through memory again, lost in every moment he'd had with...

Dad.

Frowning, he shook his head at himself, and his eyes drifted back to Samuel.

And he realized then, that he didn't want this life anymore. Caleb's sad life. He didn't want this home anymore. He wanted his other home. He wanted his true father, the man lying dead on the bed just a few feet away.

Dad...

"Leave him," Samuel said, and the man's rough voice pulled him back. Samuel turned from Joshua to look at him. "You, boy, have a lesson coming your way when I return. Get ready for wounded 'till then." He cocked his head towards the door as his gaze flicked to Joshua. "Out."
Joshua gave Caleb one final look, haggard and worn, and turned to leave. Samuel watched him, then his gaze lingered hard on Caleb, before he pulled out into the hallway and slammed the door shut behind him.

Silence filled the room.

Caleb took in a ragged breath, and his gaze drifted to Mark once more. Slowly, he took unsteady steps to the body on the bed. Something spattered at his feet, and he didn't even need to look down to know it was blood.

"Dad," he said, in a broken voice, as he neared the corpse, and reached out to grasp that cold hand again.

The contact was frigid, but.. he needed that. He needed to hold his father's hand.

"I'm not myself, dad. I'm someone else," he heard himself whisper, and wiped at the blood still dripping from his nose. Holding it up, he gave his father a weak smile. "Won't stop. Might be joining you soon."

He released a heavy breath. "Dad, I don't know where Julie is. Is she with you?"

As the pounding in his head grew once more he groaned and collapsed over his father's arm. "God above... help."

The cold fingers clenched suddenly around his own.

Caleb jumped back, distantly aware that this was just another spasm, but the breath left his body in a rush as the corpse in front of him opened its mouth.

And nothing came out but the strangled wet sound of muscles slapping together.

The corpse's eyes flicked open. The milky orbs of a drowned man squeezed shut and opened again, as the mouth worked once more.

And as Caleb looked on in complete shock, Mark's arm lifted and his body twisted on the bed.

It struck him then, even as the weirdest sense of relief chased the shock rushing through his body, that his dad was fighting, struggling, dead eyes wide... with panic.

"DAD!" he cried, and pressed at his dad's neck once more, as the body before him twisted again, and the dead eyes swiveled towards him.

No pulse, but... of course there wasn't! The hand clenched around his own was still freezing, he knew his dad was dead!

Mark's brows rose and fell, as the mouth worked again, and this time the one who couldn't decide if he was Rowan or Caleb realized what he was trying to say.

Son

"Dad!" he yelled again, his mouth spreading in a wild grin, that must have been red with the blood still trickling from his nose, "You're damned!"

A flicker of a frown from his father, another wet sound as the mouth worked, and his dad's eyes squeezed tight.
"No no no," he said quickly, pressing against his head. "No, you're dead... not..."

God, how'd this happen?! How'd his dad turn?!

He shook his head at himself. Didn't matter! Hope bloomed in him, obliterating the drowning grief that had flooded him before. He knew what to do to bring his dad back!

Quickly, he shoved his hand at Mark's face. "Here!"

His dad's arm rose sloppily, and slapped his hand away, and the dead eyes swiveled towards him, pleading.

_Afraid._

For a moment, he just stared, not understanding. How was his dad not tearing him apart? That's what the dead did. They tore people apart.

_Like they tore me apart._

Something lanced through his skull again, and his legs started to go. With a quick jerk, his father's hand grabbed him, and he found his feet.

Grasping the mattress with white knuckles, he looked down into his dad's milky eyes. "My head's... broken.. dad... I.. are you real?"

son

His father's hand stretched towards him, and he closed his eyes as the dead fingers pressed against his cheek.

And the cold touch steadied him, made him remember who he was, who he'd been. A corpse, once. He knew what his dad was going through. When he opened his eyes again, his father's gaze had fallen to his mouth, at the blood leeching between his teeth, and his dad's brows drew in hard.

Mark's mouth opened soundlessly again.

"A breath dad," Rowan said. "You need air to speak. Your body doesn't do that for you anymore. It's hard, I know."

Mark made another gurgling sound as he twisted on the bed, and his hand jerked over his chest as he labored to breathe.

"It's like filling a balloon in your stomach," Rowan offered, and placed his hand there.

With that, Marks chest rose, and he took in a long whistling breath, his mouth curled in the slightest smile.

Those drowned eyes turned to Rowan, Mark's mouth opened, and he spoke.

"..ssson.. ffoun..yyu.." The last word trailed in a sigh.

And Rowan made a small, choked noise, as tears flooded his eyes. "Yeah, Dad, you did," he said softly, trying to smile, but not quite managing it. "Dad... _how? _How did this happen to you - you're supposed to be immune?! Were you bitten?"

Mark shook his head sloppily, then frowned, and his mouth worked soundlessly again. Grimacing,
he closed his eyes and took in another long, slow breath.

"..n-no.. wasss.. in.. p-pl.. plane..?"

He took another labored breath. "..shot." And pointed down at his leg, still covered by the sheet.

Rowan nodded, and lifted the sheet back. A light pink stain of diluted blood spread on the mattress under the wound. The wound itself was a jagged bloodless hole.

"Jesus Dad," he whispered, and felt a rush of sudden anger. "Those assholes just shot you out of the sky."

"..k-know. W-was.. there.."

Rowan turned back, to catch a crooked smirk on his father's pale face.

"Dad.. god.." he whispered, and grasped his father's hand again. "This is real, right? I'm not lying on the floor making this all up in my head?"

Mark shook his head awkwardly, then brought up a hand and brushed it clumsily across his own nose. Looking frustrated, he brushed again, and his fingers slipped across the clouded surface of his eyes.

"Dad, no, don't," Rowan said quickly, pulling his dad's hand back as he tried again.

"..can't.. ssseee.. ri..ght.."

Nodding, Rowan tried to smirk, but it slipped from his face. "Dad, you're dead. Your eyes are dead. There's a film over them. You'll get used to it after a while."

*What the hell am I saying? A while? Dad's not staying like this!*

Rowan pressed his hand into his father's face again, twisting it so the angle was right for a bite.

"Here," he said.

Mark's milky gaze flicked from the hand to Rowan's face.

"..h..here?"

"Bite it. My blood's the cure, remember?"

Mark frowned deeply, and pulled away as he pushed Rowan's hand aside.

"..n-not bi..ting you.." he managed.

Rowan pressed his hand at him again. "It's okay Dad, I can handle it."

His father pushed himself up, or tried to, shoving Rowan's hand out of the way again. His chest rose and fell rapidly.

"Nnnot DOING that sson.. sssstop.. try..ing.. make me!"

"But," Rowan said, dropping his hand as he shook his head. "Dad, I don't get this. Why aren't you trying to kill me? That's what you *should* be doing!"

Mark's face twisted angrily, and he struggled again to rise from the bed.
Rowan tried to push him down. "Dad, no, stay there. You can act dead if anyone comes in."

"S-stop!" his dad groaned. "..Jus.. STOP." With a flopping twisting motion, he finally managed to shimmy off the bed.

"Dad, I don't think-"

As soon as his wounded leg hit the floor, Mark dropped like a stone, disappearing from view.

"Dad!" Rowan yelped, running around the bed to help him back up.

His dad just blinked up at him from the floor, his eyebrows arched in surprise. "Did..n't hurt?"

Mouth curling in a smile, Rowan shook his head. "No Dad, none of it does. You're dead."

Blood fell in small drops onto his dad's jacket, seeping into the wet fabric, and Rowan quickly covered his nose. Then a silly thought crossed his mind.

"You could open your mouth," he said, giving an awkward shrug, "I could just.. drop my blood in?"

Mark glared at him from the floor.

"Yeah, that's totally gross," he mumbled, smiling apologetically as he offered a hand to his dad, who took it in a grip of ice.

It took a while, but together they finally managed to get Mark sitting up on the edge of the bed. His father looked at him closely then, and reached out for his chin, angling Rowan's head up.

"Sson.. bleed...ing ..lot," he whispered, frowning. "..Wwhhy?"

Rowan shrugged and pulled away, having no idea how to explain it to his dad. Turning to the shelves, he rummaged through a tray of syringes, having finally had the bright idea of injecting his blood directly.

"You... said... some.. thing," Mark whispered, "Bout... not being... you? Bout.. it... not stopp..ing?"

His dad's words surprised him, and Rowan turned back, ripping open a packaged syringe. "You heard that?"

Mark nodded. "Yeah... heard all.. of it. Fffelt.. all." His pale eyes turned sad. "Heard you... yell..ing. Ffelt.. you trying.. bring.. me back. Cou.. couldn.. DO.. anything." The last words were heavy with frustration.

"Jesus Dad," Rowan whispered, with a growing sense of horror. "You were aware of all of that? Of drowning?"

Mark nodded again, and his gaze drifted downward. "B..body just... stopped. Was.. dark. Qui..et. Thhhought see.. Claire. Didn't." His dead chest rose and fell with no words.

A corpse's sigh.

Then he shrugged, and his eyes swiveled back to Rowan. "Heard.. you. T-then press..ure.. here.." Mark gestured limply to his chest and his face fell to sadness. "Tried.. so hard.. to.. move when you... were crying. I'm.. so... sssorry."
"You moved in the jeep, Dad," Rowan said, feeling his throat close with the memory of that moment on the shore, and needing to be far away from it. "You twitched?"

As he prepped the needle and dabbed the inside of his elbow with a wipe, he caught his dad's nod.

"Tried... to reach.. you."

Sliding the needle into his cubital vein, Rowan nodded. Slowly, he drew up 3 cc's of his own blood and withdrew the syringe, quickly taping a gauze pad against the site. Then he brought the syringe to his dad's arm. It was strange, being this close to his dad and feeling none of the human warmth that'd usually surround him. Instead, his father was radiating a bitter cold. He frowned then, stopping as he rested the needle against his father's pale skin.

Something twisted in Rowan's gut.

Stepping back from his father, he placed the syringe on the nearby tray.

Mark just watched him and frowned. "No.. blood?"

Rowan studied his father's face. Pale, clammy skin. Dead, clouded eyes. But... no spidering veins, no heavy shadows under his brows, and the wound wasn't choked with anything black.

"You don't feel anything inside, do you dad? Like.. nothing talking to you.. telling you to do things?"

His father raised a lopsided eyebrow. "uh?"

With a heavy sigh, Rowan shook his head and rubbed his hand over his eyes.

"It's not that... can't be that..

"Never mind," he said quietly. Then he looked down at the wound again. "Dad, I should probably patch you up. Not sure if the cure will fix your leg." He looked towards the door. "Not sure how long we have till someone comes back, so I have to do it fast."

Mark nodded. ".kay.."

Rowan grabbed some supplies and laid them out on the tray along with the syringe. As he was preparing the sutures, his father grabbed the scalpel from the tray. Rowan jerked back, alarmed. "Dad, what are you-"

Mark dangled the scalpel over the wound in his leg, and let it go. It fell through the wound and clattered noisily to the floor.

Looking back up at his son, Mark grinned. "Dad," Rowan sighed. "This is serious."

His father nodded, the smile slipping to a smirk. "Sssorrry."

Rowan leaned over his father's leg, and quickly cut away the jeans just under the tourniquet, pulling the muddy clothing free of the puckered wound. Wielding a pen light, he took a closer look. His stomach twisted again. The bullet had clipped the femoral artery, the impact shredding the base of his dad's quads and hamstrings, and the tendons that held them in place. His face grew hot as he stared at the damage. This wasn't something he could fix properly here, and if the cure didn't fix it, his dad was probably going to lose the leg.
He did the best he could anyway, making sure the major vessels were addressed, then he stood up again.

Too fast. The room swam, and he felt himself falling. Everything grew terribly quiet. Then sound bloomed again, the strangled cry of someone nearby.

"Son!"

Rowan shivered. *Cold.* He was pressed up against something terribly cold... and wet. He opened his eyes as the chill drifted across his head, and found himself supported by his father's arms. Mark was holding him up, brushing against his forehead, his face drawn in concern.

Rowan smiled up at his dad weakly. The only warmth he felt was the blood trickling over his mouth and chin.

"Sorry," he mumbled, and struggled to get back to his feet.

"Sson.. you're.. sick," Mark hissed, and seemed reluctant to let him go.

Shaking his head, Rowan finally managed to stand again, and grabbed the syringe on the tray. "Have to be quick, dad... Josh might be back soon."

"Josh?" his father rasped.

Rowan wiped the blood from his mouth with some gauze. "Yeah, the guy who was here before. He's my brother. He doesn't take too kindly to the Judged."

Mark's cold hand wrapped around his bare arm, sending a chill tremor through his body.

"What?" Mark asked. "Ro... confused. Broth..er?"

He nodded, and steadied the needle against Mark's inner elbow. "Yeah. And Samuel's my father. I used to live here. But I was away for a long time because Rowan killed me."

Mark's grip clenched against his arm, hard. "Rowan.. look at me... sson.."

A hand of ice pressed against Rowan's cheek, and he looked up, his eyes squinting in pain. His head was throbbing again.

"You.. *are* Rowan," Mark whispered, his clouded eyes wide with worry. "..Brann is.. your brother, nnnot.. Josh. I'm.. your father... not... Samuel."

Rowan just stared at him, then nodded quickly. "Right, right. And.. and Rowan didn't kill me. I killed him. No.. Caleb. I ate Caleb, and now he's eating me." He looked away then, shaking his head, and focused on his dad's arm, thrusting the needle under the waxen skin.

The cold hand pressed against his forehead, and he closed his eyes for a moment. Finding solace in the chill, a balm for the pain.

"Son.. you're really.. sick. Have.. to get you.. out.. of here."

Nodding wearily, Rowan pushed the plunger down and delivered the injection. Then he set the syringe aside and smiled at his dad.
"There."

Mark nodded and slowly lowered his hand, still frowning at his son. "How.. long?"

"Usually quick?" Rowan answered, and frowned.

*Nothing's happening.*

"How do you feel?" he asked.

Mark shrugged. "Ssame."

"No warmth?"

His father shook his head. "Noth..ing."

Rowan fumbled for the syringe, feeling the cold twist of dread again, and drew out another dose of his own blood. "Maybe you need more, just.."

Quickly, he injected it into his dad's arm and threw the empty back on the tray. "Okay - now."

Stubbornly, his dad remained a dead, drowned man.

"No!" Rowan yelled, slamming his fist down on the tray, and everything jumped on it with a loud crash. "This should be WORKING!"

Mark's brow drew down darkly. "Fffucking... Steph..en."

"What?"

"Stephen. His.. fault." Mark's milky gaze turned to him. "In..jected me.. untested."

Rowan groaned, running more gauze under his nose. "Dad... I don't know what to do."

Cold fingers rose and tousled slowly through his hair. "Don't... wor..ry sson. Figure.. some..thing out."

Rowan turned back with the faintest of smiles. Even dead, his dad had a way of making everything feel as if it was going to be okay. He let his father's hope in, and nodded.

Somehow, they were going to get through this. They'd find some way to turn his dad back.

Mark's gaze fell, and he frowned.

"What?" Rowan asked.

The frown grew deeper.

"What dad? What's going on?"

The milky gaze rose to him. "You.. said.. feel something?"

Rowan nodded, and felt a thrill of excitement. It *was* working!

"Getting warmer?"

Mark shook his head. "..n-no."
The smile fell from his face. "Then what? What do you feel?"

"Emp..ty."

Rowan's mouth fell open.

_Oh no.. no no._

"Dad.. that's.. that's not good."

Mark's brow trembled. "Emp..ty ssson.. need.. some..thing.."

Rowan's heart stuttered, and he backed away from the bed. "Dad, you need to lie down. Can you do that for me?"

There were restraints on the bed. If he could just get his dad down...

"..son? Sson... this?" Mark groaned, his arms wrapping around himself. "This.. what you... fffelt?"

"Please Dad, this isn't good. Please lie down?"

With an eerily intense look, his father focused on him, and Rowan felt a cold finger of fear trace down his spine.

"Dad, listen to me," he said quickly, "you're-"

"You.. have it," Mark whispered in awe, the words coming out with a long needful sigh. "I.. I.. smell.."

Frowning, Mark shuffled forward on the bed. Rowan jerked back in response, and found his back suddenly pressed up against the shelves.

Mark watched him, his head tilting curiously. "Are you... hiding it? Where..." He drew in a long scent of the air. "God," he groaned, "Ssson... don't.. hide it... please.."

"Dad, no," Rowan moaned, as his father slipped off the bed, almost falling to the floor again, before finding some crooked balance with his mangled leg. "Please dad, stay where you are."

"..but.. need to ffind it... ssson." Mark reached out towards him, his brow twisting in a desire Rowan understood completely. He pressed back against the shelves as far as he could, then darted left.

Mark moved unnaturally quick, snatching out with a cold hand. The icy fingers closed tight over Rowan's arm and Mark pulled him back.

".. just.. want to see..

Rowan fought to pull himself free, trying to pry his dad's fingers off his arm, but Mark was too strong. With another long breath, his father drew him in closer.

"Dad, you have to let me go!" Rowan yelled, pushing hard against his father's chest. "You're going to kill me!"

Mark's brow trembled, and he shook his head. "What..? Nnoo.. no... just.. want to find..

"It's IN me, dad," Rowan cried, "It's my LIFE! That's what you want to take!" Hating what he was
about to do, he lashed out, punching his father across the face.

It was like punching a bag of ice, and had no effect, as his dad gathered him up in a cold, wet embrace.

Rowan kicked and thrashed, trying desperately to free himself, but his father's limbs were like iron, cold and bound around him like bars.

"Dad.. please, you're about to kill me," he said, as calmly as he could, as his heart pounded away in his chest.

Mark was hovering over his shoulder, and patted him on the back. "Nno ssson. No.. just.."

He felt his dad's chest expand as Mark took in a deep scent. And his father moaned, a long low sound of absolute need.

"Je..sus Ro.. it's.. right.. here. NEED.. THIS. Pl-please.," His father's arms squeezed tighter, possessively, and Rowan flashed back to the dream he'd had. The terrible dream where he'd torn out Julie's throat.

Oh god.

"Dad.. what you're about to do," he finally whispered, trembling, and drew his arms up to hold his father, "I don't blame you, you couldn't help yourself, please remember that."

Mark's hands squeezed at him painfully, and his father moaned again. "Sson, god.. it's under.. your.. skin."

"Yeah Dad," Rowan sighed. "It is."

His father grew very still.

"Ssson?" Mark hissed.

"Y-yeah?"

"I.. I think...ready to.. bite.. now."

Rowan squeezed his eyes closed.

"I know," he whispered.
Goodbye Brother

Julie swore as the tweezers slipped in her hand for the second time, the metal clattering loudly to the concrete floor. She froze and stared at the light coming from under the door, waiting to see if any shadows passed by in response to the sound.

Nobody came, and she winced, bending to retrieve the thin metal with her good hand before propping her cast back up against the door and trying again.

This had to work. Something was happening outside, something big. She'd seen it in Joshua's face when he'd stepped inside to check on her and told her she would be staying here for a while. That he'd bring her food later, but it might be real late.

He'd looked... worried. Not scared, but... on edge. He wouldn't tell her why. He wouldn't tell her what happened to his arm either, bandaged as it was. He just told her, for the hundredth time, to mind her own business, and then he left. She'd heard loud voices down the hall just before he'd come though - people arguing, people shouting, the clatter of lockers and the scuffling of heavy boots.

Now everything was eerily quiet, though she'd heard another yell a moment ago, muffled, possibly from another room?

Rowan?

Focusing on the feel of the lock through the tweezers in her hand, she closed her eyes and concentrated, feeling a growing sheen of sweat on her forehead. It hurt wedging her arm against the door like this, but she couldn't stop.

There was a sudden, beautiful click, and Julie grinned, reaching up to twist the door handle slowly before rising to her feet with a pained curse.

_Hurry._

She blinked, frowning at the strangely frantic urge inside. Rushing wasn't going to be the smart way to do this.

Holding the long narrow tweezers tightly in her hand, Julie slowly opened the door, peeking through the slit to look further down the harshly lit hall. There was noone there. Emboldened, she stuck her head out a little further, blowing a stray curl of hair from her face. The hospital wing was empty.

Nerves alight, she pushed out of her room, and walked further down the wing, towards the room at the end.

It was also empty. Scanning for something better than tweezers, and finding nothing but empty gun racks, she returned, and tried the door at the end of the hall. It was unlocked, and opened to another empty room that had been recently used. Blood lay spattered on the floor, and soaked the gauze discarded on a tray near the bed. Creeped out, she backed into the hallway again and tried the door to the right. It led to a room that had a strange long metal table, scattered equipment that looked rusted and old, and some crates which were oddly familiar.

There was another strange, muffled sound. Julie swiveled to look out into the hall, wondering where it'd come from. The only room she hadn't checked yet? Jesus, was it Rowan? Was he okay?
She moved carefully and quietly to stand by the door, listening, her skin flushed with a strange fear.

The silence was interrupted by a low moan.

_HURRY._

What if somebody was in there with him? What the hell was she supposed to do? She had nothing to defend herself with but a stupid pair of tweezers...

Not taking any chances, Julie turned the lock over excruciatingly slowly, trying not to make a sound. Then she pulled the door open in tiny stages, until she could just peek through the slit.

For a moment, she couldn't quite process what she was seeing, because it didn't make any sense.

Rowan was being hugged by someone, they were standing awkwardly together next to the bed, and the clothes the other person was wearing seemed... familiar.

"Mark?!" she gasped, the recognition chased by a wonderful sense of relief as she swung the door wide and rushed into the room.

And came to a dead stop.

As Mark turned, and she saw...

_Blood._

Mark's face was wet with it, and his eyes were milky and crinkled with joy as he lifted from his son's shoulder and smiled at her, his teeth thick with gore.

Julie's world narrowed to the horrifying sight of Mark's mouth.

"Ju..lie?" he whispered, in the hesitant tones of the dead, and he took an awkward step towards her. "Julie... I.. found.. it."

Julie could not pull in a breath.

Rowan's body sagged against his father's, held up only by Mark's pale arms, possessively looped around his torso. His shoes were twisted against the floor, dragging as Mark turned with him.

Long streams of dark blood soaked the back of his shirt, where his shoulder and neck had been torn open.

"Nnoo," Julie groaned, taking a step back as Mark shuffled forward again, dragging his son's body.

"Come... ssee," he hissed, and his arms shifted as he pulled his son up again. "It was... inside.. him."

Julie's heart and mind stuttered at the sight.

_Rowan... is he?_

_Oh god..._

"Mark..." was all she managed, and when he stepped forward again, his bandaged leg bending awkwardly to the side, she found she couldn't move. Her body was frozen.
"There's... more," he whispered, the smile on his face ecstatic, and Julie's stomach threatened up her only meal as he lowered to his son's shoulder again.

"Mark!" she snapped, as his mouth opened wide. "Mark, STOP!"

He frowned, his brows drawing darkly over his clouded eyes, and looked up at her. "Whhy?"

Julie wanted to cry. She knew this. She'd been here. She understood. And it was horrifying to understand, as the memory washed over her again. Rowan through the bars, Rowan's arm in her grey hands...

It was everything.

"Because you're killing Rowan, Mark," she said in a strangled voice, "You're killing your son."

How did this happen!? Mark was immune! Stephen made him immune!

Mark's frown deepened. Slowly, his gaze fell to the boy in his arms.

"Rowan," he sighed, and he shook his son softly. "Wake... up."

"Mark... can you give him to me?" Her voice was shaking as she bent it into something light and unconcerned. "Let me hold him for a moment?" She reached out with trembling hands, and tried to steel her body for what she was about to ask it.

I have to grab him, and I have to run...

Mark shook his son again, and Rowan's head fell oddly across the wound.

"Sson?"

"Mark!" Julie snapped again, her voice firm, commanding. "Give him to me now."

The frown on his face eased into something terrible. The need, amplified and aching, as he drew in a long scent.

From her.

"Y-you... have it... too," he whispered, and let out a soft moan. "God... Ju...lie... you have... mmore."

Oh my god.

"Mark! Give Rowan to me!" she yelled, as he took another step towards her.

Milky gaze flicking down to his son and back, he nodded, and held Rowan out to her. "All... gone."

All gone?! What?!

Julie did her best, folding her arms around Rowan as she tried to stay as far from Mark as possible. But the weight was too much and her ribs betrayed her, screaming in a bright agony. She had a moment to register that Rowan's body was cool and terribly still before she crumpled, falling awkwardly to the concrete floor.

"No," she moaned, holding him on the ground, no longer thinking of Mark, even as she felt him shuffle near. Rowan's face was slack and pale, splattered in blood, and she couldn't even look at what was left of his shoulder.
He was dead.

"Baby," she cried, and held him up, pressing her face against his, whispering in his ear. "I'm here baby. Not leaving you."

He would come back, and she'd hold him till he changed again. The cure was always love. That was the one constant. The only thing that mattered.

Cold hands slid under her arms.

"Juu..lie.. comme heere.."

Julie held Rowan tighter. "No Mark," she whispered, pressing her chin against Rowan's cool forehead. "I need to stay with Rowan."

The hands pulled at her. Desperately, she clung to Rowan, and tried to crawl away with him, even as Mark wrenched her free.

"Just.. want.. to s-

There was an explosion, deafening in the small room, and the hands hooked under her arms stiffened, then slipped away.

Jerking with the sound, Julie looked up at the doorway, and saw Joshua standing there, the Ruger aimed over her head.

Something fell heavily to the concrete floor behind her.

Julie's mouth went dry, and she twisted around to look.

Mark's body was crumpled a few feet away, lying motionless on the ground. He was inert, his gaze distant and empty, his bloodied mouth softly open. Just above his left, clouded eye, was a neat, bloodless hole.

"Mark..." she whispered. "Oh god no..."

"Caleb!" Joshua shouted, and rushed into the room, dropping down beside Julie as she squeezed her arms around Rowan again, pulling him up and cradling his head.

"Oh god Rowan," she whispered, squeezing her eyes closed. "Don't look."

Joshua let out a long heavy breath.

Julie looked up at him, her brows twisted in anger. "You killed Mark," she said bitterly. "You killed Rowan's father... you..."

He ignored her. "Judged once more brother," he said softly, reaching out to brush his hand over Rowan's temple, his eyes terribly sad. "There's nothing I can do for you now."

Julie shook her head quickly. "No, he's going to come back. We're going to cure everything again." Her mouth twisted in something that was meant to be a smile, but it sat wrong, and she felt it fall away. With a soft, heartbroken noise, she lay her forehead down on Rowan's and felt her throat close with tears.

Joshua shuffled to his feet, and Julie heard a sliding metallic click. She recognized the sound immediately - a new round being chambered in her Ruger. Eyes opening in shock, she looked up to
see Joshua aiming the gun down at her.

"Joshua, what..?"

"Get away from him Julie."

Her father's words... echoed again, and she realized with a sickening, heavy fear, that Joshua was going to shoot Rowan.

"No!" she cried, thrusting her hand up. "Joshua NO! He's going to come back!"

"As one of the JUDGED, Julie!" Joshua snapped back at her. "Get out of the way!"

"NO! I will NOT!" Twisting over Rowan protectively, she glared back up at him. "Go away!"

Rowan jerked suddenly, his hand scraping across the rough floor.

"SEE?!" she cried, smiling down at Rowan's face. "Baby, I'm here, I'm waiting!"

A strong hand drove under her shoulder, and Joshua pulled her up roughly and threw her aside. Landing hard, she rolled over with a gasp. Joshua was stepping back from Rowan's body as he leveled the gun.

"I love you brother," Joshua said, his eyes welling with tears.

"NO!" Adrenaline spiking through her, Julie threw herself at Joshua, catching him in the chest just as the gun went off, coughing up concrete a foot from Rowan's head. She was still yelling as they landed in a sprawl of limbs, and grabbed frantically for the Ruger, determined to win it back and shoot Joshua if she had to.

He shoved a hand in her face as they struggled on the floor, so she bit him, hard enough to draw blood. As he roared and wrenched his hand away, she brought her head up under his jaw, cutting his cry short and stunning him enough that he dropped the gun. Rolling off of him then, she scrambled for the weapon, but let out a wild screech as he kicked her in the side.

As she lay on the floor, struggling to get her breath back through the pain, he grabbed the gun and brought it up again, wavering on his feet. Julie reached for him with a moan, her heart frantic with the knowledge she couldn't possibly get to him in time, but she pushed through the agony anyway, getting to her knees and crawling towards him as he suddenly hissed, drawing the hand she'd bitten in against his chest.

With a grunt, Joshua collapsed around it, then looked up at her in shock.

"W-what did you d-do?" he stammered at her, his eyes tight with pain, and fell to his knees, gritting his teeth. "Lord in heaven.. w-what.."

And as she watched, stunned and scared, his eyes rolled back into his head and he fell to the floor, trembling violently.

"Joshua?!" she screeched, frozen to the spot, as his tremors intensified, becoming a full blown seizure. The sight triggered a memory that left her cold. Of one of her dad's soldiers just back from a raid who'd hit the mess hall where she was hanging out with a friend. Without warning, he'd seized up. Tremors at first, then shaking so hard he'd knocked their table over. His head had disappeared in a spray of gore when over twenty men stood up to deal with him.
Poor man hadn't even known he'd been bitten.

Wait... Hadn't Mark had a seizure after Stephen had given him something treated with Rowan's blood? Jesus.. did I just do that to Joshua?

The idea scared her... what the hell was in her to make him do that? In Rowan?

Rowan...

As Joshua's tremors eased to stillness beside her, Julie turned slowly to look back at Rowan.

His limbs were twisted oddly, his face turned away. Motionless.

Julie shuffled back to his side and gathered him up again, ignoring the pain shooting up from her rib. His head lolled against her arm, and she brushed his hair back and kissed his cold forehead. She tried not to cry. He'd come back soon, there wasn't any point.

It was strange. He was pale, terribly pale. But not grey. Veins were visible under his skin, but they weren't traced by the dark. Blood was oozing from the ruin of his neck, no longer pulsing with a beating heart, but the wound wasn't black.

It didn't look... right.

What if he didn't come back?

What if he really was dead?

Julie's heart sank with a sudden terrible weight, and she shook him, searching his face for any sign of movement.

"Rowan?" she whispered, her voice shaking with her fear. "Baby? Come back to me, okay? You have to come back to me... please."

As if in answer, Rowan's eyes opened.

Julie looked down at them, stunned.

They weren't silver. They weren't the washed out grey they'd been when they first met. They were blue. Dulled and dim, but... blue.

"Rowan?!" she cried, her mouth falling open.

Drawing in a slow breath, Rowan smiled up at her, his eyes flicking back and forth between hers as he raised a pale hand.

She leaned into his cold palm, feeling a sudden delirious joy as he brushed his dry fingers across her cheek.

"...Ju..lie?" he whispered, and his brow trembled again. "Juulie..."

She beamed down at him, a little choked cry leaving her as she cradled his hand. "Hey..."

His smile grew into a grin. "Hey.."

The grin faded slowly, leaving his eyes terribly sad.
"I'm... so sorry," he rasped.

She frowned down at him, trying to ignore the chill seeping into her skin from his touch. "For what?"

"Kill... ing... you," he whispered, anguish twisting his brow.

She drew in and kissed him on the forehead. "It wasn't you," she said softly.

He frowned deeply, looking terribly confused. "It wasn't?"

Shaking her head firmly, she smiled down at him again. "Of course not. Caleb did it, not you."

He grew quiet and still and stared up at her. Long enough to unsettle her, to look truly dead, and she shook him again as the chill sank deeper.

"Rowan?" she whispered.

Suddenly animating again, he shook his head, his eyes pleading. "Ju...lie... I don't... know... which one... I am."

*What?!

"You're *Rowan*, baby," she said quickly, reaching down to caress his cheek. "You're the man I love."

A small smile tugged at the corners of his pale mouth, and he reached up to hold her hand this time, drawing in a long breath.

Something uncertain crossed his face, and he frowned up at her again.

"What?" she asked.

"Why... am I.. Where's..?"

Shock flicked across his features, as his pale hand shifted quickly to his shoulder, his neck, probing the horrible wound. "Dad.. he...?" Drawing his hand back, Rowan stared for a moment at his fingers, dripping with blood. Then he sighed, and stared at the back of his hand. At the pale skin.

"Dead."

She nodded down at him, her eyes growing damp.

The frown deepened. "Thought... couldn't get... infected. Thought... I really... was... dying."

Julie shook her head. "This isn't like the last time Rowan, you look... different."

He nodded thoughtfully against her lap. "D-dad.. did too. Looked.. like.. real corpse. Then.. he..."

Worry wrinkled his brow, and his eyes flicked back to her.

"Where... is he?" he asked, and shifted against her, struggling to get his body coordinated enough to rise.

Julie's heart fell.

*Oh no.*
"Rowan.." she said, and just stared at him, tears sliding down her face. She couldn't say it. Didn't know how to say it.

He frowned up at her, then his eyes grew wide. "I.. heard... g-gunshots?"

Julie's face crumpled, and Rowan's eyes grew wider still.

"Dad?" he gasped, and flopped over on his side, finally getting his hands underneath to push himself up.

Julie's eyes fell to Mark's still body, just beyond Rowan, and she started to sob. "I'm sorry Rowan."

He turned and froze.

"... no.."

Slowly, jerkily, Rowan crawled to his father's body, his hands reaching for his father's head. Reaching for the neat hole.

"Dad..."

Bowing his head, he knelt by his father's body and grew terribly still.

Unnaturally still.

"Rowan?" Julie said softly, wiping the tears from her face.

He didn't answer.

"I'm sorry," she said, shuffling closer to him as she reached out a hand to press against his back.

When she touched him, he stiffened.

"Are you okay?" she asked, frowning as she pulled her hand back.

He drew in a long breath.

"My.. dad... lying dead... in front of me... Julie," he sighed. "And.. I can't.. cry."

"Oh.. Rowan," she whispered, her face falling as she pressed against his back again.

He turned then, his face twisted in pain, his dull blue eyes dry and terribly sad.

With a soft sound, Julie pressed into him, gathering him into her arms, and his arms gently folded around her.

_Cold._

He sighed. A deep long breath, released slowly.

Softly, she stoked the back of his head, as his chin pressed against her neck, and he squeezed her close.

"I'm sorry baby," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Nodding against her, he sighed once more, shifting so his mouth was nestled where his chin had been.
His cold lips parted as he drew in another long breath.

Julie's eyes opened.

Rowan shifted again, his lips brushing against the warm skin of her shoulder, and there was a heartbeat of heavy silence.

"Juu...lie," he whispered against her skin. "Get... away.. from me."

A cold dread clenched around her heart.

"W-what-"

"Don't... talk," he said quickly, and his arms drew tighter, terribly so, then relaxed again. "Go...

Slowly, carefully, Julie pulled away, her eyes wide, showing white as she watched him out of the corner of her eye.

Rowan wasn't looking at her, his eyes were fixed where her throat had been moments ago.

Then he shifted suddenly, his eyes flicking intently to her, and his arms reached to embrace her again, one hand closing over her shoulder, before falling away as he frowned.

Heart pounding, Julie shimmied back further, but Rowan matched her retreat, and finally his cold arms snaked out to engulf her again.

"No... d-don't... leave," he hissed, as he grasped her arm and tried to pull her in. "I...

"Stop!" she said sharply, knocking his arm away, but his other hand closed around the back of her neck, his fingers like ice, and he drew her in against his chest. As his arms folded about her tightly, she shivered against him, the chill radiating from his body sinking in deep.

_Fuck!_

"Rowan?" Squirming in his arms, Julie tried to find a way to free herself without fighting. Without panicking. Because she had a feeling that would make everything so much worse.

"Bet..ter..." he sighed, smiling down at her as he drew in a long scent, his nostrils flaring. "I.. just.. oh god..." His face buried in her shoulder again, twisting until his lips were back against her throat.

"Juulie," he whispered roughly. "This... this... is bad.. p-please.. go.."

"I can't Rowan," she whispered back, her voice trembling. "You're holding me too tight."

"Yeess," he sighed, and his fingers squeezed the flesh of her back so hard it hurt. "But.. I neeed.."

_Oh Jesus...

"Rowan, baby, let go."

"Ju..lie..." he moaned against her throat. "God.. p-please.. let me.. in"

_Oh SHIT.

"Rowan, you're stronger than this. Let me go." Her voice was maddeningly calm, but she was anything but. She could feel her pulse rabbiting against his chin and her breath was coming way
too fast.

Someone groaned.

Julie flinched, not understanding where it had come from, then her eyes grew wide.

*Joshua... oh no.*

"Rowan," she said quickly. "Joshua's waking up, you have to let me go! You have to get out of here!"

"The dream..." Rowan said quietly, as his cold fingers crawled over her scalp and twined in her hair. "I remem..ber the dream."

Julie whimpered as she felt him pulling her hair down, forcing her head back, exposing her throat. Desperately, she tried to keep him talking. "T-the beach dream? The... oh god Rowan, no.." His cold dry lips were pressed against the softest part of her throat, just under her chin, and it was the most vulnerable she'd ever felt in her life. He was hovering there, his hands clenching even tighter as he breathed her in.

"No," he whispered, as he shook his head. "No.. you were wearing... a blue dress.. and I kissed you... so.. deep.. here.."

Drawing in another breath, he moaned again, and she felt him shudder. "Julie.. there's.. something.. in your.. scent.."

Tears fell from the corners of her eyes as she squeezed them closed. "Rowan.. you're hurting me.. you've got to stop.."

Rowan moaned, the sound anguished and full of need, and she felt his teeth against her skin, pressing. "I.. can't..."

Something shuffled behind her. There was a quick intake of breath.

"NO!" she yelled, struggling again to free herself as her heart jumped from her chest in a panic. "Rowan PLEASE! Joshua is going to SHOOT YOU!"

Rowan's eyes lifted to hers, and what little breath she had in her left in a dreadful rush. The eyes were alien, wild with a sharp, absolute hunger. Wrenching her head back harder, his lips curling from his teeth, Rowan growled at something over her shoulder, and she heard the sliding click of metal on metal.

"Goodbye brother."

"NO JOSHUA! DON'T!"

Rowan lunged for her throat, jaws wide, and Julie squeezed her eyes shut with a cry.

Something brushed through her hair, zipping hot by her cheek, and it took a moment for her to realize that she'd heard something too.

Something very loud. A terrible sound. Deafening.

Everything seemed so slow... why was everything so slow?

Rowan's arms fell from her like cut ropes.
And he dropped away.

Julie opened her eyes.

She stared at the wall in front of her, at the shock of wet, dripping color against the grey concrete, before her eyes drifted down to the floor.

And she started to shake.

A wild moaning sound filled her ears as she reached out towards Rowan's head, lying in a growing pool of dark blood.

"Rowan," she whispered suddenly, and the moaning stopped just as suddenly. "Rowan?"

Her fingers touched the hole, set so perfectly in the middle of his forehead, and came away wet.

That's real.. that's... he's...

Julie screamed, her eyes bulging, and dove to him, pulling him up and trying to cradle his head, but his head was broken.. the pieces were falling in wet masses through her fingers...

Strong arms engulfed her, pulling her away. When she started to fight, to claw her way back to Rowan - she had to fix his head, he needed to come back and he couldn't do that if his head was ohh ggggggod! - the arms picked her up off the floor and squeezed her close until she couldn't move. They held her there, keeping her head from turning to look, to see.

"I'm sorry girl," came a whispered voice somewhere above her. "I'm sorry. I had to."

Julie made a sound beyond rage, an incoherent gush of anger and spite, and struggled anew, trying desperately to free her hand so she could claw at Joshua's face, tear him to pieces, make him pay for... for...

The reality slammed into her again, an almost physical blow that drove the fight from her body and left her gasping.

Rowan had been shot... in the head.

Rowan would not be coming back.

Julie sucked in a sharp breath, and a terrible sound ripped from her throat, a wail that only grew louder the longer it went on, fueled by desperate breaths and the memory of Rowan's shattered skull slipping through her fingers.

There was a distant sound, something popping fast. Gunfire, that she only half heard, as she felt her mind shutting down, her body slipping away as a point was reached that she couldn't handle anymore.

Joshua stood then, carrying her, and as he turned, she saw the bodies of father and son lying on the floor, only a foot apart.

Her mind blinked out then, as he carried her from the room, but something stayed with her as she sank into the deep dark.

Something strange.

Something she couldn't possibly have seen.
The twitch of Mark's hand.
Calling Reinforcements

Marcus raised the binoculars to his face and swore as he stared down at the scene playing out just inside the town. Things did not seem to be going well down there at all. The Colonel had his arms in the air, and the other guy, the guy who looked a thousand shades of mean, was stabbing his hand forward, shouting in the Colonel's face.

And they were surrounded by armed men.

He dropped the binoculars and swore at the canopy of trees above his head. Behind him, the Bell sat cooling down at the very edge of the clearing where they'd found evidence of the plane crash, just as Mark had said. It'd clinched the Colonel's plans, and he'd immediately mobilized his men to approach the town.

To inquire about their missing, and negotiate their release.

*So much for that idea.*

Marcus wasn't sure what he would have done. He'd seen the dead hanging up on the wall, he'd shared the same horrified reaction as everyone else on the team.

He certainly wouldn't have gone in just *talking.* There'd have been shouting, at least. Maybe grenades? He'd have been a bald, less than optimally muscled Rambo - roaring, swearing, firing a gun bigger than himself... something that shot a shitload of really big bullets...

He sighed. He was doing his usual thing, trying to make a joke as a way to cope. Amala had been talking to him about that.

This was an extremely serious situation, he had to focus and be ready to act. Because what if the Colonel went down? What if they were taken prisoner, which seemed about ninety-nine percent sure at this point? What if the town came for *him* then?

He glanced down at the gun tucked into a holster on his leg that the Colonel had lent him. It'd slipped twice now, and seriously felt like some animal humping his thigh. He hated it. And anxiety was making his palms sweat. The binoculars slipped in his grip as he raised them again.

The big guy was still yelling, and Marcus was taking notes. His posture was that of a bully, all exaggerated gesture and volume. A man who ruled by anger and fear.

The Colonel stood straight, a wall against the man's assault, and radiated a calm that somehow seemed more dangerous that anything the other man was doing.

Marcus watched, and marveled, and reconsidered his stance on their fearless leader. But only for a moment.

Because he heard something snap, somewhere off to his right. Lowering the binoculars, he turned to look through the trees.

He'd heard that right? Hadn't he? Some animal? A deer maybe?

No other sound reached him save the wind rustling through the leaves, and he turned back towards the town, lifting the binoculars again.
Oh... oh, that's great. The Colonel and his men were being herded towards the weird door that John had suggested led to an underground bunker.

So, really badly then.

And now... armed soldiers were being pointed up the hill. Right to him.

Fuck.

Another snap, again, from his right.

The binoculars flew from Marcus' face, his hands shot to the poorly attached holster at his thigh, and he groped to free the gun, to be ready for whoever was coming, trying to sneak up on him, flank him? How'd he missed them coming up? Dammit, maybe they'd already been up here?!

Had they seen him yet? Could he get back to the helicopter and get the thing off the ground before he was shot in his seat?

Nerves jangling, Marcus brought up the gun and took a slow step sideways, back up the hill towards the clearing, his ears straining for any further noise.

Something hissed behind him.

Eyes wide, Marcus' skin flushed with fear as he slowly turned to look over his shoulder.

The leaves above rustled and whispered in the wind, and the trunks of trees stood silently in endless overlapping rows stretching out before him, speckled in shifting patches of sunlight.

He didn't see anything, but his heart was hammering.

That sound... I know that sound.

It triggered memories he immediately stuffed down and tried to bargain with. It was a snake, right? Wait, snakes didn't actually hiss did they? Dammit. Bear? A freaking hissing bear? He scowled at himself, still searching through the trees for any sign of life. Everything was moving, making it hard to keep track of it all, the sunlight, leaves... branches that looked like withered limbs, with long fingers curling in the...

Marcus' breath caught.

Oh fuck.

He froze, his mind glitching over the fact that the thing stepping oddly through the trees towards him, no more than twenty feet away, was... a boney.

The gaunt skeletal figure, its desiccated flesh stark and hideous in the bright afternoon light, twisted its eyeless face towards him, and screeched.

The sound washed over Marcus, and he found himself reacting from his old life, cowering, lowering his gaze, and for some goddamn reason standing completely fucking still as the thing took spindly steps towards him, scenting the air as it came.

What the fuck am I doing?

There was another screech, back up towards the clearing, an answering call. Then another. And another from an altogether different direction. And he suddenly knew what had snapped the twig
before, as something roared behind him. Something very close.

There was no time to get to the helicopter, as more thin dark figures moved towards him down the hill.

Marcus turned towards the walled in town and ran.

And the monsters took chase.

---

So, yeah, zombies. MOAR! zombies. Because apparently, they weren't done with me, even though I thought I was done with them (although I will say, I always thought something bad was going to come out of what Stephen did to Mark ;). Please understand, I didn't just shoot Rowan in the head for funsies, and I will repeat that this is not a tragedy fic. :) I've written just over 300,000 words in this world because I adore the story of R and Julie. What happens in the previous chapter is *not* how it ends. I hope you'll bear with me and watch it unfold. :)
"I don't care who you say you are," the man in front of John growled, stabbing a blunt-nailed finger in his chest, "I don't care where you say you're from. You can't walk on up to my door and demand any damn thing from me or my people."

The Colonel kept his gaze steady, his breathing even, and his arms at a moderate height. Just enough to seem cooperative, but not enough to give the man what he was looking for.

A reaction of fear.

He also knew the man wasn't finished with his little speech, so he waited. No need to antagonize someone who very clearly needed to show his men he was powerful. The reaction would be excessive and violent and John couldn't afford that in the middle of this situation. He was desperate to know where his daughter was, that was his focus, and it helped keep him watchful and steady.

"There are consequences," the man added, speaking louder, walking in front of the Colonel, practically strutting in front of his men. The guy hadn't even introduced himself yet, and John's eye wandered to the tag on his jacket as the man passed.

Riggs.

Crappy name.

He focused back on the man as Riggs finished speaking, stopping in front of him again. "for coming into our territory, and threatening my town."

John sighed inwardly.

"We are in no way threatening you, your people, or your town," he said calmly, keeping his voice low and even. "You shot down one of my men, who was on a search mission for a plane we found buried on the ridge above you. We just want to take our survivors home. There will be no retribution."

As soon as the word left his mouth, and he saw the shift in the man's eyes, he knew it'd been a poor choice. While it made sense from his perspective, because he was sitting on one of the largest organized armies left in the United States, Riggs did not know that. Riggs was king here, in this little town that apparently kept its women well hidden and liked to hang bodies up for all to see, and the man had an over-inflated sense of his own power.

John had just threatened that.

Riggs' mouth curled in a mean smile, and the stocky man leaned in close. "No.. retribution?" he echoed incredulously, then his eyes danced around his men, who seemed to follow his lead on the smile, all save the man to his left. A bearded man with intense eyes whose name tag read Morrissey.

The Colonel had been quietly sizing the soldier up and found him interesting. Not a clear cut bully like Riggs, but willing to support the man in power, in order to wield a little of that power himself. A very smart individual.

Which was probably why the man wasn't smiling.
John looked back at Riggs and let out a slow sigh. Should he turn this into a dick sizing match? Had he already blown his chance for peaceful extraction?

As soon as Riggs turned back to him, he knew he had. The man's smile had turned truly nasty. This was the power play, coming up now. Before Riggs could do what the Colonel knew he would do, John tried his hand.

"Yes, retribution," he said with the same evenness he knew infuriated people. "You don't see fit to release the survivors, or their bodies to my charge now, I bring the combined army of over twenty settlements to your door," he held the man's eye with a hard gaze, "And we come in and we take them by force."

Riggs stared right back, his mouth twisting in anger as John spoke.

"Morrissey!" he barked.

*Here it comes.*

The soldier stepped forward, "Yes sir?"

"Lead a squad up the hill, take the helicopter."

John sighed. Irritating and expected. Hopefully Marcus was watching and would act appropriately. Hopefully Marcus wasn't just sitting up there playing with himself.

"Yes sir," Morrissey answered, but there was a note of uncertainty in his voice that the Colonel took as a small victory, particularly as Riggs noticed it too.

"There a problem?" Riggs snapped at the soldier, turning to face him, pressing into the man's space.

Morrissey did not answer for a moment, as his eyes darted thoughtfully to John and back to Riggs. Then he shook his head.

"No."

There was a beat of intense silence as everyone assembled felt the absence of a certain salutation, and John felt the corners of his mouth curl up as Riggs' eyes grew a little larger.

John had a feeling Morrissey let the absence stretch as long as he could to make a point, but not enough to put him in serious trouble.

"Sir."

And with that, John knew he had someone he could nudge into assisting him, provided he could prove he wielded the larger sword.

As Morrissey turned away with his group, Riggs glared after him for a moment, before turning back to the Colonel.

Anger radiated from the man in sharp waves, and John knew that Riggs was probably going to get physical soon. He couldn't afford to get physical back, at least not out in the open like this, with so many rifles pointed at himself and his men.

Riggs circled him like a shark, then shoved him hard between the shoulder blades, in the direction of what the Colonel had taken to be their bunker. John had expected something, so he didn't
stumble, but he did start moving, as Riggs spoke loudly for the benefit of his men.

"We're going to have us a chat, after I check you and your men for the mark. Set you up with some nice accommodations."

The smile was back on Riggs' face, curled mean, and it was obvious the man felt comfortable again, in his element with the support of his men, some of which snickered on cue.

But John was confused, as he and his men were shoved towards the bunker. Mark?

"What mark?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"The mark of the Devil," Riggs growled behind him. "We find that on you, you'll end up on a cross. Suffer as Jesus did and your soul'll be saved."

The words stopped John in his tracks, and his gaze was drawn up the wall again, to the unfortunate souls hung up on crosses around its perimeter.

He hadn't assumed the crosses held any particular significance. He'd thought it was just a convenient way to display the bodies of those who'd done some wrong, and that the town had a particularly harsh form of capital punishment.

But Riggs' words brought things into a sharp, very uncomfortable clarity.

Religiously entrenched militia.

Shit. He'd played this absolutely wrong. Should have been much more aggressive from the start.

"What the hell you stopping for?" Riggs barked, "I didn't say stop, did I?" John felt the violence in the man, and readied for a harder blow, possibly to the back of his neck or skull. He weaved his hands behind his head just in case.

There was a sudden burst of gunfire. Quick barks, not from the rifles that seemed standard issue for the town, but from the sidearm he'd lent Marcus.

That confused the hell out of him. Surely Morrissey's group hadn't reached the helicopter by now? What the hell was Marcus firing at?!

The fool wasn't trying to rescue them was he?

Like everyone else, he turned to the sound, and heard the metallic snap of rifles being readied by soldiers near the wall gate.

"How many men you got outside?!" Riggs yelled, glancing back towards the gate.

John didn't answer. He wasn't about to admit that he had a single man out there. A single once-dead ex-salesman turned elementary teacher helicopter pilot who couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with a cannon.

"Answer me!" Riggs growled, and that's when the blow came, a sharp strike between John's shoulders by the butt of a rifle. John had been ready for it, and twisted around with the blow. Taking advantage of the non-business end of the gun, he grabbed the stock, wrenched the rifle from the man's hand, and followed through with an elbow strike to the soldier's face.

Riggs staggered back with a sharp grunt, and the Colonel had the rifle up and aimed at the man's temple in less than a second as he stepped back out of reach.
One of his other soldiers had followed his lead, and managed to disarm the nearest of Riggs' men, who was now staring at her in complete shock as she yelled at him to get on his knees.

Apparently the man hadn't realized he'd been covering a woman.

As he glanced at the rest of Riggs' men, he could see that they hadn't either, and his remaining soldiers took advantage of the confusion, and a sudden burst of rifle fire at the gate, to wrest free their captors' arms.

"On your knees," the Colonel growled at Riggs, irritated that things had come to this, and still confused by the engagement at the gate. What the hell was happening over there?

He focused back on Riggs who hadn't done anything but glare at him, "Riggs, on your knees now!"

"I don't think so," Riggs said coldly, and a small smile spread on his face. "I bend my knee to God alone."

John blinked, and had to do a quick reassessment of the man. The confidence was unexpected. Then he caught Riggs' gaze looking over his shoulder, and heard the curse of one of his men, and he slowly shifted, enough to keep an eye on Riggs while glancing towards the bunker.

He froze.

In the distance, came the sound of yelling and more gunfire, but the Colonel barely registered it. Because another soldier stood behind him carrying the limp form of his daughter, pointing a Ruger out from under her knees.

"Julie?!!" John called, his voice betraying his shock as he slowly lowered the muzzle of the rifle.

"Shoot him son," Riggs spat from behind him.

"Dad, we've got trouble," the young man answered, shaking his head.

"I said SHOOT HIM!" Riggs roared.

John took a step towards his daughter, the rifle fallen to his side, and his heart twisted in his chest as he saw how pale she was, saw her eyes swollen with tears, her arm... why was her arm in a sling? Was that a cast?

She was starting to stir, her brow trembling. Relief rushed through him in a wave. She was alive.

Then he noticed the blood on her hands and his mouth went dry.

Is she hurt? Did they hurt her?!

"Dad, for once LISTEN TO ME!" the soldier holding Julie roared back at his father, "There were Judged in the bunker! I got them, but I don't know if they got to anyone else!"

Everyone froze, and that's when the sounds from the gate truly reached them.

"DEAD AT THE GATE!" came the scream of a soldier atop the tower on the wall, followed by a burst of gunfire and an inhuman screech.

John spun around, whipping the rifle up again as he took a step back towards Joshua and Julie. The gate was being closed frantically by the soldiers stationed there, and Morrissey's men were
backing through the closing gap, firing constantly into a shifting mass of thin figures just beyond.

Jesus Christ! Skeletons?! How the hell were there skeletons here?!

One of the group broke free, and John immediately recognized Marcus, holding his hands in the air as he ran towards them, his head ducked low.

There was another screech, and the men at the gate spilled back as one of the skeletons pushed through, immediately jumping on the closest man. The soldier went down in a spray of bullets, from his rifle into the surrounding soldiers, and from his companions in return, shredding them both.

"GET THAT GATE CLOSED!" Riggs screamed, running towards his men.

John addressed the remaining group, catching the eye of the town's soldiers as well as his own, "Get our gear, get that gate under control! MOVE IT!"

The voice was one he hadn't used for over a year, a deep resonant bellow fueled by an adrenaline rush that could make the deaf snap to attention. The soldiers around him immediately mobilized, running towards the gate, as the skeletons breached the opening again, and were cut down by Morrissey's men.

"D-dad?" came a soft voice behind him.

The Colonel turned immediately, his gaze softening as he saw his daughter's blue eyes staring up at him from the soldier's arms. They were shattered with grief, and her mouth was trembling as she looked down at her hands again, smeared with blood.

"Julie... is that yours?" he asked, his heart pounding.

Her eyes filled with tears as her face crumpled, and she shook her head.

And suddenly he knew. But... he didn't understand.

His eyes rose to Riggs' son, and the young man immediately stepped towards him, holding Julie out for the Colonel to take. He did, gratefully.

"Rowan is dead," the man said, and John felt his daughter start to shake against his chest at the words. He pulled her close and held her tight, looking up at the man again.

"His father also," the soldier added, his gaze steady, yet holding its own kind of grief. "They turned and I shot them. I had no choice. I'm sorry."

The young man sighed, looking down at Julie gently, then he presented the grip of the handgun to John.

"This is your daughter's sir, thirteen rounds left. I'll take the rifle."

The Colonel stood stock still as the man exchanged weapons with him and turned away, running over to assist his father, passing Marcus who finally caught up with them, his eyes wild.

"Boneys every-fucking-where, JESUS!" Marcus said, still staring back at the gate. Then he turned, holding the borrowed gun out like a dead rat. "Take this, I can't shoot for... Julie!" Marcus' eyes lit up as he saw her, but his smile immediately faltered as he took in her tear streaked face, and the blood on her hands.
"Julie? Are you okay? Where's R?" he asked, circling in place to take in the town, the soldiers finally securing the gate, then looking back at them both. "Is he with Mark? Did he make it?"

Julie started to shake again, sobbing without sound, and the Colonel drew her tighter still and shook his head at Marcus.

The man paled. "Mark's dead?"

The soldier on the tower screamed, and they both turned to see a withered arm reaching over the wall as the man hammered at it with the butt of his rifle, obviously out of ammunition. The boney clawed into the man's throat and dragged him over the side.

"Shit!" John cursed. Then he drew in a sharp breath and roared to the men at the gate. "THEY'RE COMING OVER THE TOP!"

The men turned, and his soldiers immediately fell back, leveling their reacquired rifles at the top of the wall.

"Where's R?" Marcus asked, turning back to them, his face growing desperate.

"He's DEAD Marcus!" John snapped, angry at everything - for Rowan and Mark's death, for the failure of their cure, for the shit storm they seemed surrounded by now. "For some goddamn reason he and Mark turned. They were shot, Marcus. I'm sorry."

He looked away from Marcus' shocked face then as the soldiers at the gate let out another burst of fire as more skeletons appeared on the wall.

"How many were out there Marcus?" he asked, turning back to Rowan's friend.

Marcus' head was hanging low, his eyes unfocused towards on the ground.

"Marcus!" John snapped, "How many?"

There was a grinding, clawing noise at a section of the wall behind them, at the same time that gunfire echoed around them oddly, and the Colonel realized that it hadn't come from the nearest gate.

But from the far side of town.

"Too many," Marcus whispered, his skin paling.

Julie started to shiver, and she whispered something John didn't catch.

"What honey?" he asked, lowering his head to her. "What'd you say?"

There were more bursts of gunfire, the sounds of screaming towards the center of town, and the wall close to them started to shudder as something hammered and scrabbled at the metal sheeting.

Julie slowly raised her head to look at him, and her eyes were heavy with despair.

"Terrible things..."

Yikes. We'll be with Julie in the next chapter, and it's kind of huge, and pivotal. As always, thanks for reading, hope you're enjoying it. Comment if you can! :D
Julie sank into a comforting darkness, wrapped herself up with it, and tried desperately to stay there, even as the angry yells of men, the sound of gunfire, leached into the dark space and threatened to pull her out.

But then, she heard a voice.

Her dad, calling her name. And it wasn't something she could ignore anymore. So she started to rise, slowly, and the comforting blanket of nothing pulled away, exposing her mind, her heart, her skin to the real world again.

And the real world stabbed her through the heart with a word.

Rowan.

Joshua was yelling above her, his voice echoing oddly through his chest as she lay against him, yelling that he got them.
Marcus was suddenly there, his wonderful voice burbling around her... he had a way of making her smile. But then he asked that question.

Where's R?

She looked out at him, her face wet with tears, her mind clouded. Where was R?

"Is he with Mark? Did he make it?"

The words ripped through the cocoon she'd hastily wrapped around herself, and she saw them again, Mark and Rowan, lying dead on the concrete floor of that room. The dark holes that had ended them both. Horror swept her up and crushed her heart once more and she started to sob, the tears spilling without sound as her father drew her nearer still.

Gunfire.

Yelling.

Perry had warned her...

Julie shivered.

Terrible things...

She hadn't realized she'd spoken out loud until she heard her father's voice close to her ear. And chasing it, more gunfire, screams, and the scrabbling of broken nails on metal.

Julie looked up at her father, feeling a despair so deep she felt she was drowning. And she told him.

John's eyes grew sharp with concern, and lifted to scan around them again, frantically hitting each source of sound.

Men were yelling, someone ordering them to fall back. There was a terrifying scream of metal on metal somewhere close, a ghoulish screech and the Colonel ran with her, yelling at Marcus to follow, and head straight for the bunker.

She felt herself shake again. She couldn't go down there. She wouldn't. Squirming wildly, she pushed herself from her father's arms and landed hard on the dirt road, crying out with the impact, then pushed away as her father bent to gather her up again.

"NO!" she screamed, "I'M NOT GOING BACK DOWN THERE!"

She backpedaled awkwardly, and ran into someone's legs. Someone very thin, who smelled really bad. There was a low hiss and long thin fingers curled in her hair and yanked her to her feet.

"JULIE!" her father cried as the thing dragged her up and backward, and she kept screaming, grabbing at the thing's cold withered hand as it lifted her clear off the ground and roared.

There was a gunshot; the creature's fingers jerked away and Julie fell to the ground on her hand and knees. She crawled as her father ran to her, and stumbled as he lifted her to her feet and pulled her close. Looking up, her eyes wide and wild, and saw skeletons coming from every direction, as more soldiers backed towards them firing.

Marcus went kicking and yelling under one, but her father executed it with a shot, and Julie started shaking again, turning into her father's chest so she wouldn't have to see any more. He started to pull her with him again, yelling at her that they had to go, get down in the bunker, it was the only
chance they had.

She dug in her heels as he dragged her towards the door, and in the distance she heard the screams of the townspeople rising around around them, and she knew everything was lost, that darkness was going to swallow the world again, and the fight fell from her.

And then... she remembered Perry's words.

*Have faith.*

Julie opened her eyes, and she stood tall as her dad's hand reached for the bunker door.

Then jumped about a foot in the air as something struck it *hard*.

From the other side.

Her father jerked back from the handle, and folded her behind him as he stepped back, gun raised to cover the door.

The door was struck again, and the frame started to splinter.

"What the hell?"

It was Samuel's voice, somewhere to her left.

Julie turned, suddenly aware that the only thing she could hear around her now were the frantic breaths of her father and the soldiers, and the groans of people in pain. Somewhere in the distance had been the screams of others, but they'd been quickly cut short.

Her breath caught in her throat at what she saw. Nearby stood a too-small gathering of survivors - her dad, Marcus, and Samuel, supporting Joshua who was bleeding from a gash on his leg, with a few terrified townsfolk, their faces wide with fear, and a handful of soldiers, mostly Samuel's men.

But completely encircling their small group, was a massive swarm of boneys.

Julie felt dizzy, her heart hammering away in her chest in fear. She'd never seen so many in one place before. Not even when they'd attacked the city. There were *hundreds*. She stared at them, her nerves screaming, telling her to run, to do *something*.

But they weren't moving. Samuel and the other soldiers swiveled in place, guns raised at the boneys, their eyes showing way too much white.

The entire gathering of skeletons was standing stiffly, staring at the door, completely frozen. Julie's eyes caught movement to her right and she spun. A few strands of whispy hair drifted in the breeze on the skull of a boney nearby, withered and still, its breasts shriveled nubs against a sunken ribcage.

There was a final shattering impact, and the door split in two, falling from the frame and landing hard in the dust.

The Colonel stepped back, and Julie heard him suck in a shocked breath, but she couldn't see what had broken the door. Her dad was still shielding her with his arm as took another step back.

Shifting slightly, she peered out from behind her father's protective arms, and felt the world lurch sideways.
Rowan and Mark were standing just inside the bunker doorway.

Staring out at everyone else.

"Mark?!!" Her father said, his shocked voice betraying his disbelief. He turned to Joshua. "I thought you said-"

"I did!" Joshua yelled, his wide eyes showing the same shock, "I shot them both in the head!"

"Dad... he did... I saw it," Julie whispered, staring at Rowan's face, at the line of dried blood on his forehead, unable to believe what she was seeing.

The hole was gone.

At the sound of her voice, Rowan's eyes flicked to hers, and he smiled, drawing in a long scent of the air.

"Ju..lie.." he whispered, and stepped towards her.

John stepped back, pushing her behind him again. "Rowan, I need you to stay where you are."

Rowan looked up at him and frowned.

"W-why?" he asked, then his eyes fell to Julie again and he smiled, stepping forward once more, his pale hand stretching towards her.

John lifted the Ruger, aiming it at Rowan's left knee. "I mean it."

Mark turned then, from staring at the ring of skeletons, who were watching him in frozen silence, to glare at the Colonel. His mouth twisted in a bloody frown. "Don't tell.. my ssson what.. to do," he hissed, taking a step towards them both. He moved smoothly, his leg no longer bending oddly beneath him. As if the damage wasn't an issue anymore.

John turned to point the gun at Mark. "Both of you, STOP."

"Jesus, John!" Marcus snapped, giving the skeletons a nervous glance before pushing the Colonel's gun aside. "Point that thing at the fucking boney's okay?! Not our friends!"

Rowan's gaze drifted to Marcus, and his mouth stretched in a smile as he took a step towards his friend.

"Mar..cus.." he sighed, and raised his hand. "You're... here."

"Yeah," Marcus said, smiling himself as he walked up to Rowan, still watching the boney's out of the corner of his eye. "What the fuck man, they said you were dead!"

Rowan stepped forward to meet him, taking his hand. "I am.. dead?"

"Marcus, no, don't!" Julie rasped, her voice a strangled mess, but it was drowned out by Marcus' laugh, as he pulled Rowan into a hug.

"I mean really dead, you smartass," he said, and patted him on the back. "I'm glad we found you."

"Marcus, get away from him! Right now!" John barked, stepping forward and raising the gun again.
Marcus just rolled his eyes, and went to step back.

But Rowan went with him, closing his arms tight.

"Yes..." he said softly. "..glad."

And he buried his teeth in Marcus' neck.

Marcus jerked back with a yell, but Rowan only held his friend tighter, digging deeper, and blood gushed in a sudden torrent across his face and down the front of his shirt as he ripped something free, swallowing it over his friend's struggling body.

"Aw..f-fuck.." Marcus moaned, as Rowan lowered again, eyes half-lidded in pleasure, face drenched in his friend's blood.

Julie made a small choked noise, her hand flying to her mouth as she staggered back.

"NO! MARCUS!" the Colonel roared, whipping the gun up to fire at Rowan's head. Skeletal hands came from nowhere, twining around John's head, his neck, twisting the gun from his hand as it fired into the dirt, and he was gone, pulled back against the circle of skeletons. With a frantic cry Julie rushed to save him, tearing at the withered arms that held her father fast, but long brittle fingers closed over her face, her chest, and she was drawn back screaming with him.

"Julie!"

There was a single crack of a gunshot, and through the shriveled fingers curled across her face Julie saw Mark fall to the dirt, his head shattered, before the soldier who'd fired the shot - one of Samuel's own - was dragged away kicking and screaming, his cry cut horrifically short. The remaining soldiers circled their leader, who was struggling to hold Joshua by his side as his son kicked against him, eyes fixed on Julie, trying to get free to help.

"You stay here by my side, boy," Samuel growled. "God will deliver us yet."

Rowan lifted his face from the ruin of his friend's neck, and his gaze fell to his father's body, to the shattered ruin of Mark's head seeping into the dirt. As his arms fell open and Marcus slipped dead and torn to the dusty road, a sound rose around them, undulating from the open jaws of hundreds of skeletons circling their group, ground from throats of withered flesh and bone.

Julie recognized the sound, the cadence.

Laughter.

It came rumbling from the swarm, building around them in waves, and the soldiers around Samuel swiveled in place, eyes wide and frantic, targeting each skeleton in turn through their rifles as they struggled to find the source.

The sound died away. And a voice rose in its place, so deep it shook the ground at their feet.

"God?"

Julie's throat went dry.

Oh no... oh Jesus not that...

"What's that, sir?!" one of Samuel's men cried, twisting in place, trying to track the sound. "What the hell's goin' on?!"
A skeleton nearby fixed on his movement, stepping forward with a thin hiss, and the man snapped
around, firing into the crowd with a panicked yell. Brittle heads and chests exploded in a wild
black spray with the crack of his rifle, but his magazine quickly ran dry and more boney surged
over the fallen and enveloped him. Two more soldiers raised their rifles and shot into the mass, but
were overwhelmed in seconds. Their screams faded to wet gurgles as the skeletons tore them apart.
Silence fell as they were dragged away.

"Jesus... Christ..." came her father's voice, still somewhere beside her. She tried to twist to see him,
to reach out to him, but something hissed sharply near her ear and the clawed hands tightened.
Whimpering, her body shaking in fear, Julie squeezed her eyes shut.

This isn't happening... this isn't... oh god..

"Juulie..."

Her eyes flicked open at the sound of Rowan's voice and suddenly she was moving, the dry twisted
limbs that held her thrusting her violently forward into the circle. Losing her footing, she tripped
and fell to the blood soaked dirt in front of Marcus' body, and jerked back as his hand twitched
towards her.

"Julie!"

Her dad, calling out for her, and the sounds of a scuffle at her back. Turning, she saw her father
struggling against the boney holding him, kicking up the dust of the road. Getting nowhere.

"Why.. would GOD..." the voice rose from the dead around them again, heavy and
dark, "...come... to this place?"

A cold, bloodied hand brushed against her cheek.

"Ju..lie.."

With a startled gasp, she flinched back from the touch. Rowan was leaning over her, smiling as the
blood dripped from his lips.

"C-come.. heere.." he whispered, grasping her wrist to pull her up. With a wild cry, she tried to
snatch her hand away, but he held it fast, and she bucked and kicked against him, trying to get free.
It was futile. The blows meant nothing, and he drew her, inexorably, into his arms.

"NO!" her father cried, still caught, still fighting with everything he had.

Samuel struggled to contain his son, and lifted his head as he roared in answer to the voice around
them. "This is a HOLY place, demon! God WILL come, and He will deliver us! His people, His
CHOSEN!"

More of the terrible laughter rose around them, echoing off the wall above their heads.

Julie looked up as Rowan drew her in, her skin crawling at the wrongness of the sound. Oh god..

That wasn't an echo. The laughter was coming from the wasted figures hung on the ring of crosses
above the wall, from the faces of the dead, shriveled and torn by beak and claw, fluttering like
shredded masks in the wind, as they turned towards them.

"N-no.." Julie mumbled, as Rowan pulled her closer, and his bloodied lips pulled back in a smile.
"Satan I HEAR YOU! I SEE your works!" Samuel roared, his voice bellowing above them all, as he pointed up at the wall. "SHOW YOURSELF and I'll send you right back to HELL!"

"Juulie.." Rowan whispered, his face only inches away. His dulled eyes danced between her own. "I want... you."

Julie stared back, desperate to find the connection they'd had in the frozen blue of his eyes, the love that'd brought him back to life before. But it wasn't there anymore. And she didn't understand why.

The cold eyes fell to her throat, and her nerves skittered under her skin as he shook his head slowly, lowering towards her. "No.. no.. I want.. what's inside you.."

"Rowan," Julie cried, her heart slamming in her chest as she tried to catch his eye, tried to make him listen, "Please... we beat this before... I know we can do it again! I love you! You love me too! You have to focus on that!"

Rowan's face rose, and for one moment she thought she'd actually reached him. But that hope died as his mouth twisted in an ugly smirk and he leaned in close, his eyes darting back towards Samuel and Joshua.

"Tell you... a sssecret..." he whispered, his hand uncurling from her shoulder to press a pale finger against his bloodied mouth. "But.. you can't... tell... Julie. You.. you can't, promise..."

Julie stared up at him, not understanding, fear stealing her breath as she tried to speak, "Wha..OW!"

His hand clenched tight against her side, over her broken rib, and he leaned into her, his brow driving down hard.

"Prom..ise... Julie.."

"I.. I promise," she stammered, feeling her world unraveling. Why was he doing this? What the hell was he talking about?! Why can't I reach him!

His face split in a wide grin, his eyes darting to Samuel and Joshua again. Then his milky gaze returned to her, growing sly.

And she finally knew the truth, before he whispered another word.

"C-Caleb?" she said, the name leaving her mouth in a strangled mess as her heart went cold.

Icy fingers closed tight over her mouth. "SssSSSSHHHHHHhhh..." he hissed. His breath washed against her face, a cold wave of copper blood and torn meat as he glared down at her. "Don't... tell them... sssssssshhhhh..."

"ROWAN, YOU LET HER GO! GODDAMMIT!" Her father roared, struggling again.

Julie just stared at the face before her, as his fingers dug into her cheeks, and her eyes filled with tears.

No..

"I wanted what.. he had, Julie... His life... his father.. a TRUE father," Caleb spat, his eyes turning angrily towards Samuel again. "Rowan got so... sad.. when his dad... died.. he.. left. He gave me.. everything... and I forgot.. who I was.. but.. it's all clear.. now... and it's all.. mine."

He lowered his hand and his bloodied mouth twisted in a smile. "And I understand... now Julie.."
he sighed. "It's wonderful... it's all so good. I don't blame him... anymore... not if it was... like this."

His eyes grew sharp with hunger. "I'll take.. you.. Julie. All.. of you... like he took.. all of me... Then you can be... together... up here..." He tapped the side of his skull with a bloodied finger.

"No" Julie moaned, and twisted away from his arm with an angry, desperate wrench. She staggered back, but there was nowhere to go, and finally she stopped, and stood crying, as the man she loved stepped towards her, a stranger.

Hopeless... it was hopeless. Everything was lost. Rowan was gone, the cure corrupted, the dead unstoppable.

Perry's words echoed in her mind again, wrapped in Rowan's voice.

BE hope...

Julie moaned. How? What was she supposed to do? She stared around at the sea of wavering, watchful dead, at Caleb wearing Rowan's face as he stalked towards her, wanting nothing more than to tear out her throat.

What in the world was there left to be hopeful about?

And with that thought, something suddenly shifted, inside.

With a gasp, Julie's hand rose to her stomach, to the little bump that nobody else had noticed because it was barely anything at all. The little bump she'd been wanting to talk to Rowan about since two weeks ago, when Dan had given her the news, and she'd stared at him, her eyes as big as plates, then squealed and hugged him, and cried, then hugged him some more, then stared off at a chart on the wall while he talked about what steps to take, what books to read, all the while thinking... How do I tell him? What will he say?

And as she stood there, her heart thrumming in her chest, she felt another tiny flutter.

Hope burst in her heart like a star, and her eyes rose, bright with that hope, to meet Caleb's gaze as his pale arms stretched towards her like snakes.

"Rowan..." she whispered, smiling softly as she stared into the frozen blue depths of his eyes, like mountain lakes frosted over in winter.

"We need you."

Something shifted behind the dulled surface of his eyes, and he stopped.

And her smile turned brilliant as he blinked slowly, and his lips parted with a question.

"Ju..lie?" Rowan whispered. "What..?"

"Holy God above..."

It was Joshua's voice, fearful and hushed, followed by an abrupt shout from her father - of no words, just utter shock.

And Rowan's eyes rose from hers, and kept rising, as the shadow of something huge and twisted fell over her.

"RUN JULIE!" her father screamed, and it tore through her nerves like a knife. She'd never heard
that sound from her dad before. Never heard that kind of fear.

"Yes... by all means..." came a voice of utter darkness, on a wave of rot and sour ruin, rumbling ever nearer to her, as the shadow lowered and something misshapen and foul breached the very edge of her vision, "...RUN..."

Julie jerked forward with a terrified cry, twisting as she ran to Rowan, who swept her behind his body with a cold arm.

And her throat closed up at the sight of the monstrous construct of twisted bone and withered flesh that stood towering over them both. Black lips pulled back from its jaws, in no shape of man or beast, but some melding of the two, filled with broken teeth like shattered glass shards, and it spoke again, the folds of seeping flesh around its cavernous eyes twisting in mirth.

"...hello yet again... bright one..."

All of the warmth seemed to leave Julie's body in a rush, leaving her brittle, crackling with cold. She remembered this thing. She remembered screaming at it in a tiny room somewhere so far away now it could be on a different world, and she remembered its voice inside of her. Commanding her. Forcing her to take.

"No..." she whispered, her fingers digging into Rowan's bloodied t-shirt. "Not you. Not again.. we killed you... we.."

It hissed, its lips twisting in a thin sneer at her words. Then it looked away, the sneer fading as it turned towards Rowan.

"New one..." it purred, and its skull cracked questioningly to one side as it stepped forward on legs with too many joints, ruptured by the bulbous growths and twisted spines of its own skeleton. "I am... surprised... and.. delighted... by you.." Something long stretched from the creature, wrapped in withered flesh, and fingers unfolded at its end, impossibly thin and sinuous, towards Rowan's forehead. "...by this new... gift... you have brought me..."

Rowan jerked back, but the thing moved impossibly fast. The fingers curled around his skull, holding him fast as another arm stretched forward and traced the line of dried blood from the bullet wound long since vanished.

"NO!" Julie screamed, and she grabbed at Rowan, trying to pull him free of the creature, as he fought too, punching at the things horrific face.

The creature's arm lashed out, and Julie felt a crushing impact, a terrible pain, like burning knives slicing through her skin, before the ground suddenly slammed into her back and she lay for one moment without thought, without breath.

"JULIE!" a multitude of roars and cries, all saying her name, all far away. She coughed, and felt the rush of something warm against the burned skin of her throat and chest as she tried to move.

"Julie!" Rowan's voice this time, the sound of his feet scuffing the dirt. "Let.. me GO!"

"..the other soul... had so much more... enthusiasm... let us bring.. him back.."

The scuffling stopped with a terrible suddenness.

Julie groaned as she rolled over and drew herself up on one arm. Blinking through the sudden blur
of her vision, she felt the warm trickle of something wet down her neck, and over her stomach.

Rowan was no longer moving. The creatures spindly, spidering hands gently stroked his head and the purr rose again around them, rumbling through the earth.

Julie tried to speak, but something was wrong with her throat. Raising shaking fingers, a terrible panic gripped her as she felt a the edge of a jagged gash across her neck. Frantically she pressed against the wound and her breath bubbled against the palm of her hand as something warm and wet pulsed down her chest.

Oh.. god..

"R..wnn" she whispered, holding her throat as she looked down at the bleeding gashes across her chest. The thing had sliced her open with its claws. There was so much blood... oh god help... As her wavering eyes rose to Rowan, the creature released him and stood tall once more.

A frown flickered brief across his brow, then his face twisted in a bloody smile as he looked down at his hands.

"Nnn.." she gasped, struggling to get her feet underneath her as her vision blurred again.

"Caleb... she is.. yours.." the creature murmured, pointing a thin clawed finger her way.

Her father cried out again, a sound of impotent rage.

"C-Caleb?" Samuel's voice, in stunned shock. "Why'd it say..?! Joshua?!

"Caleb STOP!" Joshua roared, his body pressing forward in his father's grasp. "Don't follow the demon's command! FIGHT IT!!"

As Caleb stepped towards her, Julie shrank back, still clutching her throat as she struggled to speak. "Nnn..ghk.."

"Brother... you don't... understand.." Caleb sighed over his shoulder at Joshua, before turning back to her. "It's... wonderful. It's... so goood."

"I wish to see... what a new one... can withstand. You..."

Julie stumbled, falling to her side, and through Caleb's legs she saw the creature stop in front of Mark, who'd risen to his feet, his head intact once more, his features twisted in a dull fear.

"What... the hell.. are.. you?"

The thing's massive head rose, swiveling to the swarm of boneys behind Mark.

"They will take.. your gift now... and let us... see.."

And the creature stepped away, towards Samuel and Joshua, as the horde of skeletons in front of Mark hissed and swept forward.

"No-" he managed to gasp, before the swarm tore into him, bony hands and black jaws ripping, clawing at his damp clothes, biting into his pale flesh.

Caleb had just lowered to Julie, his eyes fixed on her throat, when he heard Mark's mangled yell and turned to see the man fall under the writhing mass.
"No..." He stood, and started towards the crowd. "Don't... that's..."

"Caleb..." the creature growled, twisting to gather him up in its claws and pull him to its side. Black shrunken lips lifted from its jagged teeth, as it drew him before Samuel and Joshua. "Let us... talk... to your.. real father..."

Julie struggled to push herself up and spasmed in another cough, the motion tearing through her ribs and the jagged wounds across her body. Blood spattered to the dirt as she rose on her good hand and desperately searched the sea of the dead around them for her own father.

"Nngg..." she moaned, as she clutched at her throat and tried to pull herself forward.

Marcus was pulling the struggling figure of her father from the boney swarming forward to join in the feast of Rowan's father. The Colonel was fighting him, punching him, kicking, but Marcus held him tight, and buried his face in John's neck.

No... Julie's vision blurred again, and she struggled to get her feet under her, to push forward. Because she had to stop him... she had to be hope... she had to...

...save everybody.

But her legs gave way and she fell again, surrounded by the shrieks and groans of the feeding dead and the sound of tearing flesh. A frayed blue hem brushed over Julie's outstretched hand, laying in a growing pool of blood, as a woman from the town shuffled past to join the mass, stooping to gather a lump of bloodless tissue from the dirt, drawing it into her grey mouth.

"That is.. enough..." the thing growled, and the swarm of dead pulled apart, to stand in a ring around the pieces that still remained, a dismembered skeleton that seemed to be weaving together as the crowd watched silently. Growing in mass.

Healing.

"I am... pleased."

Its monstrous face swiveled back to Samuel then, and the empty chasms of its eyes seemed to grow, drawing in the weak light of the dying day. "Now," it growled. "You were full of.. threat... and vigor... moments ago... but it seems... to have... fallen away..."

It drew closer, pressing Caleb forward, into Samuel's view.

"W-who..?" Samuel whispered, his eyes bulging as he stared into Caleb's dulled eyes.

"Your... son. In the skin.. of the one.. who killed him."

As Samuel's head started to shake back and forth, rejecting the words, the creature's mouth stretched wider, splitting the width of its misshapen face. A wet, grating sound issued from its rotten throat. "Oh yes. What delightful.. anguish..."

"Caleb," Joshua cried, reaching for his brother's arm. "Help us! You can turn on the demon, redeem your soul! You can brother, I know it!"

Caleb frowned, and tilted his head, "But.. why Joshua?" He shook his head sloppily, and stepped forward, his hand closing on Joshua's wrist. "You don't... understand. Let me... show you."

"N-no!" Samuel cried, wrenching Joshua from Caleb's grasp and pulling his son back as he raised
the gun by his side and aimed for the creature's head. "A DECEPTION! Satan the Deceiver, I am God's WRATH! I will smite you in HIS NAME!"

The creature moved too fast, too fluidly for its massive, twisted shape, its hand folding over the gun, over Samuel's hand, his wrist, and clenching. The gun fired, and a spray of black rot shot from the creatures shoulder, before its hand closed tighter.

With a wild shriek, Samuel fell to his knees, scrabbling desperately at the thing's spindly fingers as blood spurted from between them, spattering against the dry dust below. It released him then, dropping the hand and wrist pulped about the broken gun, and sighed, the sound desolate and empty.

"Dad!?" Joshua screamed. Diving to his father's side, he reached for the ruin of Samuel's forearm, and stopped, his eyes bulging at the mess, clearly lost at what to do.

"Dad.." Caleb whispered, his eyes falling on the mangled flesh and bone, at the bright blood pouring from it all, and growing sharp with hunger.

"I am not... Satan... you fool.." the creature growled above them. "And I have.. little to do... with God..." It's mouth twisted into something cruel as it looked down at Samuel. "Much like... yourself..."

Samuel was digging into his pocket with his good hand, tugging to pry whatever was wedged there loose, watching with wild bloodshot eyes as Caleb drew nearer.

"Caleb... it.. it is you.. isn't it.. boy.." he whispered, his lips wet with spit.

"Yess father," Caleb hissed, dropping to his knees beside him, staring into father's wrecked face, twisted in fear and pain.

He smiled.

"I was... the balance..." The thing sighed above them. "I rose to correct... what was broken. Too much.. of one life... devouring everything... in its path." The creature's gaze rose from the family, turning to sweep over Julie, over Marcus as he dragged her father's body past the torn remains of a soldier, to the crowd of dead encircling them all, watching. "I fashioned a fitting cull... the devouring of the living... by the dead... and I took souls... to stop the endless cycle... of births. When all was done... I was to fade... my task complete."

It swiveled back to the fallen family. "Noble, yes?" it hissed, and its black mouth broke wide again, tearing and cracking as new teeth burst from its deformed jaw in a violent grin. "But your souls... they proved too... exquisite. The lives within... too intoxicating. Your twisted hopes.. your cruelest dreams... your darkest whims... they have saturated me.. they have... corrupted me.." It drew a bony talon under Samuel's jaw as its voice grew deeper, and the ground rumbled with every word.

"I am no longer... the balance. I am.. merely.. corruption. And I will not... ssstop... until I have.. devoured you ALL.."

Its jaws cracking wide, the massive head descended, and Samuel thrust up the carved wooden cross he'd torn from his pocket, shoving it in the monster's face as it bore down on him.

"I COMMAND YOU RETURN TO HELL!" he roared, his eyes wide and feverish, his pale face
shaking with the effort of his cry.

And the creature stopped, its suppurating face an inch from Samuel's trembling hand.

Rotten flesh twisted in around the empty voids of its eyes. "You continue... with this? Did you not.. hear me?"

And the thing started to laugh, as Caleb's dead eyes were drawn to the cross in his dad's hand. The roughness of it, the familiar shape, the familiar nicks and gouges he'd carved with his own knife. The birthday present he'd given his father, when he was just old enough to wield a knife without sending himself to the doc.

And his dad had smiled that day, when he'd unwrapped the simple brown paper in the kitchen, and pulled the wooden cross free. Smiled and looked down at Caleb, and his eyes had grown small and wet, and Caleb hadn't understood why he looked so sad. But his dad smiled. And said, in a soft voice, unfettered by any weight or harshness,

"Thank you... son."

Caleb's mouth fell open, his eyes darting to his father's panicked face. "D-dad?" he whispered, pulling in a sudden breath. And it felt as if he'd just woken from some dark place, some numb world, where everything moved through a thick cold liquid, but there was something warm in his chest now, something that wanted to beat again.

And he turned back to the monster who'd held him, who'd brought him back to Rowan's body, and his face twisted in anger as its horrifying jaws opened wide again, ready to swallow the cross, and the hand and arm that held it.

"NO!" he roared, and threw himself forward, slamming his body into the creature's bulk, tearing at its broken form, ripping rotten flesh free, and forcing it back, away from his family.

"You annoying... speck.." it growled, and a bony hand closed about his face, the fingers crushing tight against his head. The pressure grew until he felt his skull start to crack, and he thrashed, desperate to free himself.

"John... NOW..."

Julie gasped at the sound of her father's name, and saw him suddenly straighten in Marcus' arms, swinging up the rifle he'd just pulled from one of the soldier's corpses Marcus had dragged him past, and leveling it at the creature's skull.

There was a rapid cracking sound as the automatic rifle burst into life, spitting hot rounds through the misshapen head of the monster, disintegrating it in a spray of black sludge and skin and powdered bone, and the hand around Caleb's face jerked and fell away.

And they all watched as the monstrous form teetered, and crashed to the ground, melting back into the form of a very human, and very dead, skeleton.

Julie looked up from the fallen boney, her face breaking in a bright smile.

"Dad!" she cried, "You did it!"

Caleb turned in place, taking in her father warily as the Colonel brought the rifle back up on him, but Marcus rested a pale hand on the barrel.
"No.. he's okay.." he whispered. "He's coming back now.."

"Yeah, try not to shoot Rowan Dad, Jesus," Julie said with a smirk. Then she looked at him.. still Caleb, as he turned towards her, his brow flickering with a frown.

"You did it Caleb, you broke free of it yourself," she whispered, seeing him in a new light. "I saw.. the cross, and your dad in the.. kitchen... he..." and then she stopped, because she didn't understand how she'd seen what she'd just seen, and he was turning away from her anyway, shuffling over to his family, as his dad shook with a groan and Joshua hovered over him protectively.

"Caleb.." Samuel was whispering, looking up at him as he returned to his side. "Caleb..."

"I can't stop the bleeding," Joshua was mumbling, his voice panicked, as he held his father's shattered hand and wrist. Blood was still pulsing from the mangled stump, speared through by a jagged edges of fractured bones. "I need a tourniquet.. I need..."

Samuel eyes were fixed on his son's, anguished and afraid, as Caleb's name kept tumbling from his pale lips.

"I'm here.. Dad," Caleb answered, and he pressed Samuel's hand, still clutching the cross, against the man's chest. He nodded at Joshua, "Rip from your.. shirt.."

"Has anyone.. noticed.. we're still surrounded... by dead people?" Marcus muttered. Then he pointed a pale finger at Rowan. "And you... you little shit... I want to talk to you."

Julie turned back to smirk at Marcus. "It wasn't Rowan, Marcus, he's-"

"Julie?" her father said suddenly, staring her way in shock. "Julie?!"

She smiled as he took a startled step towards her. "Yeah dad, I'm okay, I was doing my best to be hopeful, and I guess.." He started to run, and she raised her arms to hold him, but froze as she saw his face. "Dad? What's wr-"

He passed right through her.

Eyes wide, Julie stood stock still, staring at the place where her father had just been.

"W-what?" she whispered.

John cried out behind her, a sound of utter despair.

"JULIE! NO!" he roared, and Julie flinched with the sound, her eyes still frozen forward. Suddenly feeling... terribly... wrong.

"Oh.. shit," Marcus mumbled, and he rushed towards her too, with the lilting stagger of the dead.

"Marcus," Julie mumbled, her mouth freezing up in fear. "Please.. you... you see me... you.."

He passed, just to her left, and his arm swung right through her midriff. She shuddered. It had been cold. Terrribly cold. Not like her dad, who she hadn't felt at all.

"No..." Julie whispered. "No."

"GOD NO!" her father roared again, before his voice broke and fell to moaning. "Julie... no.."

Slowly, she turned around.
And her breath left her in a rush.

Because her dad was holding the body of a young woman. A young woman with blonde hair, in a blue t-shirt sliced open in four long gashes, damp with dark blood, her throat torn and seeping.

*Oh my god. That's... me.*

Julie put a hand to her phantom mouth.

*I'm dead.*
"Julie..." the Colonel whispered, stroking his daughter's hair as he held her body close. "Oh my sweet baby girl..."

Julie wanted to cry. The last time she'd heard her dad talk to her like that was just after her mom died. For one brief moment, he'd grabbed her up, his throat tight with tears, and he'd spoken just like he was doing now. Then abruptly, he'd pulled away, his face growing hard, and told her bluntly that mom was dead. She'd been shattered, and could only watch in stunned silence as he went to the car to get the shovel.

Julie sighed. She couldn't take his pain anymore. This was too much. Even Marcus was looking at her with a dull, dead sadness that tugged at her heart, and she sighed at him too, reaching uselessly to comfort, just as she had her dad.

"Marcus... Dad.. I'm coming back.. don't.." Her voice trailed off, because of course, they weren't listening.

Julie looked down at her own very still, very dead face. Then peered closer, fascinated. Then she felt weird. Was it morbid, to be so interested in her own dead body? What the hell else could she do but look? She couldn't touch anyone, nobody was hearing a damn word she said, and trying to jump back into herself had ended with a faceplant in the dirt. She'd tried that twice now, desperate to bring herself back to life.

Desperate to save her baby.

But it hadn't worked. And Julie couldn't think that she wasn't somehow coming back, because... that meant the little life inside her would...

No. I'm coming back. I am. So... hold on... please.

Her gaze drifted down to the terrible cuts across her throat and chest.

"Jesus," she whispered.

She had no idea the wounds were that bad. The jagged gashes gaped at her through her bloodied shirt, still seeping a thick, dark blood, and her eyes grew wide as she looked into the deepest cut. God... is that bone?

"ROWAN!" her father roared suddenly, his voice choked with tears, and Julie jerked back, startled, as he twisted up from the ground. And she reached for him again, and let her hand fall again, as she failed to affect the world in any way.

A calm feeling fell over her then, and she settled into watching what unfolded. After all, this wasn't new. She'd stood beside her body before, back when Caleb had killed her.

But then, there'd been a voice, pulling her from the terrible sight of Rowan, destroyed by what Caleb had done. The voice of...

"Mom?" she said quietly, turning in place, suddenly hopeful. God, it'd be wonderful to hear her again. Her gaze swept over the circle of wavering dead surrounding them, Mark's shuddering form curled newly naked where'd he'd been torn apart, and settled on the family of crazy people circled around their asshole of a patriarch, one of them in the stolen body of her Rowan.
But her mom wasn't here.

So why hadn't she moved on?

*Not that I want to go.. I don't want to go.. I can't go... I have to save-*

"ROWAN YOU GET OVER HERE RIGHT NOW!"

As she jumped for the second time, it suddenly clicked, why her dad was yelling so urgently for Rowan, and she smiled, feeling a little bloom of hope.

"It might work dad," she said to no effect, and then frowned as the hope fell away.

Because Rowan wasn't Rowan anymore... he was Caleb, and what was weird was that she could see that now. See the weird flicker of the man she loved overlapping his body, like a projection someone had aimed wrong.

"I'm not... Rowan," Caleb muttered irritably, trying to stem the blood from Samuel's ruined forearm as Joshua ripped a strip of his own shirt for a tourniquet.

"S-son.. I.." Samuel mumbled brokenly, "I.. I did wrong.. by.. you..." Slowly, his eyes pulled from Caleb's to stare up at the sky, growing glazed and wide. "Y-you're... his wrath... come.. f-for me.."

Joshua's gaze darkened at his father's words. Twisting around, he saw the Colonel, roaring from Julie's still body once more, and turned quickly back to his brother.

"I'll.. take care of him Caleb, you go help her now."

Caleb shook his head sloppily, staring down at his dad's ashen face. "No.. he.. needs me."

Joshua released a heavy sigh.

"Brother, look at me."

Caleb looked up, and Joshua held his brother's eye, his mouth twisted by a deep sadness.

"Rowan," he said firmly, "Julie needs you now."

As soon as Joshua spoke those words, the weird flicker snapped suddenly into place, and Julie's mouth fell open in wonder.

Rowan blinked. For the briefest moment, he stared at Joshua, his brow folding in confusion. Then his gaze fell to the mangled mess of an arm he was holding, and he almost threw it away from himself, the confusion jumping to shock. Joshua stopped him, taking Samuel's arm carefully, and looking past the soldier, Rowan rose slowly, frowning at his friend, at John, and...

Julie felt his stirring dread, his rising fear swimming through the air in waves, as he suddenly staggered forward in horror at the sight of her body slumped in John's arms.

It broke her heart, and Julie reached out to him, wanting to ease the anguish she could feel spiking from him as he rushed to her body's side. But his arm swung through her own, cold and insubstantial, and her gaze fell with a heavy sigh.

And that's when she noticed something dark and twisted, something huge, pulsing thickly under the
ground. And in recognizing it, in truly seeing it, she finally saw something that filled her with horror - a dark squirming worm of a cord, chaining her to the pulsing thing, hooked straight into her chest.

Jesus!

With a panicked cry, Julie tried to wrench it from herself, but let go with a sharp gasp - it was hideously cold. As she stood there, skin crawling at the sight of the thing twisting through her, she slowly traced another... linked to Rowan. And another to Marcus. Even one to Mark... and finally realized she could see a writhing cord connected to every corpse standing around them, silently watching them all.

And Julie knew why she hadn't moved on.

She was tethered. She was caught. She'd been... taken. The thing hadn't bitten her, but it had killed her, and claimed her soul as its own.

But.. why was she still here? Why hadn't she been dragged down?

And slowly, she saw it. Another cord. Bright, filled with a dancing light that made her smile, even in the midst of the growing, swelling darkness under the earth.

A cord to her dead body, connecting her to the little infant within. Whose heart still beat, whose soul flickered strong and sure.

"Oh my god," she whispered. Tears sprang to her eyes as she saw the little life, the little soul, within her still body. And the hope rose up in her again, even as Rowan dropped beside her with a horrible moan, and gathered her bleeding body in his arms.

"Julie?" he whispered, and his pale hand closed in hers, bringing their clasped hands to his heart. "Julie.. come back. I'm here... I'm.. waiting.."

He closed his eyes tight, and she felt a soft wave of something incredibly warm and bright.

"I love you Julie."

And Julie felt a tug of something, and looked down at herself, and saw.. another cord. A beautiful shimmering golden light, stretching, reaching out from herself...

..to Rowan.

As she stared at it in wonder, starting to feel a strange pull towards her body, the very air seemed to shudder. Everything shifted around her, the black cords pulsing, shifting, twisting, as something dark started to come up Rowan's chain, something heavy and cold and foul, and he stiffened, and started to stretch, his body cracking and breaking as it grew into something hideous.

And suddenly, she was pulled towards him, yanked sideways with such force her phantom body felt snapped in two.

And everything went utterly dark.

Save for the stars.

Julie stared about herself, not understanding what had just happened.

There were a thousand.. a million... a billion stars? More than she could ever hope to count, a
tapestry of little lights, circling, spinning, blinking weakly in the smothering dark void she'd suddenly found herself in.

And when she looked down at herself, expecting to see her phantom body again, and didn't... she suddenly understood.

Because she was one of those lights. Wonderfully, beautifully bright. And she was lost, just like they were, stuck drifting in this dark, empty place.

A place.. behind...

...a wall?

Hi folks. As you can see, we're dancing into some interesting territory here. I've played before with the concept of the afterlife, how the dead might feel emotions coming off of others, reconnect with loved ones, and the like. You might find this hilarious if you're an atheist, and I don't mind. It might not fit your particularly view of an afterlife either, and that just fine. Just hope you stick it out with me and see where it goes. ;) Can anyone guess where she is? :D Thanks for reading, leave a comment if you can. G'night.
Rowan clawed up from the darkness that he'd thrown himself into, drawn by something terribly important, a need, but not his own. Something outside of himself he couldn't ignore.

Julie.

He opened his eyes.

And nothing made sense.

Julie was standing in front of him, smiling at him with such beautiful, bright hope in her eyes, something he hadn't seen in her for days, that his heart stuttered just once in his chest, before falling still again.

And with that very familiar sensation came the most awkward realization that the rest of his body was cold and still... which meant...

I'm dead?

But...

And before he could even fathom why, something from nightmare stood up behind Julie.

Rowan could only watch it rise, struck dumb with disbelief, feeling the phantom twist of dread in his still heart as he realized what it was.

The dark thing. The fucking monster behind the whole apocalypse, that he'd faced down twice now. Three times, if he counted the nightmare where it'd eaten his face off.

Fear rose in him, a languid rush muted by his body's stillness, but inescapable. It wasn't like he hadn't seen this form of the creature before. He had, though it wasn't quite the same, there was something much more animalistic in the thing in front of him now, that towered before them both, its shadow falling over Julie.

There was a shout then, something that snapped him from his frozen shock. He recognized the voice, though he didn't understand why the Colonel was here, how and when he'd gotten here, he didn't understand anything, but there wasn't time for understanding, because the thing... holy shit...

the thing was leaning down over Julie's shoulder.

Its voice was so much worse than before... cutting through his heart like a jagged saw. It growled at her to run, and she jerked forward to him, before he could get his dead body to move. But he quickly swept her behind him, and set his feet down square, and got ready to tear this thing apart.

Although, he had no idea how he was supposed to do that, and the creature wasn't looking at him anyway, staring down at Julie with a horrifically smug look on its wretched, messed up face.

"...hello once more... bright one..."

Julie said something at his side, and he felt her fear and her disbelief, but he didn't really catch the words, because he was still trying to work out what he could do to stop this thing, while his mind circled on the fact that he was dead WHY AM I DEAD? and what happened...
...to dad?

Grief clawed at him, but he shoved it aside as the thing hissed, and took a lumbering step towards him, rumbling bizarrely about new ones, and being delighted, and - Jesus! - reaching out with a horribly long and withered arm, like the branch of some twisted rotting tree as its fingers unfolded towards his head.

Rowan jerked back, still trying to protect Julie, but the thing snared him anyway, its hand curling tightly around his skull and holding him still as a cold brittle claw dragged along the pale skin of his forehead.

He thrashed out, punching at the creatures horrific, seeping face, at the pools of utter empty darkness it had for eyes, and Julie screamed beside him, pulling at his waist, trying to get him free.

*Jesus, Julie, just RUN!*

The words hadn't even made it to his mouth before she was somehow gone, and he hadn't even seen the creature in front of him move, but suddenly she was on the ground yards away, and the smell of her blood bloomed in his nostrils as the things hand returned to his face.

*Oh no.*

"Julie!" he cried, and he fought as hard as he could to free himself, to reach her, to help her. He punched and clawed at the things face, tearing free slick, rotten flesh. "Let.. me GO!"

And the creature leered at him, and its hand closed tight about his skull, and it spoke...

"..the other soul... had so much more... *enthusiasm*... let us bring.. him back.."

And suddenly, he was gone, once more, into nothing.

*Julie?*

The next thing he knew, he was on his knees, looking into Joshua's eyes. Rowan stared back for only a moment, feeling hopelessly confused, and frozen by the deep sadness and regret in the man's face, before his gaze fell to the bleeding, mangled thing he held in his hands. With a startled jerk, he flinched back, almost throwing Samuel's arm at Joshua, as his mind cycled over terrible memories of tearing meat from bone and endless screaming...

But he forced the memories back, as something drew his gaze beyond Joshua.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. Because something.. was wrong. Julie needed him... she'd been hurt.. she...

He didn't understand what he was looking at at first. A wall of the dead, silent and watchful, and...

*Marcus?* He was here? Wait.. Marcus was dead too? He was standing next to John, and John was...

*No.*

Something broke inside his chest, and he staggered forward, over the dying man, the dying man's son, past his best friend, past the grieving father, and fell to his knees besides the broken body of the woman he loved.

*No.*
A horrible moan, not like the dead make at all, tore from him as he gathered her up in his arms. She was boneless and cold as he pressed her close, and the wounds in her chest, her throat ..Jesus Christ.. gaped at him. Laughed at him.

You couldn't save her.

No, he growled at the thought. No.

This is not how this ends.

She'd brought him back once with a simple touch, and he'd do the same for her. He just had to hold on, and never let go.

"Julie?" he whispered, and his pale hand closed in hers, and he brought their clasped hands to his cold chest. "Julie.. come back. I'm here... I'm.. waiting."

And he closed his eyes, and squeezed her hand tight, and felt his heart pulse once more in his chest.

"I love you Julie."

And he waited, his heart starting to thrum inside, starting the dawning tremble to life, and he remembered when he'd left his body after almost freezing to death, and how he'd gone to be with her, unseen. Julie was probably nearby. He knew it. In fact, if he was really still, didn't take a breath at all, he could feel her. Somewhere to his left.

But before he could look up, to try and talk her back, he felt the ground shudder underneath them all, felt the dead around them shift, their grey and shriveled faces turning to stare at him, and his body grew cold. Brittle with a chill that crept through him, overwhelming him, stealing his body from his control, and he was slammed back.

To somewhere dark.

Rowan opened his eyes.

And slowly stood up as he finally recognized where he was.

He was standing before the wall.

The one he'd built in his own mind. The one he'd spent so much time constructing, concentrating on every little detail to make it as real as possible, to separate himself from the minds he'd taken in, from the personalities that had threatened to overwhelm him. Stretching out an arm, he pressed up against the surface, felt its familiar roughness, and then stopped, terribly confused.

What the hell just happened?

"Asshole."

Rowan jumped, and twisted around, still terribly confused, but apparently now confused with company.

Joshua was standing a few feet away, glaring at him angrily. Only, he looked a lot younger, and his blonde hair was all over the place.

"I'm Caleb, you moron," the man snapped, taking a step towards him.

Rowan stepped back, his arm scraping the wall, as he almost tripped himself up.
"Caleb?!” he choked, his eyes wide. "What the... how the..."

"We're in your head you dumbass," the man muttered, still stalking forward. "You piece of shit."

Rowan swiveled, looking around to understand, confused beyond belief, still stepping back as Caleb advanced. "But.. I was just."

"Yeah, and I was 'just' too! My dad was dying, you fucking dickwad! And you pulled me away from him!"

Rowan turned back to Caleb, and stopped retreating, standing to his full height in front of the man as his brow drew down hard.

"HEY!" he snapped, "For one thing, I didn't pull you away! I didn't even know your dad was dying until... wait, why are you swearing so mu-

Caleb's punch caught him square across the jaw, and Rowan staggered back with a startled grunt as the man stormed towards him again, trying for another shot.

Rowan threw a hand up and caught Caleb's swinging fist, and swung back with a hard right to the man's chest. It hurt, and he quickly pulled his hand in close, rubbing the knuckles with a little hiss as Caleb crumpled to the floor, gasping and clutching his chest. Rowan moved to stand over him, rage rising through him in a rush.

"You killed Julie," he growled, and he lashed out with his foot, hoping to take the guy's head off with the swing. But Caleb grabbed his foot and twisted it, and Rowan fell, slamming into the ground hard, his skull bouncing off the floor with a dull crack.

"Oww.." he groaned, cradling his head with his arms. "Jesus.."

Rolling back with a grunt, he looked over to Caleb, who was coughing against the floor. The man finally curled to his side, trying to rise to his hands and knees. "I didn't.. mean.. to," he managed to gasp, glancing Rowan's way. "But she... kissed me."

Rowan sat up slowly, holding his head, and stared at Caleb in complete disbelief. "You killed the woman I love, because she kissed you?" He pressed against the side of his jaw, then dropped his hand as he glared back at Caleb. "You know what I do when Julie kisses me? I kiss her back!"

"No," Caleb sighed, shaking his head as he finally managed to sit up. "It wasn't.. just that. She hurt me, then she... she shouldn't have done that. Nobody touches me, I don't let.. they just don't."

Caleb's voice had started to tremble as he dropped his head to his knees, and Rowan felt the rage leech away. Because he'd seen inside this kid's head. Literally. And it was a pretty shitty, dark place.

Frowning, he gave a small sigh. "I didn't pull you from your dad Caleb, I don't know how I came back. And why do you care anyway? Your dad hurt you, like, really bad. He's a fucking monster."

Rowan felt his eyes grow damp as the words left his mouth, and shook his head again. They had to stop sitting around talking. He had to figure out why he was here, and get back, and save Julie.

Caleb had grown terribly quiet. When he finally spoke, it was with a very small voice. "He's my dad Rowan," he sighed. "I hate him. But.. I still care... because.. he's my dad." Turning his face towards Rowan, he gave a sad smile, his eyes red. "Your dad was always good to you, so... I know you don't understand. But you can't help but care, even when your dad's a monster. An asshole.
Because the need never goes away. You keep needing, you keep hoping, praying that one day the monster will go away and he'll be your dad again. That he'll smile, and say sorry, and mean it, and everything will be good again. Squeezing his eyes shut, he turned his face back down.

And it was a while before he spoke again, but Rowan just stayed quiet and there, because Caleb seemed to need that.

"I'm sorry I killed Julie."

Rowan sighed. "I know." He pushed himself to his feet, and walked over, extending a hand. "I'm sorry I killed you." It came out so simply, but it wasn't a simple thing. He was sorry he hurt the man so terribly, sorry he'd taken Caleb's hope away, torn the man's throat out and ended him as he pissed and shit himself against the concrete, staring up at a tiny sliver of pale blue sky. Sorry he'd taken everything Caleb had been, and everything the guy could have been yet, away, and wandered off, leaving his opened body behind as if it didn't mean anything at all.

Caleb looked up, and shrugged, and got to his own feet, ignoring the hand. "I get it now, Rowan," he said quietly. "I understand why you did what you did. Why you couldn't stop." He scratched the back of his head as he stood up and glanced at Rowan awkwardly. "I... sort of ate your best friend."

Rowan blinked. "Jesus, you turned Marcus?"

"Yeah," Caleb said, nodding. "He all but threw himself at me, and it was right there in my face... couldn't fucking help myself." Then he sighed. "Oh, and I'm swearing so damn much because you do. I've been in your head for too fucking long."

A small smirk crossed Rowan's lips. "I don't swear that much Caleb."

Caleb let out a short incredulous laugh. "You do, and then some. Don't deny it. But yeah, I ate your friend. And the best part is he thought I was you when I did it." It was Caleb's turn to smirk.

Rowan groaned. "I'm going to get hell for that. If.. I ever make it back.. to..." he turned and looked around himself again. The room they were in stretched off in all directions away from the wall, which had no end, save for its meeting with the floor.

Was it always this big?

"I have no idea why we're here, do you?" he asked, still looking at the wall.

And someone else answered.

"Yes."

Rowan spun around, towards the voice, a voice he remembered. "Oh shit," he whispered, as the person swung into view.

A young man about a foot shorter than he was, with chestnut hair, serious eyebrows and a lopsided smirk.

Rowan backed up, his eyes wide.

Perry.

Caleb watched him, and looked at the newcomer, then back at Rowan.

"What's wrong? Who's this guy?" Caleb asked, pointing at Perry. Then he froze. "Oh.. wait. I
remember you from Rowan's memories, you're..."

"Perry, yeah, hi," the man said, not even looking at him.

Rowan watched him, his mouth tightly shut.

"You're a guy he killed, like me," Caleb continued, then his mouth fell open as he looked back at Rowan. "Oh wow... you killed him... and then you took his girlfriend?!!"

Rowan winced.

"Yes he did," Perry said quietly, still staring at Rowan, still giving that lopsided smirk.

"Am I you?" Rowan said suddenly, the words rushing from his mouth, edged with a soft fear, "Are we together... just because of you? Are we... in love... because of you?"

"Uh..." Caleb said awkwardly, looking back and forth between the two of them.

Perry shrugged at Rowan, and the smirk grew wider.

"No!" Rowan snapped, pushing forward from the wall. "That's not an answer!"

"I should..." Caleb hooked his thumb over his shoulder and stepped away.

"Answer me!" Rowan yelled, stabbing his finger at Perry.

The man's smirk grew thin. "What if I said yes? That you love Julie just because of me. That that's the only reason. What would you say to that?"

"BULLSHIT!" Rowan yelled, stepping forward again, leaning into Perry's face.

Perry grinned, looking up at him. "There's your answer."

Rowan blinked, straightening up again. "But... that's not an answer!"

Perry shrugged at him again. "It's the only answer that matters right now."

"But..."

"Now, are you two done?" Perry said quickly, reaching out for Caleb, pulling him back. "You guys the best of buddies now?"

They looked at each other and back at Perry.

"No," they said in unison.

"Great," Perry said with a smirk, ignoring them completely. "The reason you're here, is because that dark asshole is running around in your body, Rowan. Its currently ripping your family and friends apart."

Rowan jerked back. "What?!!"

"Is my dad okay?" Caleb blurted, his eyes wide. "Joshua?"

"No," Perry said simply, and grabbed both of their wrists. The touch felt electric, and Rowan tried to jerk back, but couldn't. It brought back the weird hazy memory from over a year ago, the strange dream meeting with himself. And that thought turned his stomach.
Caleb tried to pull away too, his face an angry mask. "What you do mean, no!? I have to help them! I hav-"

"We," Perry said quietly, but his voice seemed to fill the space around them, impossible to ignore, absolute, "are here to stop it."

"How?" Rowan asked, his mouth dry.

Perry gave him a skewed look. "You don't remember the dream I gave you?"

Rowan's eyes grew wide. "That was you?"

When Perry just glared back, Rowan tried to remember, and came up with slender threads of broken meaning. "You said.. I had to, um... have hope... that faith, uh... something, something freeing people.. and..." He stopped. "Oh."

"Yeah, oh!" Perry snorted. "The 'something, something freeing people' part, God, why did I even bother..."

Rowan's mouth fell open as a new truth hit him. "You..." he whispered.

The sarcasm fell away from Perry as his gaze returned to Rowan.

"You.. saved me?" Rowan said, his voice small and full of wonder. "That was you?"

Perry nodded with a small smile.

And suddenly, Rowan's eyes were wet, and he wanted to shrink away from both of them, both of these souls he had killed and torn from the world. But Perry's hand was fixed on his wrist and he couldn't pull away.

"Why?" he said brokenly, and could not raise his eyes to look at the man.

"Because..." Perry said softly, intoning the words heavily, "Julie needed you."

Rowan blinked through the tears, wiping desperately at his face, and nodded. Of course... of course that made sense. That's what was important...

Perry quickly dropped to his normal voice, "Jesus, you're an idiot, man. Why the hell wouldn't I? Yes, you killed me, yes, you killed him, yes, you killed a lot of people. But you couldn't help it, and it's time you let that go. You're worth saving, Rowan. You're worth bringing back from the brink. Not just for Julie's sake."

As the tears threatened again, Perry caught his eye.

"And both of you have something important to do," he added. "Right now."

"Both?" Rowan asked.

Perry nodded, and looked at the wall. "I said you had to have hope. And you have it. She's on the other side of that wall."

Rowan's mouth fell open.

"Julie?"
Every Bright Smile

Julie thought of the wall, and was suddenly in front of it, staring down its endless length and height. She turned, to look back at the other souls drifting in the void. They wavered and circled weakly, never going anywhere. Aimless. Pointless.

What did the wall mean? What was it for? She reached out, and realized that she didn't have anything with which to touch it... after all, she was just a really bright light, in a really dark space. 

*Like sunlight bouncing off a thousand waves...*

Perry's voice came to her again, and she smiled. Or at least, she thought she did. He always did have a nice way with words. When he let himself be himself, not what he thought other people needed him to be. If it weren't for the freaking zombie apocalypse, she'd have pushed him to be a writer.

A heavy sadness hung on her then, but his voice kept drifting through her thoughts.

*Everything is drawn to you... in this world, the next... the place inbetween...*

Julie froze. Which was meaningless in a form that wasn't really a form at all. But her mind stopped on those words, then started to circle.

Everything? She glanced back at the twinkling lights that stretched out endlessly through the void. Through the darkness.

And suddenly she *knew*, as she turned back to the wall and Rowan's words echoed through her.

*...it's like there's a wall in my head... and it's breaking, and everything's spilling out...*

This was Rowan's wall.

It *had* to be.

She'd snapped towards him when the dark thing had taken him over, after all. Somehow... she'd ended up behind it... with all of the other souls...

*Oh my god... is it all of them? All of the souls that were taken?*

There were so many, what other explanation could there be?

What had Perry said? Something about.. when people slipped through, and felt the reality of their own death through Rowan... they were free?

What if... she drew them all together right here? To this point? Could they break the wall? Would they all be free then?

She stared into the endless, formless void, and back at the strangely mundane, ordinary wall.

What else could she do but try?

*But... how the hell do I do that?*

She looked back to the lights again, circling, drifting.. aimless.. oblivious.
You glow like the heart of the sun... everything is drawn to you...

Was it really that simple?

And could she do it?

Uncertainty gripped her. How was she supposed to be sunshine on all those waves, like Perry said? How could she even imagine that she could do something like that?

The doubts drifted through her, strangling her heart, and her light grew... dim.

And that just made her angry.

No. No room for doubt or fear. Not anymore.

Be hope.

Okay... let's do this.

Um...

Hope on!

The thought made her laugh, and she flared briefly in the suffocating dark. A few of the lights twinkling nearby stopped wavering, and grew stronger. Closer.

The realization brought a rush of excitement, and her light blazed strong again.

I can do this!

Julie focused everything she had, everything she was, on the feeling she got in her heart just before laughing out loud. She thought of Rowan, and the moments she'd been drawn into his eyes, drawn into his soul and felt a love there that left her breathless and trembling...

And she thought of the little one within her... the little life tied so tightly to her own, and refusing to believe in her own death, she thought of every bright smile they would share, every fit of laughter she'd hear, every uncontrollable giggle, and eyes as bright as the bluest sky looking back at her with the purest, deepest love of a child.

And Julie burst like a nova, into a star of brilliant diamond light.

Every light that she could see, every aimless drifting soul, suddenly stopped. And slowly at first, uncertainly, they drew towards her, then started to race, until they were speeding so incredibly fast she couldn't track them anymore.

They swirled and grew around her, and the darkness dissipated, and everything was so incredibly bright she wasn't sure where she was anymore in the thick of it.

And then she felt it.

The wall, at her back, or front, or whatever part of her faced it as pure light.

And she tried to push it.

It was solid.
Okay wall, time to break!

It did not break.

Oh come on, I have like a billion souls bouncing around back here - break!

The wall stretched away on all sides. Solid. Too solid. More solid than she.

Her light grew a little dim.

And a terrible thought hit her as she puzzled over how to get through.

*If all of these souls were to 'die' through Rowan... wouldn't that hurt him?*

*Like, a lot?*

And she knew the answer with heartbreaking certainty.

*Yes.*

Her light grew dimmer still, and some of the souls around her started to flicker and fade, just like she.

*It's going to destroy him.*

Julie felt a terrible pain at the thought, deep in the very center of her being, and her light dimmed dramatically, sputtering like a candle under breath. She pressed against the wall, and closed eyes she did not have.

*But... I have to do this.*

Because it wasn't about him. It couldn't be.

It was about saving... *everybody.*

Opening eyes she did not have, opening her heart despite the terrible *knowing* of what was about to happen, Julie drew in every joy she'd ever experienced in her short life, every moment of love and happiness she'd ever known.

And she *glowed*, brilliant and blinding, like the heart of the sun.

And the wall began to crack.
"She's behind the wall?" Rowan asked, slapping his hands up against the rough surface, leaning in close as if he could peer through.

He felt stupid.

"Yes, and right now, she's doing everything I'd hoped she'd do," Perry said quietly.

Rowan could hear the smile around the words, and he turned back. "You talked to her?"

Perry was still smiling. "Yes," he said with a nod. Then he grinned. "Did more than that too."

"What?!" Rowan stammered, taking a sudden step towards him.

Perry waved him off, "One kiss, man. Relax already. Now..." He raised his hand, in it was a simple carpenter's hammer. "Let's break this wall."

Rowan peered at him, at the hammer, and back. "Where the hell did that come from?"

Perry smirked. "Your head, dummy, where'd you think?"

Caleb gave a little laugh. "That's not breaking this wall. Look at it, it's tiny." He turned and thrust his arms out wide. "The wall's huge!"

Perry sighed at them both. "Well, if you keep thinking like that, it won't break it. That's how this place works... dammit."

The hammer disappeared from his hand.

Rowan blinked, jerking back in surprise. "Where'd it go?"

"Seriously?" Perry snorted. "Guess you can't help being slow, your brain's been completely scrambled. It was just a thought Rowan, that's all it was. But since smart guy here," he tilted his head towards Caleb, "put it in your head that it wouldn't work, it won't work."

"If it's all based on thought, why can't I just punch the wall?" Rowan asked, ignoring Perry's jibes. "What an ass."

"I heard that," Perry said, and crossed his arms. "Okay, imagine punching that wall with your fist. What's going to happen?"

Rowan imagined it, and winced, reaching for his knuckles. "My hand's going to break."

"Great," Perry sighed. "Scratch option two."

"Maybe I can think of another hammer?" Rowan said suddenly.

"Oh, like one of those carnival hammers?" Caleb offered, his voice rising in excitement. "The big wooden ones they use on the thing with the bell at the top?"

Rowan and Perry both gave him a look.

"What?" Caleb said, looking right back. "Come on, those things are cool, that'd work!"
Perry smirked at him. "You know they rig those right? The hammer is never as heavy as you think it'll be, and there's resistance at the top so..." He shut himself up. "Dammit!"

"I can think of a hammer," Rowan said quietly, as a smile spread on his face. "One that'd break anything."

Perry and Caleb stared at him for a moment, before Perry shrugged, gesturing that he should continue.

And Rowan went back, to when he was a kid, on that one day of the week when Bran and he would rush home from the comic store, and spill all of the comics on his bed, and read them in one straight rush, their brains spinning with stories of superheroes and villains, their struggles, their victories, their courage and hope. They had a lot of years between them, but it was one thing they always shared, and they still got caught up in it all.

And he closed his eyes, and he pulled a hammer straight from the pages of the comics, from the hand of a superhero who felt as real to him then as his own dad.

He felt the weight drop in his hand, just like when he'd thought up a knife in the horrible dream with the creature ages ago, and he tried to lift it with a triumphant cry for effect.

But the weight increased tenfold, then a hundredfold, and then suddenly he couldn't hold it anymore and his arm was wrenched downward as the hammer thunked to the floor with a metallic ring.

Perry looked up from the hammer at Rowan and cocked an eyebrow. "Seriously? That's the hammer you choose?"

With an embarrassed shrug Rowan bent down to pick it up.

"Now that's cool," Caleb said. "Is that.. a blacksmith's hammer?"

The hammer, engraved in runes and wrapped in leather, would not budge. Rowan gave Caleb an odd look. "You never read comics?"

Caleb shook his head.

"Unbelievable," Perry muttered at Rowan. "You total geek."

Rowan's face grew hot, and he waved Perry and Caleb over. "Shut up and help me here."

Perry smirked at him, shaking his head as he walked over. "You know, this is your head, your mind. You don't have to make it so accurate. Make it so you can pick it up."

"Then it wouldn't be Mjolnir," Rowan mumbled defensively.

Perry stared at him cock eyed. "You even know the name? Holy crap."

But he bent down, and together with Caleb they wrapped their hands around the handle, and pulled.

And pulled. And pulled.

Rowan sighed. "Guess I can make it a little less accurate."

Straining with everything they had, the three managed to pull the hammer from the ground. It hung between them drawn to the earth like a magnet, slipping inexorably through their fingers.
"Really practical Rowan," Perry breathed. "Great job."

"Shut up," Rowan grunted. He started to sway the hammer with them, back and forth, drawing up the momentum for a strike.

Then an uncomfortable thought hit him. "Wait," he started, hesitating, but Perry's expression grew eerily serious, and he kept swinging back and forth, driving the hammer ever closer to the wall.

"Hold on," Caleb said suddenly, trying to pull back too, "What happens to me? Can I see my brother again? My dad?"

"Perry, stop for a moment, isn't thi-"

"We're not stopping," Perry said flatly. "It's time for this to end."

Rowan tried to bring the hammer back and hold it, and Caleb joined him, but straining, they couldn't stop the momentum they'd built and Perry continued, swinging effortlessly. Then he smiled at Caleb. "You will go soon little soul. Say your peace."

Caleb's jaw fell in shock, he tried pulling away and couldn't, and just at that moment, the hammer made contact. A small tap that shook the air around them like thunder.

A crack appeared, and a jolt of sharp pain speared through Rowan's temple. He grunted and dipped his head down.

"Oh shit," he whispered, as blood slipped over his lip.

"Yes Rowan," Perry said sadly. "This is going to hurt, I'm sorry. This wall holds every last soul the corruption has taken. Merging with you bound them here." He drove the hammer forward again. "And we're going to free them all, right now."

The hammer struck again, harder this time, and the crack speared up towards the endless sky. Something glinted, as bright as a diamond, behind it.

A bolt of excruciating pain sliced through Rowan's forehead and he cried out, staggering with it.

"S-stop," he rasped, blood slipping into his mouth as he spoke, and he struggled to pull the hammer away.

Perry heaved the hammer back again. "I was sent here to make sure you do this Rowan. We're not stopping 'til it's done."

Caleb grabbed Rowan's shoulder, pushing into his view as he shuddered in pain, still tied to the inexorable swing of the hammer. "Rowan, if... if you... survive... tell them..." Caleb's mouth twisted in anguish for a moment, before a slow smile spread across his face. "Just tell Josh I love him. Tell him... it was real good to be with him again, to laugh with him again. Tell him... he might be the eldest, but this time I get to go first... and I'll be watching over him, always."

The smile grew even brighter, and Caleb threw himself into the swing, turning one last time towards Rowan.

"Thanks for bringing me home."

And again the hammer struck, and a new crack split along the wall's length.

And Rowan screamed as his head was speared violently, stabbed with a white-hot blade. Things
were starting to push through now, he could feel them straining. And before them all... someone bright... someone he knew... someone he loved...

*Julie.*

And a terrible thought hit him. Her body was dead.. if he did this... wouldn't she go.. *up?*

Rowan closed his eyes, as the hammer started its inward swing one last time. And he felt his heart clench tight.

Because he couldn't stop. Because... it was about saving *everybody* now.

This... had to happen.

This... was going to destroy him.

Gritting his teeth, Rowan clenched his hand tightly around the hammer, and strained with all the strength he had to ram it forward with a roar. And he caught, at the very last moment, just before it hit, Perry smiling, and a thought bursting inside his mind like the light spearing through the wall before them.

*Thanks Rowan. Thanks for keeping her safe.*

The hammer slammed against the surface.

The wall shattered.

And for one brilliant moment, in the space of an instant, the light before him became his whole world, filling him with a sense of love so pure and deep and blazing everything in him opened wide to it and cried back in joy.

*Julie!*

And then... *everything* shattered.

Rowan gave a wild, strangled shriek as his mind, his body, was ripped asunder with the last moments of countless souls. Eyes bulging in a sudden, inescapable terror, he arched back, his body spasming in an agony without limit, a multitude of woundings, of tearings, disembowelings, shatterings, slicing through his nervous system in brilliantly vivid waves. Fear squeezed his heart to a frantic spasming in his chest, a pulsating crescendo of escalating horror, tearing screams from him that shredded his throat raw and left him shuddering, jaws opened wide to the empty space above as it suddenly shifted to the purple of a twilight sky. Something was roaring through him then, overlapping and twisting his voice with a sound like the earth breaking in two, as he felt his body changing, breaking, shrinking, and the sound faded to his scream only, an endless scream echoing the dying cries of a multitude that slowly withered to silence.

Rowan fell to his knees.

No longer seeing through eyes flooded red, no longer hearing through ears seeping something from deep inside his own skull, Rowan swayed, blood rushing over his lips and from his mouth, where he’d sliced open his own tongue in the throes of an agony so deep he was left with no feeling, with no thought.

With nothing at all.
Nothing but the light he was following, as he fell forward into the dirt and slowly dragged himself by inches to its source, his fingers curled and stiff like claws.

He reached out, and found another hand, cold and still, and he closed around it tight. The light dimmed and faded then, and Rowan faded with it, sinking to the ground as the darkening world beyond his open eyes lost all meaning.

And as the dry earth drank his blood with greed, the fingers he grasped so tightly shuddered.

And trembling, closed softly over his own.
The corrupted one rose, twisting and stretching the form of the boy to its own comfort, the physical expression of its marred essence, that had once been as bright and pure as the soul of the child in the dead woman's body it now found itself standing over.

It turned, feeling the familiar settling of its newly reweaved bone and flesh, and twisted to face the father soldier, the one who'd shredded the skull of its previous host. And it sighed, the breath a song of rot and ruin, because the man had pulled out another gun, the stupid small metal things that had ended the harvest of many of its avatars before.

But that was all about to change.

The gun coughed, and the corrupted one felt a flutter of excitement. What would happen? What would it feel?

It was delightful.

The bullets tore irritating holes through its skull, scrambling the brain matter within, but in moments, the wounds closed, seeping flesh and rotten bone weaving like a dark tapestry across its skull.

And that's when it felt a strangeness to its host, an oddness to the body it had co-opted, corrupted, as it itself was steeped in the corruption of every human soul it had consumed.

But it could not determine the source, even as it twisted, slamming the armed man back into the crowd of its avatars, and he disappeared under the teeth of the many, his gun firing into skulls that quickly reformed and descended again. The one like its host, the second mutineer, who'd pulled the father soldier to safety before, rushed into the mass and tried to save him, but was overwhelmed, and shuddering, mouth clenched in grim purpose, the soldier drew the gun to his own head and fired.

The one that was once balance, but now corruption pure, stared down at the remains of the man. Bemused.

Until it heard the cries of another, hovering over the dead body of the fool. The false believer. The abuser. And it leaned down over the young man, who jerked back and punched and flailed until he was stilled, and it whispered a tale of a father, and a son, and the terrible things that were done while the second son slept oblivious.

The man's hope faded from him like a light extinguished, and the corrupted one bit him gently, holding him, caressing him as he shuddered, and grew still, and rose so much quicker than the rest, empty and perfect, his soul snared and every nuance of his being devoured.

Everything was perfect then. Everything was good and right. Even the mutineer had stopped fighting, and stood resigned, with the rest of its new army, as the sun sank to the earth's edge and the light grew weak and grey.

It would be a new harvest. A perfect, unstoppable harvest. The last feast.

The corruption tilted its misshapen head and its jaw shattered wide in a new smile.
Perhaps it would not be the last.

There were other souls, perhaps not as complex... not as exquisite.

And there were other worlds.

And it...

The creature stopped, and every avatar at its feet, every avatar still crawling the world newly awakened, stopped.

And its endlessly empty eyes grew wide.

As it felt... a rupturing within, the cracking of something sealed, a barrier that had snared the tethers it had forged to every soul claimed as its own.

"No.." it rumbled, its head twisting to the body of the girl, untouched at the edge of the ring of the dead.

And it stormed forward, preparing to crush the body under its own feet, shred it with its own claws, to pull the mangled fetus of the child within free and sever the link between them all.

The bright one... the first mutineer.. and the child. Linked still, and working together to destroy the work it had done. To break its hold on the souls of the first devourers. The first eaters. The ones it had risen to cull.

"NO!" it roared, and the ground trembled, the earth shaking, as the rupture grew, and suddenly...

They were freed.

And it screamed, its rage and agony twined with the voice of the boy, as every moment of pain and death it had visited through its own was thrust back upon it, and, tethers severed, every still body across the earth collapsed in silence, and souls poured in an endless stream out towards the source, bright and unknowable.

The corruption was stripped away, dissolved through the stream, and shedding the broken boy with a sigh like snowfall, the entity grew as bright and clear as a crystal, freed from all human desire.

And fading, sank back into deep stone and the quiet rich earth.

Back to sleep.

As the balance was restored.
Marcus woke up.

For a moment, he stared at the blade of grass in front of his face in the pale twilight, and enjoyed the simple act of breathing.

And then he grew confused, and frowned, and stared at that blade of grass almost angrily, as his brows wrinkled in deep.

*Wait... wasn't I dead a minute ago?*

With a sudden gasp, Marcus jerked up, twisting to his side, to stare at the spot where the creature had last been. Where it had shuddered, and screamed as its head - a horrifically deformed version of his friend's passably handsome melon - arched up to the sky.

It wasn't there anymore... but...

"Rowan!" he cried, and crawled to his feet, only half registering the stirring of others around him, the wakening town, all of them living, breathing.

Well, except for that guy. The boney with no head they'd shot before. Or those.. pieces.. of people.. dressed in the shredded clothing of soldiers. *Jesus.* Or the guy with the mangled arm. His eyes were sightless, open to the sky.

Marcus focused on his friend, diving to Rowan's side. It was a horrible sight, and for a minute he didn't know what to do. Blood soaked the ground under his friend's head.. and his eyes were...

"Oh shit, buddy, don't be.." Marcus mumbled, his heart jumping as he reached for Rowan's pulse, all the while looking into his friend's open eyes, the whites flooded a dark red.

A tremble of a heartbeat under his fingers made him almost shout in relief, and he flopped back on his knees, letting loose a deep breath before leaning forward again, and shaking his friend's shoulder.

"Rowan, hey man," he said, his gaze tracing his friends outstretched arm, and the hand clasped tightly around Julie's. She was lying where Rowan had dropped her when he'd broken and split and stretched into that fucking horrible *thing*, and she looked... almost peaceful.

As he frowned, his eyes drawn to her still, pale face, Marcus released a heavy sigh.

It was so damn sad.

His gaze fell to her terrible wounds, to the gaping cut across her throat, the long gashes across her chest.

Which rose almost imperceptibly, before falling again.

Eyes bulging, Marcus jerked forward, shifting to Julie's side, even as people started climbing to their feet around him, some dressed as soldiers, some as weird Mennonite clones, and some.. well, completely naked and terribly thin. The thin ones stood listlessly in place looking terribly lost, as others wandered to find those they knew, and some circled just at the edge of his vision around the dead man staring up at the sky.
Names were called, in strangely stilted voices, and questions rose around him that he had no answers for, as he thrust his hand to Julie's throat, careful to avoid the deep gash across her neck. But he didn't even need the confirmation of her heartbeat, no matter how tremulous, as her chest, incredibly, rose and fell once more. A cry of utter, startled joy burst from him, and he lowered to give Julie a quick kiss on the forehead.

He grinned at his friend, who still hadn't stirred. "Rowan.. you did it buddy! You brought her back!"

But Rowan didn't respond. He just lay there staring with those terribly bruised eyes, curled on his stomach, one arm outstretched to Julie, the other lying still by his side.

The grin faltered, and Marcus shifted again, moving to shake his friend harder. "Hey. R, snap out of it."

"J-Julie?" came a wavering voice, and Marcus looked up to see the Colonel emerging from the milling crowd, some of whom had stopped to watch them now. The soldier's clothes were torn and soaked in blood, and his head was an absolute mess of caked gore, yet oddly, intact.

Marcus wasn't too surprised. He'd seen John waver to his feet and stare down at himself in numb confusion not too long after blowing his own brains out. Just another one of the new, indestructible dead.

"She's alive John," he said, as the Colonel fell to his knees before his daughter, narrowly avoiding Rowan's body. John was shaking, trembling, as he scooped her into his arms, and when he saw their clasped hands he quickly grabbed a plastic tie from his pocket, zipping it over their palms, binding them together.

Marcus raised an eyebrow, anger rising in him quick. "What the fuck are you doing?" he snapped, reaching out to try and tug it off. "You arresting them now?! Jesus, you're such an ASS!"

John knocked his hand away and gave him a look that froze him in place. "I'm trying to keep them alive Marcus. Fuck off."

And then the Colonel closed his eyes, and he let out a loose, shaky breath, and when he opened them again, the hard edge had fallen away, replaced with something unexpectedly fragile.

"Thanks for... saving my life... for trying to help," he said quietly. His hand rose slowly to the side of his head, to the caked remains blown free by the self-inflicted blast. Scraping it away roughly, he stared at what fell from him for a long moment before his gaze rose to Marcus again.

Marcus stared back at him, stunned. The look the man was giving him was something he'd never seen in John's face before. Something desperate and deeply regretful.

"Please," the Colonel said, sighing as he drew his arms around his daughter. "Please don't tell her what I did."

And Marcus found himself shaking his head, because there was no joke he could crack here, no way to shrug off what the man was giving him.

His trust.

"I won't," Marcus said simply. And he smiled.

And the Colonel smiled back, something sincere and appreciative, before coughing as he looked
down at his daughter, and Marcus quickly looked down at his friend, as everything grew suddenly awkward.

And he frowned, because Rowan was still staring away.

At nothing.

"Something's really wrong with him, I don't know..." Marcus mumbled, and mindful of Julie and R's clasped hands, he pulled his friend up against his lap.

Rowan's mouth parted, but his expression stayed empty. Drying blood ran in dark streaks down his face and throat from everywhere blood could leak.

And Marcus was terrified, because when he peered down deep into his friend's eyes, he didn't see anyone there at all.

"I've got you R," he said quietly, as he held his best friend gently. "Hang in there buddy. We're going to take you home."

*Just like I promised.*

At the thought, Marcus sat bolt upright, almost dumping Rowan from his lap. John looked up at him, startled, and Marcus gave him a huge grin.

"The helicopter!" he yelled, and setting R aside carefully, he jerked to his feet and swiveled in place, getting his bearings. Then he sucked in a big breath. "Okay everybody!" he roared, "Clear some space - I'm about to land a 412 on all your asses!"

Everyone turned to stare at him in various stages of dull confusion to outright shock, and absolutely nobody moved, save one. The kid he'd passed on his way to John when all hell'd broke loose. The one who'd been staring down at the dead guy with the mangled arm, his face set in stone.

The man walked up to him, and the crazy grin slipped from Marcus' face as he stared into the guy's eyes and saw someone dead inside looking back.

"I'll take care of it," the man said flatly, then those eyes turned away as he glanced down at Julie and R, and Marcus felt an odd rush of relief. The man's hand rose then, though he did not look back, and he pointed into the thick of the crowd. "His father is there somewhere too. Might need help."

A few soldiers Marcus recognized from Murphy's squad came to him then, having heard his shout to the crowd, and they quickly moved to the Colonel, who was holding his hand over Julie's, and whispering softly into his daughter's ear.

John finally looked up when one of them addressed him formally, and he blinked at them for a short while, before shrugging back into the role of the Colonel and ordering them to search the crowd for their own survivors. His gaze met the younger man's briefly as the soldiers melted into the mass of survivors around them, and he frowned.

"Your father?" John asked.

"Dead," the man with empty eyes answered, without pause or inflection. And his gaze fell quietly to Julie.

Marcus left then, leaving them to whatever passed as sympathy among those who ruled with arms
and armies, and he sifted through the crowd, in the direction the man had pointed, and finally almost stumbled over the prone form of his friend's dad, circled by a small group of survivors, most of them the thin, drawn shadows of folks who used to be boneys.

"Mark?!" he gasped, stunned by the sight of Rowan's father, laying shivering and curled up tight against the dirt road. A woman was tending him, obviously not someone from town because she wasn't dressed like she'd jumped here from the thirties, but the rest of the crowd were looking on, confused and haunted, and one of the thin ones stared at him as he took them all in.

"Wh.. why.. am I.. here?" the thin one asked in a hollow whisper, his lips stretching over his yellowed teeth.

"I dunno buddy," Marcus said, unable to think of a damn helpful thing to say. "But do the world a favor and cover that thing up."

Then he dived to his knees beside Mark, and glanced up at the woman who was gently stroking Mark's hair, and resting her hand, with a simple gold wedding band, on his trembling shoulder. Mark's shivering gradually eased, his breathing growing more steady and deep, and a small smile spread on the woman's face as her blue eyes rose to Marcus.

Marcus found himself smiling back. The woman was oddly familiar... Did he know her? She was really quite pretty, even if she did have short hair, and her smile was absolutely contagious.

"Hi," he said stupidly, as if they were meeting over a coffee. Feeling weird, he looked back down at Mark's easing features. "He okay?"

He remembered what the guy had been through, and shuddered at the memory. Wouldn't be any way to come back from that without some serious scars on the inside.

"He'll be okay," she said softly, and her eyes danced to his as she smiled again. "They'll all be okay."

Marcus found himself nodding and smiling, "Oh good. That's.. that's great."

Wait.. huh?

The woman lowered then, and brushed her lips tenderly over Mark's, before pulling back to gaze at his features as he started to stir.

"I love you sweetheart," she whispered, with the brightest smile of all.

Marcus coughed awkwardly and looked away. That was really... forward. A married woman and all... could this town get any more damn weird?

"Claire?" came a voice, more of a croak than anything else, and Marcus looked back, realizing it'd come from Mark.

Then he swiveled in place, scanning the crowd around them, the milling folks beyond, completely confused.

The woman was gone.

"Where'd she go?" he asked, still twisting to find her. Only the circle of once-dead remained, and they stared down at him blankly.
"Marcus?" Mark said in another dry croak, and Marcus looked down at the man. Rowan's father was staring blearily around himself, and suddenly jerked back from the wall of people watching.

"Yeah, I know," Marcus mumbled, still searching for the woman, "Shriveled wang as far as the eye can see." He smirked down at Mark as the man struggled to sit up. "Speaking of, buddy, we need to get you something to wear."

Maybe the woman had gone to get a blanket or something? Some water? The poor guy sounded like he was gargling dust.

"I..." Mark mumbled, and rubbed his palm against his face. "What... Marcus... I."

Marcus patted him on the shoulder, helping him sit up, and tried not to stare at the guys fairly generous setup. "Jesus Mark, packing a cannon down there... Guess it's genetic.. I, ah.." and he shut up as his mouth kept rambling without the benefit of his brain, before spotting one of the soldiers nearby and waving her over.

The woman dropped to Mark's side and immediately threw a bed sheet over him. "They're bringing them from the homes," she said, answering Marcus' unasked question. "Their leader's organizing some food and water now too. Mark how're you doing?"

Mark looked up at her, looking confused as all heck, but he stood on shaky legs when she helped him to his feet. "There you go, you've got it," she said encouragingly, then turned, and addressed the rest of the wavering once-dead in a voice that snapped them to attention. "Everyone! Follow me please! We're going to take care of you over here."

"Where's... my son?" Mark whispered, as he seemed to finally look outside of himself, at the crowd being slowly cleared from the road.

"He's going to be okay." Marcus answered, suddenly remembering the woman again, and her strangely confident assertion. He tugged on the soldier's arm as she tried to lead Mark away. "You didn't see that lady did you? Dressed in normal clothes? About this high, short brown hair, blue eyes, really infectious smile?"

And Mark gave him the strangest look, as his eyes grew wider and even more confused. "Claire?" he whispered, even as the soldier guided him insistently towards the bunker entrance.

"Oh, was that her name?" Marcus called back, then he shrugged. "Yeah, she was here, seemed real friendly with you, but I don't know where she went! I'll point her your way if I find her, okay? Go drink something!"

And Mark disappeared, led numbly away, with the most astonished expression on his face.

Marcus turned back, reorienting himself to the town gate. "Right." Then he was off, glancing briefly over at John as the soldiers returned with bandages and blankets and set to work prepping Julie and R for evacuation.

All Marcus had to do was get the helicopter down here, get them loaded up, and shoot straight back to the city. They had enough gas for the trip, and he'd push that damn thing harder than it'd ever gone before to make sure they did it in half the time.

The run up the hill left him breathless, and slightly unnerved in the growing dark as he imagined every wavering branch another limb of the skeletal dead, but he shook it off and forced himself to jog the last few hundred yards, and finally there it was, the Bell 412. Ready and waiting.
"Right!"

And he yanked the door wide, and he jumped up into the seat, slipping slightly as he misjudged the step.

And he sat there, staring at the instrument panel in front of him, at the lever between his leg and at his side, at the switches and knobs and dials over his head, and back down, out over the hillside sweeping down below him, and the walled in town as the stars spread out like a sparkling river across the darkening night sky.

Without a fucking clue what to do.

"Holy crap," he said, very quietly.

It was all gone.

They were all gone. Everyone in his head, all of the memories he'd been slowly relishing all these years. The pilot cop, the porn star, the librarian. Some biker he'd been vicariously living through for the past month when he wasn't wrapped up in the elementary teacher, spouting songs and dancing around with the kids like he'd just snorted powdered unicorn.

"Oh fuck," he mumbled, and he dropped his head in his hands, and he started to cry.

Because he was just... himself again. Just Marcus. The salesman from Topeka, who'd left his wife and her kid behind for his other wife in Detroit and just happened to get stuck in that damn airport with a bad connection when the world turned to shit.

And they were gone too. He'd checked through every channel he could for any news of the two cities he'd called home, and found nothing. He'd reached for comfort then, in the minds of others, taking pieces he wanted, ignoring the pieces he didn't... which included parts of himself. Like the part of himself that had thought having two families in two different parts of the country was in any way okay.

He knew it wasn't now. He was able to see that now. But everything else he'd padded himself out with... added to his life with... was just...

Gone.

Marcus sucked in a sharp breath, and wiped his hand fast across his eyes, and forced himself to just stop. There wasn't time for this. Rowan and Julie needed him. Even if he couldn't somehow save the day by sweeping in like the hero and evacuating everybody with a wink and a smile, he could call in the real heroes who could.

He stared at the panel, and pulled the headset over his ears. Stared at the panel for a little longer, then tried a couple of switches. Then got frustrated with himself and slammed his hand down on the dash.

"Come on.. you just did this! What'd you do?"

With a heavy sigh, he closed his eyes, and just let it go. His body had to remember something this simple, something he'd done not hours before. And he thought of the radio, and he opened his eyes, and his hand was hovering over the switch.

"There," he sighed, and flicked it on, and nodded as he spoke into the radio, hoping it was sending right, and to the right people, and gave a huge sigh of relief when Ed answered, sounding
incredibly relieved, then stunned as Marcus explained the situation as best he could and asked for an immediate evacuation with any medical staff they had on hand.

Then he sat back, dropping the headset back on the dash, and tried to sing the song.

The song about a rabbit and a fox, and a lesson learned about the power of friendship. The one he was supposed to sing to a group of kids on Monday, and now couldn't quite remember the words to. Or the tune. In fact, it was a mangled mess by the time it left his mouth, though he tried his hardest to do the little fingerplay with it, and the voices the way they were meant to be done.

Marcus dropped his head with a small sigh.

"Uh.. Marcus.. was that also part of the message?" Ed's voice rang through the speaker on the panel. "Because I don't think I got it all. But the rabbit voice was fun."

As his face turned beet red, Marcus stammered something incomprehensible, and hit every switch on the dash he could find that could possibly relate to the radio. The engine started to whine, then shuddered, the blades chopping the air for a moment before stopping and starting again, the searchlight came on, freezing a raccoon in place as it tried to slink through the undergrowth unseen, and Marcus eventually started cursing, then yelling, until Ed's voice came through once more.

"Marcus, you see where the jack's plugged in from the headset?"

Marcus stilled, turning the engine off for the fourth time, then snapped at the mic. "Yeah?!!"

"Next button down on the left."

"Fine!" Marcus yelled, "THANK YOU!" and slammed his finger into it until it the cover popped off and fell on the floor.

Ah Marcus. Love writing you. Had no idea his chapter was going to get quite so sad, but still, good to be back in his head. Also, Claire's cameo was unexpected and lovely for me. Thanks for reading everyone. Let me know what you think so far if you have a chance. PS: Apologies to all helicopter pilots everywhere.
Waking Ghosts

When the evac team finally arrived just over an hour later, they met the survivors of Murphy's squad waiting for them by the gate of a wall in ruins. They were told to leave their weapons behind, bring medical gear as the priority, and escorted through a town of ghosts.

Or at least, that's what it felt like to Dale.

Everyone had a lost, haunted look, and a strangely similar dress style that just added to the weirdness, as did their total disarray - shirts and dresses torn and bloodied, hair hanging in messy tangles from a forgotten style. Survivors of a new calamity that couldn't seem to figure out what they were supposed to be doing now that it was over. Dale recognized the look in an instant, having worked with the Colonel in gathering the aimless dead soon after the first Change. Those near-living had been just as haunted, just as lost, but the folks here were fully alive, and that was the oddness of it. Like there was something deeper the town was waking up from.

Marcus had told Ed what'd happened of course, and Ed had passed it on as best he could, but Dale had already caught a glimpse of it first hand. As he'd been gathering men and artillery at the Davis Outpost, a few soldiers and a lady running supplies to the airstrip froze in the middle of what they were doing, at exactly the same time, and collapsed bonelessly to the ground. Which would have been fine if they'd all been standing still. The poor woman took out a shed on the edge of the airstrip with her car, and had to be carted right back to the outpost clinic, with one of the soldier's quickly excusing himself to look after her, being her husband and all.

Then there were the folks who made Dale's skin crawl, and made his group wish they'd been able to keep their sidearms as they passed them on their way to the bunker not too far from the gate. Thin, almost emaciated figures, with sunken eyes and barely any hair, dressed in clothes that didn't fit worth a damn.

The most haunted ones of all.

Dale and his group were quickly guided down the concrete stairs to a locker room holding more of the skeletal survivors, huddled under blankets and eating food brought by the town's soldiers, directed by a man who introduced himself as Joshua. He immediately pointed their team to the medical wing then returned to his thin charges without another word, and Dale watched him as the group continued on.

The man never smiled. Not even when the ones who looked like they hadn't had a scrap of food in years gazed up at him in utter gratitude. There was some terrible sadness in Joshua, and when Dale finally turned away and headed down the hall after his team, he took a little of it with him.

When the Colonel burst from one of the rooms, everyone was stunned, and not just because of the abrupt appearance. The man looked as ragged as hell, torn and blood soaked, his eyes holding a little of the same haunted look as the rest of the townsfolk, only sharpened with his usual glare. They'd never seen their commanding officer in such a state, and the entire team just stared at him, jaws hanging, when they probably should have been saluting, reporting - anything other than just standing there in mute surprise. Didn't seem to matter. Without a word to Dale, the Colonel quickly scanned the group, spotted the two medics, and practically grabbed them around their collars to yank them into the room. When Dale followed, the sight made him stop dead in his tracks.

A small crowd surrounded the two missing kids, laying motionless and covered in bloodied bandages, their hands clasped and bound, on stretchers propped over the beds joined in the middle
of the room. Neither responded a wink as the medics surged forward and made preparations to 
move them, with the priority on care for Julie. Both of the medics seemed a little frantic over her 
more serious wounds and quickly set her up with blood and fluids, but they slowed as they moved 
on to Rowan, and it wasn't until Dale got a closer look that he saw why.

The boy's eyes stared up through everything, seeing nothing. Mark sat silently nearby, holding his 
son's hand and staring into those eyes until a medic ran some quick tests and gently taped them 
down, finding the boy completely catatonic.

Then they evacuated, with Mark, the Colonel and the medics standing by with the kids in a cleared 
area outside the bunker, while Dale, Marcus and a small group of soldiers went to retrieve the 
helicopter. Marcus had already explained he couldn't fly anymore, but asked to sit in the co-pilot 
seat anyway, desperate to relearn anything he could. Dale knew that was against their usual 
protocol, but couldn't bring himself to say no, the poor guy seemed so despondent. Never once 
cracked a joke either, and that threw Dale off more than anything.

They brought the chopper down next to the bunker, and loaded the kid's stretchers in as quick as 
they could, strapping them securely side by side, keeping their hands joined, as ordered. As Mark 
sat with his boy, the Colonel sat holding his daughter's hand, giving out last minute instructions to 
the remaining soldiers to assist as needed and return to Ticonderoga the next day for a flight home. 
Joshua came out to see them then, and gesturing to the thin, haunted folks who were being led to 
homes in the full darkness of the evening, he assured the Colonel that they'd take the best care of 
them that they could, whoever they turned out to be.

Then he did something nobody quite understood. He clasped the back of Rowan's neck, kissed the 
top of the boy's head, and said goodbye.

They finally headed home then, after checking in with Ed and diverting the ground troops on 
standby back to their communities. Dale had been surprised at the numbers they'd been able to 
gather in the time they'd had, and incredibly relieved that they'd no need for an army in the end.

All that was needed at the end, were prayers. From those who believed in that stuff anyway. Dale 
wasn't one of them, but he kept his mind hopeful for the two kids, even if it didn't make sense that 
either was breathing. As far as he could tell, and it was something Stephen confirmed once they'd 
touched base back at the hospital, Rowan had suffered some kind of massive cerebral hemorrhage. 
He was completely out of it, and when they'd finally wired him up to an EEG back at the hospital, 
they found very little happening upstairs at all. But at least his body was functioning on its own.

Julie was in worse shape. Dale hadn't held out much hope for her from the start, after all, he could 
literally see into her chest in one of the worst wounds, and caught a flash of her larynx through the 
gash in her throat as they'd shifted her to a portable bed. The xrays had stunned Stephen, and they'd 
quickly rushed her into surgery, with Rowan set nearby, to address a number of wounds that should 
have killed her a few times over already.

But she didn't die. Rowan didn't die.

And most importantly, the baby didn't die.

That had been a revelation for a bunch of people. Not Stephen, who knew of it through the hospital 
records, though Julie had never confided in him herself apparently. Not to Nora, who spent a great 
deal of her shift visiting and talking to her friend as she lay under sedation, the ventilator tubes 
twitching with every forced breath. But to Mark and John, this was a revelation that seemed to 
shake them both.
Dale had been surprised. But not too surprised. He'd seen these two kids together all over town, had joked with Rowan in flight preps and seen the way his face lit up every time he talked about her. He knew just how mad they were for each other, and being optimistic about the future of the human race, knew exactly what would happen next.

So he smiled over them both, over their hands weaved and bound together, told them to get better soon 'cause their folks were losing it, then he nodded and he walked home, back to his wife, who squealed when he walked through the door, wrapped him in a big hug and kissed him silly.

And that was a very good night indeed.
The Dreamer

He dreamed.
Endlessly.

White sand, warm and silky underfoot on a beach in endless sunset and a breeze that tickled the nose with salt. He smiled into that sun as he always did, digging his toes in deeper and watching the sparkle of the dying sunlight on the wave crests between himself and infinity.

It was warm, and cool, and bright and deeply peaceful, and the birds cried over him as they flew by, and the waves washed the shore to satin smoothness.

He was waiting for someone. He knew that, deep inside, but he did not know why. And he did not know who.

But he waited, and soaked in the sun and the ocean spray.
Endlessly.

Dreaming.
Come Back to Me

Mark nodded to the nurse on duty as he passed by the little desk on his way to ICU. The man gave him a small smile and shook his head softly.

"No change Mark, sorry."

"Figured. Thanks," Mark answered, and turned away to push through the door, letting go a heavy sigh.

Rowan lay on the bed, motionless save for the soft rise and fall of his chest. A heart monitor flashed a steady rhythm at his side, the wires efficiently angled over his shoulder, and saline and nutrient bags hung from a nearby stand, one connected to the cannula at his neck, the other taped and threaded through his nose.

Thankfully, no ventilator. He'd never ended up needing one, as his body kept doing what it was supposed to do, even when it didn't seem like anyone was home inside.

Traumatic brain injury, Dan had said, leading to a massive cerebral hemorrhage, though nobody understood the true cause. Julie had tried to explain it to them, something about souls and walls and cords and... eventually she'd given up, leaving them no closer to a reason. Didn't really matter now though. It'd been six months and Rowan was still comatose. The EEG's had at least improved, showing a recent increase in activity. Stephen swore it looked as if Rowan was dreaming.

Mark hoped they were good dreams.

With another sigh, he sat down in his usual spot, on a bar stool they'd brought in for him so he could sit level with Rowan and talk to him whenever he came to visit. He spent most of his time here now, since Brandon had taken over for him on the solar refit for the power plant.

Early on he'd spent most of the time trying to get his son to just wake up, pleading in something like desperation. He'd leave the hospital an emotional wreck, feeling more than a little responsible, with memories of what he'd done to his son carving him up inside. Now he just gave Rowan a quick update on the day, and started reading the books he'd been borrowing for him from the library.

He knew Julie came in every day to see Rowan, so he never worried about mentioning her. He'd see her as often as he could - they shared lunch together on Tuesdays over in the Market - and she was getting mighty big now. The scars had healed as well as expected, but even with them she had a glow about her. He knew pregnancy had that affect on a lot of women - though Claire had always rolled her eyes when someone tried to tell her she was glowing, usually cracking a joke about irradiated babies - but it went beyond that. Julie had always glowed. It was amplified now, sure, but also tinged with a sadness he knew wouldn't go away until Rowan woke up.

"So you should just wake up Rowan," he said out loud, the thought spilling through his lips. "Make her glow real bright again."

Rowan's eyelids, gently closed with thin strips of tape, stayed still.

Mark smiled. One day. He knew it, one day those eyes would open and he'd have his son back. Then he'd grab him, take him home, wrap him in bubble wrap and never let him leave the house again.
Snorting at himself, shaking his head, he slid the book out from the pocket of his rucksack, setting it on the bed beside his son's curled hand.

Rowan was getting too thin. His muscles weren't getting the exercise they needed to stay strong and they'd shrunk all over, making him look like a goddamn skeleton who'd had some work done. He knew Nora and the other nurses did what they could, but there was only so much you could do when the fight was one sided.

Thinking about skeletons brought a hazy flash of memory that left Mark gasping and sweating and gripping the edge of his chair till his knuckles shined white.

Quickly, he went through the breathing exercises the shrink had given him to cope with the panic attacks he'd been dealing with since that day, and slowly brought himself back, thankful that nobody had been in the room to see it.

"Jesus," he whispered, and he stared up at his son. "That was a rough one."

With a soft sigh, he reached out and grasped Rowan's hand, rubbing his thumb gently over the boy's cool skin.

"So, Sarah's just started helping out at the big hospital, they finally got that place up and running a couple of months ago. Even got the whole place wired with electric from the roof system, which is great. Brandon's doing some good stuff over at the plant. Looks like they might get forty percent throughput on the old grid, which is better than they expected. Going to make a big difference, going to lead to some big changes. Helps the people who've shifted outside the old perimeter, that's for sure."

He sighed, and squeezed Rowan's hand. "What else... oh god, do you remember the old sled you guys used to run down Mercy's hill back home on snow days? Brandon found it, would you believe, buried behind some ferocious weeds against the fence at the garden back home. Bran's digging it all up, fixing it all up. He's pretty set on moving back there with Sarah actually. I keep trying to talk him out of it, house is still a mess, though he's done some good things."

Mark grinned then, staring at Rowan's still face. "Jesus, I remember when you and Bran crashed that damn thing through Baker's fence. I'd never seen that shade of red on a man's face before, you remember that? He was so goddamn angry. You two ended up doing chores over at his place for a month after... that's right."

"Here's some karmic justice," he snorted, "The weeds Brandon was digging through to find that old sled?"

He laughed again.

"Poison ivy!"

Rowan shifted his head and laughed.

Mark almost fell off of his chair.
Eyes bulging, he clenched his hand around Rowan's like a vice and stared at his son open jawed, not daring to breathe.

It hadn't been much of a laugh, more like an airy gurgle, but Rowan's mouth lifted in a grin, and he made that sound, and Jesus CHRIST he was WAKING UP!

"...'member that.. dad..." Rowan rasped, and his mouth lifted in another smile as he laughed again, this time sounding a little more like himself. ".serves'm right.."

"Rowan?!" Mark cried, and he jumped off the chair to lean over his son, pressing his hand against his cheek.

Rowan frowned, swallowing hard, and his eyelids shifted under the tape.

Then he grew still again.

"Son?" Mark asked, frantically pulling the tape from Rowan's eyes, and cradling his face. "Son?! Hey, I heard you son, wake up now!"

He shook his son then, and gently opened his boy's eyes, but they were unfocused, distant.

Rowan was gone again.

"Son..." Mark whispered, his eyes flicking back and forth between Rowan's fixed, unseeing gaze, and he gathered his boy in a hug. "Goddammit Rowan, come back to me."

"Come back."

Love it when a chapter writes itself. I popped into Mark, and all of this poured out. Thanks for reading.
The Best Shield

He dreamed.

About sledding with his brother, screaming in delighted terror as they tore down the hill so fast, the air stinging their faces under their woolen caps. When they reached the bottom they realized it hadn't been nearly high enough or fast enough, and that's when they scaled Mercy Hill, slogging through waist high snow to the top.

When they finally pushed off and the speed really hit them, Rowan had a moment when he looked outside himself, saw just how insanely fast they were going, saw how fragile his little brother was, so much younger than himself, and in that moment of clarity, he threw his arms around his little brother tight. At that moment he was a shield, the best shield he could possibly be, as his brother giggled and screamed in his arms, oblivious and joyous as they jumped and shuddered and slid to the bottom, and kept going. A big old fence loomed large, and Rowan folded over Bran, sticking out a foot to turn them around just in time.

They hit the fence hard, and Rowan took the brunt of it as the grey timbers shattered and cracked over his back, and they finally slid to a stop. Bran poked his head out from the pile they'd landed in, his eyes wide for just a moment with a strange fear, before the biggest grin he'd ever grinned split his face.

As Brandon jumped up, screaming and bouncing and laughing and telling him they had to do it AGAIN, and the old man came out and screamed and bounced and spat in disbelief, Rowan sat for a moment, his back throbbing with a massive bruise he'd do his best to hide from his dad for the next week, and thought...

I kept him safe.

He joined Bran then, laughing as he picked himself up off the ground all wobbly and sore, and tried to gather up the pieces of the fence as the old man got redder and redder, shouting at him, shouting at Bran, and shouting at their dad when he finally found them. Hushed negotiations were made, and their fate was sealed, but Bran just kept on grinning, and he smiled for a good day or more after that, and it'd been a while since Rowan had seen that kind of joy in his brother's face. Not since their mom had died.

I did good.

Rowan laughed then, thinking about the poison ivy on the toilet seat, he'd totally forgotten about that. The old man had no idea either. It never came back to them, and that was the best part. They only confessed to their dad after he'd seen the poor guy running around his yard scratching his ass for the better part of a day, and cornered them, arms crossed in disapproval till they told him why.

Then he laughed. Then he stopped. Then he laughed again, and then he told them to go to their rooms. And they spent the night tapping out codes to each other through the wall.

"I remember that dad," Rowan said out loud, smiling to himself as he dug his feet in deeper. The white sand sprinkled over his toes and slipped through the spaces inbetween. "Totally serves him right."

He looked over, where he was sure his dad was sitting, but there wasn't anyone there. Just an endless stretch of beach.
And it was starting to get dark.

Rowan sighed, and looked back at the setting sun, glowing orange and swollen as it slid beneath the horizon.

He shivered, feeling the warmth starting to leech from the day, though the sand still felt wonderful beneath his feet.

It'd be night soon.

And he was still waiting.

For her.
Julie held Rowan's cool, thin hand in her own, and smiled, and felt the familiar tug of scar tissue on her neck that she still hadn't quite gotten used to.

"I'm here Rowan," she said softly, scanning his face for any reaction, as she'd done every day she'd been to see him, her gait getting more and more like a damn ducks every week.

God, she was ready for this kid to GET OUT already. For the hundredth time she grumbled at the fact that guys couldn't take on the whole pregnancy thing, because if Rowan was just going to lay around all day for the duration, he could deal with the massive gut, the squished organs, the constant need to pee, and the final near-the-edge-of-losing-it she was experiencing as the due date loomed ever nearer.

And she still had a week to go. So, really, it could happen any day now. Or minute now. She'd actually started doing all sorts of weird things to give the baby a clue that YES, NOW WAS THE TIME, THE EXIT WAS THATAWAY, JESUS!

Julie sighed, and weaved her fingers through Rowan's, and brought his hand over her ridiculous stomach. Then she laid back against the bed they'd been bringing over for her lately and just watched him breathe.

She joked, but in truth she was terrified.

She didn't want to do this alone, but she felt very, very alone.

It never got easier seeing him like this, though she'd grown more used to his silence, his stillness, just as she'd grown a little more used to seeing the scars across her chest and throat every time she got out of the shower and stood in front of the mirror at home.

It had been very hard in the beginning, when she first woke up. They'd kept her under for almost a week after they'd brought them both back, and she'd been stuck on a breathing tube that whole time. Waking up with that thing down her throat was shocking, and she finally understood why Rowan had reacted so badly that first time in the hospital. She'd done the same damn thing, struggling against the wires, the tubes, the drains, the feeds, there were so many things going in and out of her she felt like a bug caught in a spider web. Everything pulled, everything hurt.

Everything bled.

She was a mess.

She still woke screaming some nights, reliving the moment when the monster's rotten, misshapen skull had leered over her shoulder. When it had sliced her open, and her life had spilled out into the dirt. She didn't think she'd ever be free of those nightmares. The incredible experiences she'd had afterwards had never quite burned them away.

Julie shifted uncomfortably on the bed, her body prickling with unease. Going anywhere near those memories was always hard, but something weird was happening in babyland too - the little one was doing aerobics or kung fu or something, and Julie groaned as a little foot flailed out at her ribs.

"What're you doing in there?" she murmured, gently rubbing over her belly, trying to calm her child. The baby shifted once more and grew quiet.
Julie looked back at Rowan.

It'd been almost two weeks since Mark had got them all excited, telling them about Rowan's reaction to a memory. That he'd laughed, that he'd talked. They'd all waited then, every single day, for the moment when he truly woke up, truly came back. They all fed him stories, and memories, and moments, looking for the hook that might make him react again, stir his soul again.

But nothing else worked. And he just grew thinner as his muscles wasted away.

Stephen said that they might have to accept that he wasn't coming back. That the damage done to his brain was just too extensive. That even though he'd had that moment, and a couple of twitches here and there, there wasn't enough of Rowan left for Rowan to come back to.

So Julie had decided never to speak to him again. For the second time.

She'd actually slipped on her first vow to do so, being a little quicker to forgive Stephen than Mark. But she knew that if he hadn't given that dose to Mark, Rowan's dad would be dead right now for real, and the dark thing would have never come to the town, setting in motion a crazy chain of events, that still, in a way, felt like destiny.

No matter how silly that sounded.

Everyone remembered that moment in the city, when anyone who was still dead, or had once been a corpse, collapsed in the middle of whatever they were doing and woke minutes later only to find they couldn't access memories they'd stolen anymore. That the people in their heads were gone. Stephen confided that at the exact same moment, the few remaining skeletons they held in the test labs suddenly dropped and came back to life. Only shadows of what they'd been before unfortunately, but... they were getting better. That's when he knew that something had truly been won. That's when he'd really started to celebrate.

So she'd tried to let it go, and shared a few spare words with him when he'd done his rounds, dressing her wounds, administering her medications, and checked up on the baby.

Forgiveness had been a hard road for her, but she'd managed, and it'd been good to share a smile with him. They'd even shared a laugh or two, but the moments had always been tinged with something regretful and sad.

Julie shifted again, grimacing against the growing discomfort in her abdomen. This was getting a bit much.

Rowan released a sigh.

Eyes wide, Julie stared at the side of his face, not quite believing what she'd heard or seen. He was unchanged - his eyelashes closed gently against his pale skin, his mouth slightly ajar... he looked exactly the same as he always did.

Well, his color wasn't so good, but...

Something twisted hard inside of her and she gasped, looking down at her stretched shirt.

_Ow!_

She looked back at him, trying to ignore the pain. "Rowan?" She called, and almost yelled out as his chest rose and fell with another thin sigh.
"Oh my god! He's waking up!"

"Rowan?! Baby?" Julie reached out to him, cradling his cheek, his forehead. His color was horrible, terribly sallow. "I'm here," she whispered over him, "wake-OW!" A tremendous cramp hit her and she crumpled over her belly with a cry.

"Oh god!" she squawked, laying back flat, her eyes darting to Rowan and back in a panic. "It's happening!" Cradling her belly, she floundered for his call button, as he released another slow, thin sigh.

"If you were going to wake up anytime Rowan," she yelled at him, "now would be the time! Oh god!" Clamping her finger down on the call button, she laid back again, and quickly started the breathing exercises she'd been taught as she reached out to grasp Rowan's hand.

Too cool. His hand was too cool. Motionless.

"Breathe with me Rowan, help me out here," she huffed, and stared at him as someone came through the door.

Rowan released a very light breath.

"Julie? What's wrong?" asked Stephen, walking into the room, his gaze quickly darting from her as she lay there doing her breathing exercises, one hand clenching the side of the bed white-knuckled, to Rowan... who wasn't doing anything at all.

"Baby's coming," Julie squeaked in between breaths, "and I think Rowan's waking up!"

Nora came in behind Stephen as the doctor walked to Rowan's side, frowning deeply.

"Julie? You okay?" Nora asked, then she squealed, "Are you in contractions?!"

Julie nodded, trying to smile in the midst of breathing, the cramping intensifying unbearably, and Nora squealed again, rushing to her bedside to check her pulse and the position of the baby.

Rowan gave a long, thready breath.

"What's happening?" Julie puffed, watching Stephen as he bent over Rowan, muttering something under his breath. He took Rowan's pulse, and did something to the monitor at the side of the bed, which immediately started alarming.

Julie's heart clenched. "Stephen?! What's wro-OWW!" she screeched, as another contraction hit, twice as hard, twice as painful. The baby wasn't waiting anymore!

"Rowan, don't do this son, come on," Stephen said under his breath, injecting something through the IV. After a few moments he swore and turned to Nora, "Get Mark and Brandon here asap, Marcus too if possible, but family is first priority. Get Bella in here for Julie."

Then he turned to Julie, as Nora's eyes grew wide and she ran out the door, giving her best friend a gaunt look just before leaving. Stephen pressed around her abdomen, checking the position of the baby.

"What the hell's happening!?!" she yelled, her hand clenched around Rowan's as she heard him give another breath, thin and shuddering. Another cramp slammed into her and she groaned, agony gripping her below, and feeling a sudden urge to push - but that didn't make any sense, her water hadn't even broke!
A sudden gush of fluid from below made her yelp, as Bella rushed into the room, bringing spare towels and a tray filled with supplies.

*Oh crap!*

Stephen started to pull their beds apart, stepping between the two as he glanced back at Rowan's pale face. Julie looked too, and caught a glimpse of the alarming monitor, before Stephen blocked her view. The lines were erratic... stuttery... the peaks really far between, and the blood pressure numbers were flashing...

*What the hell?!*

"Stephen?" she said, meeting his eyes with fear. Sweat trickled from her forehead as she crumpled around her stomach again, getting the urge to push as her insides screamed at her. It felt like everything down there was being ripped apart and twisted inside out... it fucking hurt!

Was it meant to happen this quick?! Was this normal?! It didn't feel fucking normal?! And why wasn't Stephen TALKING TO HER?!

"Stephen!" she yelled, on the cusp of another contraction that was meant to be five minutes apart not thirty seconds, Jesus Christ! "I'm GOING TO PUNCH YOU IF YOU DON'T TELL ME WHAT'S HAPPENING!"

"She's at nine centimeters," Bella said, her voice betraying complete awe, and Julie's eyes bulged as she stared down at the nurse.

"WHAT?!" she screeched, and threw her head back, yelling as she felt the worst pressure she'd ever felt anywhere descend into her pelvis. Was she delivering a goddamn ELEPHANT?! This was NOT FUCKING NORMAL!

"Rowaaaaaaaan," she groaned, feeling truly terrified, and she squeezed his cool hand in a crushing grip. "I need you! Oh god!"

Another wave hit her and she closed her eyes, following the urge to push, her face scrunched up in effort as the sweat trickled down her neck.

"You're doing great Julie, you're doing fine, just keep up the breathing. Don't push just yet though, okay?"

It was Stephen, and he still hadn't told her what was going on with Rowan.

So she punched him.

He jerked back with a grunt as her fist connected, cradling his nose, just as the Colonel rushed into the room, heading straight for Julie's bed.

"DAD! DON'T LOOK!" she screamed, trying desperately to cover herself and failing as another crushing wave of agony hit her, and she didn't care anymore, she didn't care what they said, she was pushing this damn thing OUT RIGHT NOW!

Stephen quickly intercepted the Colonel, trying to stem the trickle of blood over his lip, and pulled her father aside, as Bella continued to wipe Julie's forehead and neck with a cloth. Julie's eyes darted from the two men, to Rowan and his terribly sunken face, to Bella's steepled eyebrows that she had the sudden malicious urge to wax off in one go, and back to Rowan, as he gave one sad little shuddering sigh.
And suddenly she knew, even as the Colonel's face fell, and he walked to her, and walked between the beds, and tried to block her view just as Stephen had, as he bent down and kissed her forehead.

She knew.

"Noooo," she moaned, her face crumpling as she squeezed Rowan's hand desperately, holding it and squeezing it again, turning towards his bed, trying to reach him as her dad put his hands around her face and kissed her temple again. "Nooo, Rowaan, nnnoooo.."

The contractions hit hard again, as the locomotive she was delivering tried to force its way through her cervix, and she cried out with the pain of it, and cried out for Rowan, and tried to reach over to him again as her heart started to drown in her chest.

Mark and Brandon were suddenly there, suddenly running into the room, and Stephen spoke just a few words to them, as Julie cried, fighting her dad who wouldn't let her see him, wouldn't let her reach him and spoke to her with stupid words she didn't want to hear.

Stephen was there then, on her other side, telling her that now was the time to push, to push as hard as she could, as long as she could, and the blood was trickling down his nose onto the bed beside her, and Rowan was dying beside her, and she couldn't reach him, and the baby was coming so hard, so fast, she screamed all of her despair and agony to the entire world.

And it shuddered.

Mark let out a soft moan.

Brandon crumpled over his brother.

And a baby screamed for the first time...

...as a new mother cried in anguish.
A Sound Like a Name

Rowan lay back on the cooling sands, staring up at a crystal clear night as the stars twinkled down over him.

They were going out.

He'd been tracking it for a while now, at first thinking something was flying over him, like a plane, blocking out the stars as it went. But there was no sound, beside the soft rush of waves, and the stars never came back.

He sighed then, feeling the sand sifting softly through his fingers as he played for a while, trying to pull what warmth he could from the silken grains as the air turned chill around him.

Finally, he decided he couldn't wait any longer. It was time to go home.

He sat up.

There were people around him. They all looked very sad. He stepped away, briefly wondering what had happened to the beach, and looked back.

And saw a young man, pale and thin, mouth sagging, lying on the bed he'd just got up from. People were collapsing around the man, hugging him, hugging each other, crying. A bald man stood distant, having just come into the room, the muscle of his jaw twitching as he watched with sharp eyes, and came no nearer.

There was another bed, surrounded by more people. The person on the bed was radiating a brilliant light that drew him like a moth, but he couldn't see who it was.

It was time to go.

He turned to leave, to go where the light was brightest, though the light behind, on the bed, confused him for a moment longer and he hesitated, until the call grew so strong from the source he could no longer resist it.

Then he heard it.

The cry of a baby.

Rowan stopped. And he turned back.

The baby cried again, and the sound was like a name. Like his name, though no syllables, no vowels, no shape of the word was uttered.

He moved to her. The bright one was holding her, so bright, Rowan couldn't see who it was, though it felt good and right to be near them both.

The baby was looking at him, completely calm now, her new eyes wide and shining.

Rowan looked into those eyes. A smile grew on his face. He knew this little one. She was someone very special.

The baby girl's arm wobbled out, as she was brushed down vigorously by someone, then returned to the bright one's arms.
And the little hand reached, clasping and unclasping, out to him, as those eyes stayed focused on his own.

A rush of the most wonderous emotion of all rose in him, filling him completely as he grinned back, and a laugh escaped his lips as the little one wiggled and smiled, suddenly, brightly.

It was as if the whole world opened up in her eyes.

He reached out to that little squirming hand, giggling as she gurgled back, delighted in a way that made his heart burst with joy.

Was she the one he'd been waiting for?

"R-Rowan?"

Rowan's eyes were drawn like a magnet to the bright one on the bed.

That voice...

*Her.*

He'd been waiting for her.

And she was finally here.

*Julie*

His mouth opening in wonder, he leaned towards her, drawn into her light.

And tiny fingers closed around his thumb.

Suddenly he was yanked sideways, moving so fast all of the color and light of the world was torn away, until nothing but the night remained, though there were no more stars, no more waves, no more beach.

Nothing but the rising sound of grief.

Something had wrapped around his chest like a vice. It was too tight. Squeezing. He couldn't breathe.

But he had too. Because *she* was waiting.

With a great shuddering gasp...

Rowan woke up.
Holding On Tight

Julie cried.

She tried so hard not to, as the baby was lifted up, and she saw this beautiful, perfect little soul, felt her heart rush to wrap around her baby like a blanket, and the little mouth opened so wide and screamed a baby's first cry.

They placed her beautiful child on her chest, and she held her little baby girl, and she cried, the tears streaming down her eyes as she cradled the little one close, and squeezed the hand of the father her baby would never meet, cool now in her own. She cried, looking into those incredible blue eyes, more vivid than his, and how was that possible? and she tried so hard to smile, but her mouth just wouldn't move that way.

The baby cried again, and Julie looked up at her own father's face, and he was crying, but he was staring at the miracle in her arms with such awe that stripped the decades from him in an instant, and she felt a swell of love for him so deep it stilled her tears for a moment.

And the baby grew quiet, and Julie sucked in a sharp breath as her eyes snapped back to her little girl, her heart squeezing in greater fear that something was wrong with her too...

But the baby wasn't looking at her anymore.

The baby was looking at something else, tracking something with her eyes, and Julie was confused, wondering if her little one was watching Mark, who'd got up and was pacing beside his son's bed, his face sagging in despair.

Her little girl's arm reached out, wobbling as little baby arms do, and Bella was suddenly there, wiping the baby down again, giving her a fresh towel, smiling down at Julie before vanishing again.

Julie's breath caught.

Her baby was reaching out, her little hand opening and closing as she reached to wherever she was staring, and it wasn't Mark she was looking at - Mark had returned to Rowan's side, he was just talking over the body of his son, and holding Brandon's hand across the bed, and Julie couldn't look over there anymore or she'd start crying again and she couldn't do that to the baby.

Her little girl wiggled and smiled. And then she did the most remarkable thing.

She gurgled a little tiny laugh.

Julie's mouth fell open as she followed the child's gaze. What her baby had just done wasn't normal... she'd read all those stupid books, babies weren't supposed to smile or laugh till a few weeks in - till they'd been around people doing it all the time!

But... suddenly... she knew, as she stared into that empty space, as the room grew hushed around her because the others were watching the baby too.

Because she could feel him.

"R-Rowan?"
Her baby's hand closed tight, and those beautiful vivid eyes tracked something, moving and blinking, as her little head wobbled, to the bed next to hers.

To Rowan.

And suddenly, she knew. With a huge smile spreading on her face, Julie held her baby close and squeezed Rowan's hand one more time, her eyes seeking the face of the man she loved, even as her father leaned over her, trying to tell her Rowan was gone in a voice choked with tears.

And it happened, as she knew it would.

The cool hand clenched in her own, and she heard him breathe.

Everyone in the room around her exploded with sound, gasps of disbelief, startled cries, sudden sobs and strangled laughter. The last belonging to Marcus.

But Julie wasn't looking at anyone else but Rowan, as her dad jumped back from him, almost landing on top of her. She strained to get closer, to reach the pale face that turned towards her, blinking in confusion.

Rowan's eyes were dim, bloodshot and rolled as they sought her, but the hand in her own squeezed, and he opened his mouth to speak.

Nothing came out but a soft rasp, and Rowan swallowed hard, his face scrunching in pain with the effort, but she'd seen the words he'd framed with his dry lips.

Julie...

Needing him desperately, Julie reached for him, straining against hands that tried to keep her on her own bed, until she realized her dad was moving out of the way and they were shifting their beds together again.

Hands cradled Rowan's face suddenly - it was Mark, sobbing as he pulled his son up in a desperate hug. He held Rowan close for a long while, rocking his boy and mumbling over and over that Rowan had promised never to do this to them again and screwed that up big time, until finally gathering himself, he caught Julie's eye. As his gaze drifted to the little baby who'd grown quiet against her chest, the deep lines of his face softened and he gave her the most beautiful smile she'd ever seen him give. He reached out and brushed her cheek, then gently caressed the little one's crest of soft hair, and finally kissed Rowan's head as he lowered his boy back to the bed, walking away then to hug Brandon, who'd watched it all with speechless awe.

Stephen quickly stepped in, flashing a light across Rowan's eyes, before gently pushing his hand away as his thin fingers fumbled weakly for the feeding tube taped to his face. Calling out for Bella, Stephen sent her off again before unmuting the monitor by Rowan's bedside. It beeped steadily now, and he nodded in satisfaction before looking down at them both and shaking his head with a small, bloodstained smile.

"You two," he said quietly. Then his gaze fell to the baby, and his smile grew wider. "Sorry, I mean, you three."

Chuckling softly, and gingerly dabbing at his nose, he walked out of view.

Julie's gaze returned to Rowan's profile as his eyes slowly fluttered closed, and his hand relaxed in hers, but only for a moment. With a soft gasp, he jerked awake again, blinking rapidly, and spoke, his voice a strained, dry whisper, searching, seeking.
"J-Ju..lie?"

"Rowan," she answered, her voice like a warm living thing reaching out to him, encircling him, pulling him near.

Their eyes met.

Blue danced with blue, and their smiles grew soft as they drew ever closer and finally met, cool lips against warm, the taste of each other tinged with the salt of tears. He was trembling, his body already exhausted by the simple movements and his struggle to turn to her, and when they pulled away, he sank back against his pillow, his eyes sliding shut again.

But not quite closing.

Because he saw her.

His beautiful, tired eyes opened wide, the brows above drawing up in wonder as his lips parted, questioning, marveling.

Tears sprang to Julie's eyes as she watched the emotions play across his face, and he reached out a trembling hand towards their child.

His thin fingers extended tenderly, tentatively, and slowly circled the baby's downy head. When he finally made contact, his face crumpled as he started to cry.

And Julie pushed forward, kissing him, her heart swelling with a love that felt boundless as she brought her little girl up and kissed the soft skin of her cheek.

And the little one wiggled and opened her eyes wide, a tiny gasp escaping her as she blinked up at them, her small perfect mouth pursing and quivering as her eyes danced between them both.

Julie and Rowan looked up at each other, their faces lit with a soft joy.

"She's got your eyes," they said in almost perfect unison, though Rowan's voice was barely above a whisper.

And Julie laughed, as Rowan sank back against his pillow, smiling.

He reached out again, brushing his finger against his little girl's tiny hand, and her tiny fingers wrapped around his own and held on tight.

Julie giggled, and looked up at Rowan, smiling. His eyes were closing as his arm relaxed against the bed, though his hand stayed in his daughter's grasp.

With a sudden start, he jerked, his eyes blinking open again, alarmed, and seeking them both, almost frantically.

Julie smiled at him softly. He was afraid to fall asleep. But it would be okay now, she knew that. Everything was going to be okay.

"We've got you," she whispered. "Rest."

His eyes drooped almost immediately at her words, and he squeezed her hand tightly, trying to hold on.

Then his features eased, his mouth softly parting, and his hand loosened in her own.
Julie smiled, watching him sleep again, as she always did, and then it struck her. She had someone else to watch now too.

Her gaze fell to her baby, and her smile grew into a grin.

Their little one was also sleeping, her soft mouth pursed ever so slightly, her big eyes gently closed.

And her little fingers still wrapped tight around her father's.

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Thank you to everyone for reading, and let me know what you think so far, if you have a moment. :)

Listing Sideways

A breath rushes in with a flash of light and sound - the thunderous scream of twisting metal, the tinkling rain of shattered glass, terrified cries and groans fading to silence. The breath leaves him slowly, easing as consciousness sinks again to somewhere sheltered and safe.

The deep silence is torn by a gunshot, cracking sharp through the dark with another violent flash, and Rowan flinches, knowing the bullet is for him.

But he doesn't understand why.

Doesn't matter. It fades, and he fades with it, until a smile bursts in the dark. Bright and followed by a laugh. He's running then, chasing his brother through the hallway back home. Bran just stole the letter he'd written to Jess, and as they speed down through the living room, his brother giggles through the lyrics Rowan had put down just for her. Part of the song he'd sing to her at the camp a few weeks away.

"..little.. shit.." he tries to shout, but the words fall weak and muffled from his mouth and he jerks as suddenly he's not running anymore, he's lying down, and everything feels...

"Ro," someone giggles somewhere. The same giggle, just... deeper. "Are you dreaming?"

Rowan smirks at the sound. "..give it.. back.."

A chuckle. "Give what back bro?" The chuckle fades to a sigh. "You're dreaming Ro.. wake up."

He reaches out to grab it back, but his arm doesn't feel right. Too light, and it's too hard now.

And he sinks again.

A constant wave of screaming. He's immersed in it, drowning in it, can't seem to find the off switch, but then he slams a head against the floor until it breaks, and it stops.

And that's good. But now he's screaming. And he'll never stop, because it's everyone whoever screamed on the earth, screaming through him, and his mouth breaks so wide, it splits him right down the middle, and the pain is so unbearable he sinks again.

"Baby, I'm here."

A hand, warm, soft, folding over his own. Someone is close. Their breath whispers over the skin of his neck, and it feel so good, so right, that he stops screaming. But someone else is screaming now. A small, new voice, startled and scared, and the one next to him whispers gently, soothingly, until it fades.

And everything fades with it.

Something nudges his thoughts to the surface, to the brink of waking. The prickly knowledge that it's a school day, and he should have been downstairs half an hour ago. Any minute now his mom's going to come up and rip the blankets off his bed in one evil swipe.

Groaning, he tries to pull them up closer and hold on tight, but his fingers clench empty air, and everything feels strange.

She's stolen them already.
"No.. Mom.." he whispers, "Don't wan.. get up."

"Oh son," comes a sad sigh. "Rowan... son, you really need to wake up."

The voice wraps around him soothingly, deep and familiar, and he pulls that over his head instead and falls back to the dark.

When the darkness starts whispering, he opens his eyes, and someone beautiful and bright is leaning over him, smiling down at him. The world is all shadows, soft and fuzzy, but he can see into her eyes, see into her, and he just stares for the longest moment, lost in wonder. In love. He reaches for her, but she pulls away, and everything pulls away, and he's falling again.

No.

He flails out, to catch the edge of whatever he's falling into... but it has no form. His fingers slip through, and grow still once more.

"...so WAKE THE FUCK UP ALREADY!"

The roar snatches the dark away like a magician's cloak, and the world slams into his senses without mercy. Light floods his mind, a kaleidoscope of streaked shapes and colors, and fabric scratches at his skin like glass as he jerks on the bed, his body outlined in a deep ache, as deep and solid as his bones. A breath draws in through his teeth, cold and dry and sharp against his gums, and he swallows, but it feels like he's eating drywall, and it hurts so much he wants to cry.

"Holy shit!"

A groan escapes him as more noise assaults his mind. The voice is unfamiliar, but his mind isn't quite up for labels - its just toying with the sound, tossing it around like a bored kid.

"DAD! He's awake!"

The lightscape in front of him fails to resolve to anything meaningful, and he closes his eyes again. Hands clamp hard over his shoulders, and suddenly everything is moving, and it hurts, and that voice comes again.

"NO YOU DON'T!"

The light snaps back in, and his vision is filled with the blurry face of a man. The mouth is open, yelling, framed by a thick beard, the brows above drawn down deep in anger.

"You don't get to do this to Dad, or me, ANYMORE! WAKE THE FUCK UP RIGHT NOW!"

"Son, what the hell are you doing?! Let him go!"

That voice. That voice. He knows that voice. The bearded face jerks away, the space filling with a rush of cold air, and Rowan sags, suddenly hideously spent. The dark is tugging again.

You don't get to do this to Dad... or me.. anymore..

..Bran?

"See Dad? Jesus, it's hopeless... he's just going to fade out again." Footsteps recede, soft pats against vinyl. "Fuck this."

"Bran, come on."
"Bran?"

"No Dad, I can't.. take this anymore."

Rowan's mind slides and slips, but the pain in the man's voice sinks through him like an anchor, drawing the strangeness of the excruciating moment to a stop. Giving his mind a weight, his thoughts a weight, and they settle.

With a soft, gentle breath...

Rowan woke.

"...Bran?" he whispered, face twisting in a grimace. His throat felt like he'd been gargling glass.

Someone gasped nearby.

"Son?!"

Rowan shifted on the bed, and felt every single nerve under his skin scream at the same time. With a pained groan, he stopped moving, and stared at the blurry figures across the room as they stared back.

God, there was something weird in his throat. Grimacing again as he swallowed, the skin on his face pulled strangely. He lifted a hand to find out why.

"Son!" his dad roared from across the room, and the figure jerked forward, "Oh my god!"

The other figure didn't move. Just stood and watched, as Rowan fumbled with the weird thing on his face. A tube, taped to his skin... near his nose.

"Wait.. why...

Into his nose?

A hand grabbed his own and drew it away, and folded over his fingers, squeezing them. It hurt for some reason, but everything did. Rowan blinked up at his father, trying to see better.

"No son, don't touch that. You need it, so leave it for now, okay?"

Rowan nodded, not understanding. Things were all mixed up inside, and he still couldn't see right. He swallowed, and his face twisted in pain.

"Here, drink this," his dad said, and the figure swung something over from the side of the bed. A straw bounced on his lips for a minute, before he realized what it was, and he took a long sip. "God son, are you really here? For real this time?"

The question confused the hell out of him, but he was too caught up in the miracle of water to care. The cool liquid rushed through the dry desert of his throat, and it felt so good, he smiled.

"Jesus Christ Ro..."

The sound grew strangled as his dad started to tremble, and the glass went quickly elsewhere, as the hand twisted and kneaded his own desperately, brokenly.

Rowan frowned. Why was his dad crying?
"D-dad?"

Mark collected himself, straightening suddenly in his chair, and squeezed Rowan's hand again.

"I'm okay son... it's just been... hard."

Rowan let his head rest back on the bed, and stared at his blurry dad, frowning. Not understanding still. He lifted his hand to rub at his eyes, to try and bring some sharpness back into the world, but his fingers felt weird, and things tugged in strange places.

The other figure was moving forward now, arms raising, and Rowan blinked at him furiously, trying to figure out who it was, before the arms folded around him, and a scratchy beard rubbed against his face.

"Ro, you asshole... you died on us again," the man mumbled in his ear, "You can't keep doing shit like this, okay?"

The words tumbled into his mind, and bounced around, and no matter how he played with them, they made no sense at all.

So he didn't say anything, and let the man hug him, and pull away, then he stared over at his dad. Things were getting a little clearer now, and he could see his dad's eyes, drawn in worry and an odd grief.

They were so old.

Something struck him then. The first word he'd said when he woke up. The reason he woke up.

"Dad?" he rasped, and then he frowned, because to the left of his dad was something that he hadn't noticed before. A heart monitor. And above that... two bags suspended on a stand, leading down to...

"Yeah son?"

Rowan stared down at the ribs outlined against the pale skin of his chest, at the tubes and needles taped into his arm. The back of his hand. An arm and a hand that couldn't possibly belong to him, they were too thin. Almost skeletal.

What...?

The hand squeezed his own again, and Rowan looked up at his Dad. And again was struck by how... old his dad looked.

Mark nudged him on, his brown eyes wide and encouraging, "What Ro? What were you going to say?"

Rowan stared back, his mouth falling open. That wasn't just weariness in his dad's eyes. There were lines on his dad's face he'd never seen before. A heavy trail of years that didn't make any sense at all.

"Son?" his dad asked again.

With a strange fear trickling down his spine, Rowan stared around the room, his gaze drifting over the bearded guy who'd hugged him, to a bed nearby that looked like it'd been slept in, more beds against the wall, and a strange grouping of mismatched medical equipment in the far corner, next
to a long wall of shelves filled with supplies.

"Something's wrong," the bearded man said, and there was something in the voice that brought Rowan's gaze back to the guy. And made him remember the question he'd been about to ask.

"Where's... Bran?" he heard himself say, even as his mind stuttered over who he was looking at. The man's face was... something there was...

The man's eyes grew wide, and he took a half-step back. "What?" he whispered.

"Bran's right in front of you Rowan," Mark said, very evenly, at Rowan's side.

Rowan tore his eyes away from the bearded man with the strangely familiar face, and looked at his dad. His father's eyes were wide and sharp with some kind of fear, and Rowan took the fear with him as he turned back to the man.

And tried to look around him.

"...where..?"

He leaned over, expecting to see his little brother goofing off, hiding behind the guy who looked a little like Dad... but also a little like...

_Bran_...

Something broke inside his head, and Rowan's body jerked, his eyes growing wide and glazed as the world listed sideways.

The bearded man took another step back, his mouth and eyes wide with shock. And then he just kept going, as Mark jumped out of his seat to Rowan's side.

Hands folded around Rowan's face as he kept falling, watching as the man who looked like Brandon, but couldn't be, whose face framed a deep hurt in the same way as Bran's used to, but _it couldn't be..._ turned and fled the room.

Then Rowan was sinking, to the bottom of something very deep, as he stared up at his dad's face, so far away, yelling at him in a voice he could no longer hear. Too far away to reach.

He tried anyway, desperate to stay with his dad, desperate to stay awake, scrabbling at the sides of a darkness that had no form, no substance beneath his fingers.

And fell back into the dark as everything crumbled away beneath him.

_I'm sure everyone thought Rowan would just pop up and be all good. I did actually, until I started writing. Hope it wasn't too confusing with the present tense dream/memories. Some interesting things coming up ;)"
The Last Thing

Julie sighed and looked from Rowan's still face to their clasped hands. She squeezed, her fingers folding over his, but he didn't squeeze back. He just slept. Just as he had for the past six months.

"Rowan," she whispered, leaning up against his shoulder. "I need you."

She'd tried that before of course, almost every day through his coma. But it had never worked. There just wasn't enough happening upstairs, Stephen said, when she'd asked him about it. Which was a stupid thing to say, and really irritating, because it'd worked when he was dead.

Her gaze lingered over his profile. Dark lashes rested softly closed against his gaunt cheeks, his mouth lay slack in sleep, his dark brown hair was a matted shaggy, mess. Hardly surprising, since she'd been cutting it for the past six months. He was really lucky he didn't look like he had mange.

Sighing softly again, she rested against him and watched his chest rise and fall. He was too thin. They really needed to get him awake and eating properly. Fill him up with burgers, pizza, and maybe a tub of ice cream from the new farm just outside the perimeter.

*That counts as properly, right?*

Screw it, she'd eat the ice cream herself.

Julie stared up at his closed eyes and sighed one more time.

"Rowan... where are you?"

He didn't answer.

She knew he'd been dreaming. She'd had to pull him out of some terrible nightmare the night before. She'd never seen him so tormented, not even during those horrible nightmares with that girl he'd killed that he'd finally told her about. Talking to him seemed to help - holding him, being close. He'd quietened down, but then the baby started crying, and calming her had sent Rowan right back to sleep.

It was so frustrating. He'd woken before, he'd said her *name* for God's sake, and he'd seen their baby! Why'd he fall back down again?

And then, there was what happened with Bran earlier in the day. The news had been a complete shock, and she'd just stared at Mark when he told her, her eyes so wide they hurt.

Because if Rowan didn't recognize Bran now... if he'd really been looking for his little brother... that meant he was stuck somewhere in the past, didn't it?

And the uncomfortable thought had popped up...

...how far in the past?

Stephen had done his best to explain what'd happened, though he'd admitted this was yet again outside of his experience, adding with a smirk that it was almost always that way with Rowan. He suggested that Rowan had been woken too abruptly, right in the middle of a memory, and had simply reacted from that memory. That'd he'd probably be fine the next time he woke if that was the case. It was a nice explanation, or at least... a little nicer than his next theory.
He'd been hesitant to offer it actually, but she'd poked him till he did, then kind of wished she hadn't.

Stephen had suggested that Rowan might be repressing some memories. As a form of self-protection, though he quickly added that it wasn't usually done consciously.

It was stupid, what she'd asked next, because she should have known. Because she knew Rowan, she knew how much he struggled with what he'd done. Even after shrugging off some of that weight after Jack. But Stephen gave her a perspective, when she asked 'why', that stunned her. He'd said that if what Julie had told them was true - mentioning again that it was the weirdest damn thing he'd ever heard, which she just sighed at yet one more time - Rowan had experienced the death of every person killed in this plague.

She'd nodded, and said that he had, and that's when Stephen said something that just floored her.

"If you'd been through that, experienced every death ever delivered by a corpse... what's the last thing you'd want to remember?"

With a terrible sinking feeling, she'd turned to Rowan, and the answer had just fallen from her mouth. Heavy and horrible.

"Being one..."

And she'd just stared at Rowan, just as she was doing now, desperately trying to see into him, to see where his thoughts were roaming, to understand why he was so far away, and figure out how to bring him back.

Because where would she fit in, if he woke up like that again? Would he still recognize her? Or would he look at her with the eyes of a stranger and act as if they'd never met?

Julie squeezed her eyes shut and pressed against him.

"No," she whispered, her heart clenching in her chest. "Jesus, don't do that."

_Don't you dare._

She looked down at their daughter, dressed in a little onesie dotted with dancing penguins and cozily wrapped in a fleece blanket that was irritatingly, almost horrifyingly pink. Nora had said it was the only thing she could find, but Julie had a feeling her friend didn't look that hard - Nora adored the color.

The baby in her arms was utterly adorable, and completely asleep. Just like Rowan. Julie was tempted to tickle her daughter awake just so she wasn't the only conscious one in the room, but then that struck her as a Very Bad Idea. She'd only just changed the baby's diaper for the millionth time and experienced yet another painful latch as the little one nursed. Time for a break.

As she stared down at her baby, Julie's mouth curled in a little smile, her fears slowly dissolved by the soft sleeping face nestled in a sea of pink.

"You need a name little lady," she whispered. "Daddy needs to wake up now so we can pick one, doesn't he."

Her little girl shifted just slightly, mouth pursing wetly in the first tremblings of waking, before she grew quiet again.
Julie sighed and looked back up at Rowan. The baby's soothing magic fell away, and a little of that fear returned.

What would she do, if he looked at her like a stranger?

It played in her head like a haunting, superimposed over his sleeping form. Rowan opening his eyes, turning to her, and frowning.

And maybe he'd say something uncertain and simple like...

Hello?

The frown grew deeper, and she shook her head at herself.

Stop it.

It was stupid. Stephen had said it was a possibility, and they couldn't know for certain until he woke up again.

But when would that be?

"Rowan," she sighed one more time. "Where are you?"
The Ticket

Feeling excited, and more than a little anxious, Rowan stood on the curb, staring at the glass doors leading into the airport. He glanced down at his ticket for the hundredth time, to make sure he was at the right terminal, and nodded for the hundredth time at himself because of course he was. *Stop checking already.* The paper crinkled in his grip as he stood there, toes tapping in his shoes.

This was a big change — leaving his family behind as he traveled the world, soaking up other cultures, working whatever jobs he could find, busking mostly if he could make enough, and staying in whatever hostel had a spare bunk.

It was his dream. An adventure, all his own, one he'd make up as he went along.

He couldn't wait to get started.

"Time to fly," he whispered to himself, and stepped forward, shrugging his overloaded backpack against his already sore shoulders. The guitar case swung awkwardly as he pushed through the opening door, and he almost clipped a young woman as she shuffled past to exit.

He turned to apologize, but she just stared over him and away, and continued to the curb, where she finally stopped, wavering.

Rowan smirked. She'd actually been kind of cute, even if she couldn't put her lipstick on right - it was a red mess all over her mouth. But there'd be plenty of girls where he was going, way hotter than that.

With another small shrug into his backpack, he continued on in, and tried to follow the signs to the check-in counter. The place was busy, but very quiet, which was weird. The few times he'd been to the airport, there'd always been a background of murmurs and sighs, people talking on the phone, relatives laughing and crying, the sounds of reunions and goodbyes.

Actually, it was kind of weird that his family wasn't here, he'd kind of expected they would be.

Frowning, he stopped and looked back towards the airport doors, his thoughts turning to his dad, his brother.

*Mom?*

A man bumped into him roughly, some old guy with a torn jacket, but kept walking away without a word. Rowan just shook his head at the man, and turned back, the thoughts of his family sliding from his mind as he finally spied the right counter.

He stacked his gear on the scale, and smiled at the lady standing behind the desk. She didn't smile back. She just stood there, listing slightly.

*Jesus, lady, eat a sandwich.*

The woman was so damn thin. In fact, everybody in this place looked a little off. He stared around the terminal as he waited for her to do something, and watched the sea of strangely grey folks shifting back and forth, up and down the escalators, shuffling aimlessly.

The lady behind the counter hissed, and Rowan jerked back to stare at her. Thin husk fingers reached out towards him as her lips pulled back from her black gums.
"Oh, sorry," Rowan said, and quickly thrust his ticket into her hand. The fingers curled around the paper, crumpling it as she pulled it back.

He waited a little longer, tapping his hand on the counter in some complicated rhythm, then he leaned down to get his guitar, figuring the lady was done doing whatever she needed to do, though he hadn't actually seen her do anything much at all.

As he reached down, the lady hissed at him again. A low warning sound.

He frowned at her. "The guitar's carry-on."

With an eerie slowness and a cracking noise that grated against his nerves, her head turned from side to side.

"FAA rules say I can take it on," he told her, his voice starting to rise defensively, "I looked it up."

She shook her head again, with the same horrible sound, and someone groaned behind him.

He looked over his shoulder. A group had gathered, a bunch of grey people, their clothes torn and stained, black mouths hanging open stupidly.

Rowan sighed. They could just wait their turn.

He leaned down to grab his guitar, determined to keep it, no matter what the lady had to say, but as his hand closed around the plastic handle of the case, cold skeletal fingers closed around his wrist.

"Hey!" he snapped, and tried to yank his hand back, but she only held tighter. Her grip was like ice.

"Lady, let GO!" he barked, yanking his hand back again. He knew the guitar might be a problem, but he didn't think they'd get physical about it, what the hell?!

The skeletal woman leaned into his face and roared. Her breath washed over him in a fetid wave of ruin, and he jumped, his nerves taking control, and backed straight into the grey waiting crowd.

The crowd groaned and shuffled around him, and he brushed off the groping hands of the few who seemed like they were trying to steady him. Some got really grabby, and he twisted, smacking their hands away as they started to tear at his clothes.

"Quit it!" he yelled, and pulled himself out of the group, before looking back at the counter.

The woman was gone. The guitar, his backpack, were gone.

"Shit!" Spinning in place he tried to see if she'd moved somewhere else, but there wasn't anybody behind the counters now. His stuff had vanished.

Fuck!

Spying his ticket on the counter, he snatched it off before the shuffling group enveloped him again. Then he was off, almost running, to reach the escalator to the gates. As the metal steps took him to the top, strewn with discarded papers and trash, he relaxed, and smiled down at the crumpled paper in his hand.

I can still do this.

His bags would turn up. They had to. Screw it, even if they didn't he had enough to buy some new clothes, maybe get a half-way decent guitar at a pawn shop somewhere. Hell, he could just sing till
he could afford one.

*Everything was going to be okay.*

"Yeah mom," he whispered. Then he frowned. Hadn't his mom dropped him off? Shouldn't he be waiting to say goodbye before he went through security? Where was she? Felt like ages since he'd last spoken to her.

*Mom's dead.*

The world around him stuttered, and he stopped up short. With a choked moan, his mouth fell open as a yawning chasm of grief opened up inside his chest, threatening to draw him down. Reality wormed through his mind with groping fingers, and his breath was snatched away, as his darting eyes saw the world for real.

The grey shifting shadows of people, black and red smeared over their faces, their clothes hanging in tatters, their eyes...

*They're all dead.*

Then someone bumped into him from behind, almost knocking him over, and the woman shuffled away with a sigh, the angel wings tattooed on the dark skin of her back shifting, sweeping as her shoulders and arms swung limply with each step.

The thoughts slid away as he watched her go.

He smirked again.

Maybe he'd get a tattoo on this trip? From some shady back alley shop where he didn't speak the language? Now that would be an adventure. He could bring home a cool tattoo and a fascinating skin disease.

Shaking his head at himself, Rowan headed to the security checkpoint, and quickly stepped through, having nothing to put on the belt. Which wasn't working anyway.

This place was so fucking run down. Sure, it wasn't the biggest airport, but holy shit, somebody pay some bills maybe?!

The TSA guy stared through him as Rowan walked under the scanner, and waved the detector listlessly somewhere off to his right. Rowan frowned at the man, but continued on, glancing back over his shoulder as the guy waved the device over someone else stumbling through.

What the hell was wrong with these people? Nobody was looking at anyone else, everybody was moving like fucking... *zombies.*

With a frown he couldn't wipe away, Rowan continued on, the thought skittering away to some shadowy part of his mind. Then he realized he had no idea which gate was his. It wasn't on his crumpled ticket, and the thin lady at check-in hadn't given him one.

But all he needed was a departures board. He had the flight number, and his destination, he'd be able to get the gate from there.

*Easy.*

Finally noticing a bank of monitors across the food court, he headed over, passing an dusty airport
bar on the way. He wondered where the bartender was, until he saw the guy, slouched on the ground behind the counter, chin on his chest, wearing some... red.

That almost made him laugh.

*Guy can't handle his own drinks.*

Then he lingered, and the smile fell from his face.

Wasn't he going to meet his friend here? Didn't they... always... meet...

Someone hissed behind him, and he jumped and twisted to look, his thoughts rolling around loose in his head again, pulling with them a heavy feeling of dread.

It was the lady, from downstairs. She was standing by the bank of monitors, and gesturing to him, her twig fingers curling, beckoning.

Frowning uncertainly, and still pissed at her for taking his guitar, he walked over. As he neared, she shifted aside, lifting a thin arm to point down the hall.

Rowan ignored her and looked at the bank of monitors. Most were filled with flickering static, though a couple of the lower ones were black, the glass broken. A strange hand-shaped stain smeared down the face of another, and underneath someone was...

*Dead.*

NO.

... someone was *sleeping.*

Nerves jumping under his skin, he looked away and tried not to glare at the lady as she pointed down the hall again with a soft hiss.

Rowan wanted to say something, to snap back at her about his guitar, but some strange fear was holding his jaw shut. It was a weird feeling, like, if he opened his mouth, he'd start screaming, and he didn't even understand why.

"S-stop pushing me around.." he finally mumbled, as he shuffled past her, still fighting that odd fear.

The people around him moved like a listless human wave... back and forth, back and forth.

Pointless.

With a shaking, cold hand, he brought the ticket up, and held it tight.

*I can still do this.*

In eight hours, he'd land in Frankfurt, he'd find his fucking guitar, and he'd spend the first night just walking, exploring... maybe write some cool lyrics when he finally crashed at the hostel.

A smile spread on his face. Slow. Slippery.

*Yeah.*

And he moved, slowly, down the hall, and stepped onto the people mover, and stood there, feeling
like he still had a purpose, a destination, his *dream.*

And he was going to make it happen.

When the two kids went by on the other people mover, he watched them as they passed, confused. Why were they here? Where were they headed? And where the hell were their parents?

They watched him until their necks couldn't twist any further and slowly turned back.

And he did too, forgetting them almost immediately.

He wasn't feeling very good.

In fact.. he wasn't really feeling much of anything.

He held the ticket tighter, and almost stumbled as the people mover dumped him on solid ground once more.

Looking up, he felt a weak thrill of excitement. There it was, he could see it through the wall of windows. Down a few steps, and out on the tarmac.

The plane.

With a listing smile, Rowan shuffled down the steps, feeling his head bobbing heavily, his whole body strangely distant and stiff. When he opened the door to the outside, the temperature didn't mean anything, though he was pretty sure it'd been cold before.

Pretty sure.

The metal railing was still propped up against the door of the plane, that was good. It was strange that they hadn't parked at a gate and used a jetway, but the walk was okay. Just slow.

Finally, he climbed the steps, each awkward footfall clanging hollowly against the metal. It was weird that nobody was here to greet him, check his ticket, but that was okay too, he could deal with that.

They could have at least opened the door though, Jesus... it was heavy and really hard, because his hands felt numb, and he couldn't get them to do what he wanted them to do.

Groaning in frustration, he finally got the lever up, and swung the door wide.

And the most amazing smell washed over him.

He sniffed the air, his head tilting, and closed his eyes as the scent curled up his nostrils and tickled his brain. God.. what *was* that? He wanted it, whatever it was. Right now.

Stepping into the cabin, still sniffing the air, he frowned as he looked about himself.

*Wait a minute.*

This couldn't be right. This had to be the wrong plane.

It was crammed full of stuff. Junk, in random piles, the weirdest collection of shit he'd ever seen in his life.

*Jesus, that smell!* Where was it coming from?!
With a soft moan, he stepped forward, desperate to find out. He'd get his flight sorted out later... right now...

Something moved, towards the back of the plane. There was a dull thunk, a loud crack and a soft sigh.

And a figure stood up, and faced him.

And Rowan's heart jerked once in his chest, and grew still.

"M-mom..?" he rasped, his pale eyes bulging.

The smell grew around him, growing unbelievably good, and he moaned, without really meaning to.

His mom took a step towards him, dragging something behind her. No... someone... and as she neared, he finally saw her in the dim light.

"Mom... you're..."

He groaned as she reached for him, blood from the corpse she was dragging dripping from her grey hands. Her thin shriveled lips pulled back in a terrible smile from her yellowed, cracked teeth. Her eyes were gone, wasted away long ago, her skin a stretched, thin mask.

"Glad.. you're... hhhome... sweet.. hearrrt," she whispered. "Dinner's...rrready..."

Rowan staggered back, his numb mind stuttering over the sight of his mother. She was...

Dead.

NO. My mom's not dead.

...tired. That's all.

He didn't understand though. Home? What was she talking about? With a irritatingly jerky motion, he shook his head.

"Not.. home.. mom," he mumbled, the effort expansive. "Have.. to.. go on my... trip.."

And with that, he lifted his hand. Then he stared at it. Because it was only his hand. Grey, cold, distant.

Empty.

No. no, I had a. I had the..

Arm wobbly and hard to control, he fumbled in his jean pockets, in his hoodie, feeling a terrible sinking dread.

"My... ticket," he whispered, and stared at his mom in anguish.

"You. don't need.. that... anymore Rowan," she hissed soothingly, and another smile brightened her mummified face. "You're.. home and it's... time.. to... eat.."

Her thin fingers dipped into the opened skull of the man she'd been dragging, and pulled up a lump of bloody brain tissue. "I made.. your... favorite.."
The smell thrust its way to the core of who he was, hooked into his nerves and pulled him forward, even as he tried to shake his head.

This wasn't right... none of this was right. He was supposed to go on his adventure... to explore the world, soak in everything it had to offer, and come back changed by it all, transformed, and filled with new words for his music... filled with new... life.

She moved closer to him, raising the bloodied mass in her hands. Bits of it fell through her fingers, landing on strewn books and toys and cheap instruments made for kids.

That smell.

There was life right here.

And he'd been... changed. Transformed. He could see it in his grey skin, the black veins threading over the back of his hands, the utter stillness of his chest.

Maybe... he was... home.

"Mom," he moaned, as she drew up to him, and presented the meal to him, looking at him with a mother's love, through hollow eyes closed to tight dry slits.

"You're... the best..." he whispered. He pulled the meat from her hands and shoved the thick, gluey mass into his mouth, chewing it thankfully with a soft sigh, as the life, and moments of memory flooded him, saturated him.

And when he was done, he opened his mouth again.

And started screaming.
Picking up the Pieces

Julie snapped awake to a horrible sound - a strangled cry of utter anguish and terror.

Rowan?!

She jerked up, for a moment terribly disoriented in the dim light of the ICU, and twisting, quickly reached for Rowan as his body arched on the bed, his hands clenching and twisting in the sheets as he screamed, almost tearing the thin material. As she held his face, pressing lightly against his cheeks, his forehead, desperate to bring him up out of the nightmare, another wail rose behind her.

Dammit!

"Rowan, baby... I'm here!" she cried, struggling to hold him as he bucked against the mattress. "It's just a dream!"

It took time, whispers, and gentle touches, but slowly his body relaxed in her arms, and he curled against her, as far as his wires and tubes would allow.

And then a horrible thing happened.

He started to cry. And in the midst of the tears, words came, half mumbled, half sobbed. And they tore holes in her heart.

"Not.. dead.. wasn't... dead... I... didn't..."

She held him, and smoothed the hair from his damp temple, and let loose a soft sigh.

"You did baby, you were, but it's okay. You're okay now. Everything's okay. You just need to wake up."

There was a sudden stillness, and she felt him on the cusp of waking. Then he said words that left her cold.

"Mom... I.. dreamt.. you were... dead," he whispered, and his eyelids fluttered, his blue eyes rolling underneath to focus on her. "But.. you're not... dead.. you're..."

He stopped, and frowned, and for one terrifying moment, she thought that this was it, on top of just calling her mom, he was going to jerk back and freak out and ask her who she was. Her mouth twisted as sadness thickened her throat, and she couldn't look at him anymore, closing her eyes as their baby's cries rose in volume.

".Julie?"

With a sudden shocked breath, her eyes snapped open. Rowan's brilliant blue eyes stared back, bloodshot, glazed, and filled with a terrible grief.

But it was him. He was right here, awake, in front of her.

"Rowan! Oh my god!" She pressed into him, kissing him, squeezing him, smiling a wild, joyous smile, as he blinked back at her and the smallest of smiles teased the corners of his mouth.

But then it faded, and the grief grew heavier, chased by something else. A retreat.
"No, Rowan, NO," she said as firmly as she could, pressing her hands against his face. "Stay HERE!"

"Julie... I.." the word devolved into a moan, and the distance grew, as he drew away from her physically, his head twisting back and forth, "Wasn't... I didn't... I... I can't..."

And those anguished eyes squeezed tightly closed, then slowly relaxed as his words faded to silence.

"ROWAN!" she cried, reaching to gather him up again, but it was too late, his body had eased into sleep once more, his breathing even and deep.

"NO!" she roared, shaking him. "NO! You can't keep DOING THIS! You can't keep RUNNING AWAY!"

Then she started to cry, because it didn't matter anymore.

Because he was gone again.

Tears rushing now, Julie turned her back on him, and gathered their daughter from the crib, pulling her baby into a desperate hug. Their little girl's face was red and wrinkled with the effort of screaming, and for a moment the two cried together, before Julie started to rock her daughter, whispering soothing soft words, kissing her baby's little forehead as she wiped away her own tears.

Then she did something she'd never done before.

She started to sing to her daughter. A silly little song to cheer them both up, something she'd heard on the radio ages ago, not even appropriate for a baby, and strangled by sadness. She couldn't even remember the words, and had to hum her way through huge chunks of the second verse, until she grew suddenly silent.

Because someone else was singing.

Jaw falling open, Julie turned back to Rowan and stared at him in complete disbelief.

He wasn't awake.

But he was singing.

Well... it was more a whispery mumbling, but he was still singing! In tune, and he knew all the words!

"Rowan?" she said, wiping desperately at her eyes. "Baby?"

There was a tremble at his brow, the barest hint of a frown, and he stopped. Slowly his mouth moved, as if he was trying to say something in answer, then his features relaxed.

Asleep again.

Julie was too stunned by what had just happened to swear, or yell, to do anything but stare at him. Because this was something new. The baby had finally fallen asleep in her arms, and the soft rhythm of the father and daughter's breathing enveloped her as she marveled over what had just happened.

He'd responded to her singing - as hideous and horribly mangled as it was - reacted to it, and stirred enough to sing along.
Holy crap.

Why hadn't she thought of this before?

Even dead, he'd been drawn to music. Jesus, he'd been the only zombie she knew who had his own record collection!

Even dead...

"Holy crap," she whispered.

Everything Rowan had just said, the anguish she'd seen in his eyes... he'd fallen away again because he didn't want to accept that he'd been dead, couldn't handle what he'd done. And he was clearly cycling through a bunch of old memories. Maybe his mind was still trying to pick up the pieces after that terrible moment months ago?

Which meant Stephen was right, in a way. Rowan was trying to protect himself. But he had recognized her. He'd known who she was. It was all still there, he was just... rejecting it.

Julie stared at his softly closed eyes, at the lashes damp with tears, and her heart clenched. If she could just help him remember something good about that time... connect him to it in a good way and make him see it hadn't all been horrible... Rowan might come back up, and stay.

Her eyes grew wide.

The plane.

Those three days had been a good time for them both, filled with the oddest, yet unexpectedly sweet moments. Julie smiled softly as her mind wandered those moments - strangely stilted yet heartfelt conversations, silly games that went nowhere, failed attempts to teach R to dance. All wrapped in the music he never let stay silent for long.

The music was the key. If she could just get what she needed from the apartment, it would work, she knew it. Nora would have to help of course, it was still a little painful to move around, but together, they'd make it happen.

"Rowan," she whispered, reaching out to hold his hand. "It's going to be okay. You can face this... you can stop running."

She smiled.

"You just have to follow the music..."
Rowan stirred slowly, shifting slightly under the blankets, stubbornly holding on to the last dregs of sleep he could squeeze out of the morning. Something pulled at him, drawing him up, something just on the edge of his hearing.

Music, playing somewhere.

Rowan frowned. Turning onto his back, he just listened for a moment, trying to work out the song.

It was too soft to make out the words, but he caught the rhythm, and started tapping out the beat against his quilt. Something slow, weaved with guitar and... violin?

Then the tempo swelled, and the sound washed over him in insistent waves.

Rowan opened his eyes.

The soft glow from the curtains catching the full sun of late morning bathed his bedroom, and he lay there for a moment, staring up at the ceiling, listening. For the life of him, he couldn't work out where the music might be coming from. Didn't help that his door was closed. Wasn't from Bran's room though. Maybe downstairs?

It kept niggling at him, just low enough that he couldn't work out the song. So infuriating.

With an irritated groan, he flung the covers off the bed, and stood up, running his hands through his hair as he scratched the back of his head. Grabbing his jeans, he tugged them on as he hopped around his room, then rummaged through his drawers for a t-shirt.

He really needed to do some laundry. The only clean shirts he had were grey.

Pulling one on, he crossed to the bedroom door and yanked it open. The music got a little louder, but not enough to solve the mystery of what was playing, and now he was even more confused. Maybe someone was watching TV?

Yawning, he hopped down the stairs and traced a finger in a path around the framed photos and drawings in the hallway on his way to the living room. Passing the kitchen, grinding his fingers against his eyelids, he finally stopped against the old couch facing their modestly sized television.

Which wasn't on.

And nobody was here?

"Mom?" he called, and waited for an answer.

None came.

"Dad?"

Still no answer, but now he knew they weren't here. He could feel it, the emptiness of the house pressing in around him.

Maybe they'd gone out to the mall or something? Looking for a note, Rowan wandered into the kitchen to check the little whiteboard on the fridge. There wasn't anything from his parents, but his brother has scrawled something, the letters generously round and carefully rendered:
Rowan is a buttface

Sighing, he grabbed the pen, wiped his name clear with the heel of his hand and put his brother's instead. With a small smirk, he stepped away from the fridge and left the kitchen to stand in the living room again.

He had no idea where they were, but that was cool. He'd call Dave over a little later, they could jam in the garage till his folks got home.

Yawning, Rowan turned to go back up to bed, but the music swelled again, tugging at his mind as he reached the hallway.

Frowning, he looked at the front door. It sounded like it was just outside. Maybe somebody was playing out in the street? Maybe a stereo in somebody's car?

The beat pulled at him, and he headed towards the door. This was driving him nuts. Time to work out what the hell they were playing.

Not even bothering with shoes, he pulled the door open and stepped outside, into brilliant, blinding sunlight.

*Jesus*...

Throwing a hand up to shield his eyes, Rowan tried to scan the neighborhood for the source of the sound.

But... there was no neighborhood.

The light levels drew down suddenly, and blinking against the afterglow, Rowan found himself in a dimly lit space that didn't make any sense.

"What the..."

He turned to head back inside, reaching for the door handle he'd grabbed a thousand million times before, and his hand groped against a smooth white surface, oddly curved.

There was writing on it.

A big red arrow in a half circle, and the word, in similar red:

OPEN

"Huh?" Rowan mumbled, rubbing his eyes frantically. What the hell was going on?

*Where'd the fucking house go?!!*

The music faded behind him, and he twisted around, feeling a sudden strange fear settle right between his shoulder blades.

*No...*

Blue vinyl seats spread out to his right in neat rows, buried under piles of junk. Pale light streamed in from the small rounded windows against the far wall, smeared in dirt and layered in dust. To his left a curtain partially blocked his view, blue like everything else, but he could just make out panels of switches and curved glass...
This... this was...

The plane.

"No!" he yelled, twisting back to open the door, but the handle refused to budge under his hands. "SHIT!"

He wrestled with it a moment more, then turned back.

"No..." he whispered, pressing up against the door as far as he could.

Because someone was sitting in one of the seats.

Watching him.

Someone he hadn't noticed before, because they'd been as motionless, without life, as everything else.

"Oh fuck," he moaned, as the person brought their seat up, and stood. Slowly, awkwardly.

The figure started towards him then, tall and terribly grey, red hoodie torn and faded over jeans just as wrecked. The pale eyes fixed on him, alien and unblinking.

*Jesus Christ.*

He really did look like shit.

"..hi.." R said, drawing nearer.

"STOP," Rowan growled, and looked desperately around himself for some kind of weapon, anything he could use against the advancing shade wearing his face.

"..no.." R answered.

"I MEAN IT!" Rowan roared, the fear ramping up inside, chased by jagged rage. "I will beat my own fucking head in! I mean, YOUR head, not my h-JESUS, STOP!"

His double didn't stop, shuffling towards him with that piercing stare, mouth stained in red and black, hanging slackly open. Rowan's hands finally closed on something hefty - a snowglobe - and he threw it at the corpse with a guttural cry.

R caught it.

Rowan's eyes grew huge. "Wait. N-no," he stammered, "you can't.."

Almost tenderly, R returned it to a nearby pile.

".. don't break.. my stuff..." he whispered, and shuffled closer still.

Rowan snapped from his shock into a quick, jagged anger. "What stuff?!" he sputtered. "THIS STUFF?!!" Picking up an old tin car, he quickly realized it didn't have enough weight, and found a glass paperweight in the shape of Arizona instead. "THIS SHIT?!!"

With another wild cry, he threw it, and it bounced satisfyingly off his double's forehead. The corpse walked on, oblivious.
Rowan couldn't stop then - everything within reach became a missile to attack himself with. "It's all SHIT!" he screamed, flinging everything he could. "It's all stupid useless CRAP!"

R grew closer still, new cuts on his face oozing black. "No..." he whispered. "It was.. all... important."

"Oh?" Rowan sniped, shifting from the door to escape down one of the aisles. "This?" He spat, snatching something off a nearby crate. "This plastic fucking saxophone was important?!"

The toy bounced off R's chest as the corpse came closer still.

"Yes.."

"This?" Rowan barked, throwing a macrame owl, then quickly following it with an ornate pill holder. "THIS?!"

The pill holder clipped R's shoulder and opened, sending a spray of colorful capsules spattering to the already crowded floor.

R looked up from the mess, his grey eyes sad.

"Yes..." he sighed.

"You killed that old lady," Rowan growled, pointing down at the upended container, and his voice cracked as the words continued to spill, "You broke into her home and you killed her. And when her son came back, you killed him too."

"Yes..." R said, his dark lips thinning. "..we.. did..."

"NO!" Rowan roared, and he grabbed the thing he'd been searching for, the thing he'd known would be there - a pipe wrench with a bright red handle, heavy as hell. As his fingers closed tight around the cold metal, he swung it around, and stabbed it at R as he stormed towards the corpse, rage obliterating his fear. "NO! YOU did it! YOU killed them! NOT ME!"

R stopped.

"..you.. are me.." he sighed. "..we did.. this.. all of this.."

"NO!" Rowan screamed, and he swung the wrench in a sloppy, desperate arc towards R's head.

With a horrible crunching sound, the corpse's skull caved inward with a spray of gore, black as tar, and R dropped to the floor of the plane like a broken puppet.

Rowan stood, trembling with the remnants of his rage, and stared down at the grey body at his feet, wearing an empty mockery of his face. Sagging slowly, he fell heavily to his knees.

"Someone should have done that.. ages ago," he mumbled over the body, his voice strangled as he tried to choke down tears he didn't understand and didn't want. But he couldn't keep them back, and they spilled out of him in a messy rush as he looked down at the pale, dead face, the black blood from the jagged wound oozing over a scattered mess of cookbooks, car repair manuals and travel magazines.

And he started to remember.

He remembered the last moments he'd been alive as the disease ate him up, the inevitable
slow ending that stole his dreams, his life, his hope. Took everything from him, and left him this searching husk, trying desperately to find himself in the things he took, the collection of junk sitting in quiet piles around him now. He remembered the way music made him feel as a corpse, how it seemed to answer a deep question he hadn't even known he'd been asking, and how he'd groped for anything that spoke to him of the same... moving from a kid's xylophone and that stupid plastic saxophone... to an old record player from a long abandoned house, and a guitar propped against the wall of a gutted dead-end alley store.

A guitar he knew was important, but no longer understood, as he held it over his lap, plucking strings and making sounds that he couldn't weave into anything meaningful anymore.

He remembered, and saw himself as a corpse struggling to be, even as everything around him, the voice inside him, guided him to simply take.

And he didn't see the monster anymore.

He just saw himself.

Heart arching, Rowan reached for his own broken head on the floor, stopping when he realized the damage was too great, that there wasn't anything he could do to put himself back together. "No... oh Jesus... I'm sorry..." he mumbled. "I'm... so sorry."

R's dead eyes swiveled to lock onto his, and his dark, cracked lips opened.

"That's... okay," he rasped.

With a sharp breath, Rowan jerked back, but R's grey hand whipped out and grabbed him tight around the wrist.

Rowan stiffened with a gasp. The touch was frigid. He felt his body grow swiftly cold, and watched R in numb shock as the corpse sat up in front of him, head slowly reforming. Healing.

"I'm... not something... you can kill... or forget... or escape..." R sighed, and as he spoke the hesitant tones turned confident and sure as color rushed to his face. "Because I am you. What I did... what you did... will always be a part of you. You know that, right?"

Rowan stared at R in stunned silence, even as he felt his own heart still, his body growing distant and grey. Because he'd felt himself saying those words, even as the last stubborn part of himself resisted.

And finally he nodded, his head moving sloppily, as his grey eyes fell. "Yeah... I... know."

"But it's just a small part of you," R said, and smiled, his blue eyes bright. "Even smaller now, because of what happened. Because of what we did."

Rowan's eyes lifted again, flooding with color as his heart trembled to life again in his chest, and the comprehension of what his double was saying rose in startling clarity.

His mouth fell open.

"Oh my god..." he whispered.

"Yeah," R grinned, and he slowly rose to his feet, pulling Rowan with him.

"Holy shit," Rowan said, as his eyes drifted between the teetering piles of his collection, to every
object he could see.

Silence.

Nothing spoke to him anymore. The ghosts... were gone. All of their inner stories... were gone. The hundreds of lives he'd been carrying over his shoulders for years...

...were all gone.

Jesus... I'm...

I'm free.

"Yeah," his double said, grinning, vividly alive, just as he was again.

"Oh dammit!" came a warm voice from seemingly everywhere around them. "Didn't realize it'd stopped!"

Rowan jumped, feeling on the edge of some deep, indescribable joy, and twisted in place, searching for the source.

"Julie?"

R smiled, and nodded gently. "I think.. she's trying to wake me up."

And a song filled the cabin of the airplane then, bouncing off the walls, reverberating down the aisles, wrapping around the two of them.

Like a old, scratchy woolen blanket.

They both made a face.

"I hate this song," R grouched.

Rowan groaned. "It's the worst one on the album. How do we make it stop?"

R laughed. "By waking up," he said with a smile. "I think it's time. You ready?"

Rowan sighed, gazing one last time around his collection. It was just a pile of random junk now.

"Yeah," he whispered to himself, and smiled back. "I think I finally am."

Then something struck him, as the plane started to fade into a void of brilliant white.

"Wait, did I just imagine it, or am I a dad?"

R just grinned.

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If anyone gets the 'he really did look like shit' reference, I'll be happy. If not, not big deal, it might just seem really random. It wasn't!
The Answer

Julie swore, fumbling with the record to flip it, as she cradled her baby close to her chest. She could tell her daughter was getting hungry - the little one was starting to shift against her, mouth pursing in anticipation.

"Soon little lady," she whispered, kissing her little forehead. "Just gotta get this back on..." She didn't realize it'd stop so soon, or she would have waited to go to the damn bathroom...

Seriously, this was so fussy. She had to move the needle to the right spot on the record edge or it'd fall off, or start in the middle of the stupid song...

Better sound? Whatever...

She glanced down at her daughter as the music pulsed to life around her, louder than she'd like, but the baby didn't seemed to mind.

"Daddy's little girl, huh?" she giggled, glancing over at Rowan. Something was definitely going on - a frown flickered across his face as electric guitar scratched in short bursts from the speakers she'd set up on the floor.

"I think it's working," she whispered, half to the baby, half to herself. The song picked up, the singer's smooth voice weaving with the sharp guitar bursts and some wacky beatboxing in the background for rhythm. Julie raised an eyebrow and looked down at her daughter, as she tried to bounce around with the song.

"Don't think I like this one much, what do you think?"

The little one started wobbling against her chest in earnest, and she smirked.

"Okay, okay," she giggled, dancing to the bed, "Let me get settled, and we'll see if we can't do this right this time."

Julie glanced over at Rowan again before climbing up on the bed and settling her daughter in closer. As she lifted her shirt, she tried to relax and not worry about how this one would go, but it was hard. Every attempt had been painful so far, and she wasn't sure what she was doing wrong, even though Bella had done her best to help - something she still felt weird about.

She guided her daughter to the right place, and smiled tentatively as her baby latched on and started to nurse immediately, tiny hand resting gently against Julie's chest.

The smile grew. Somehow they'd worked it out, and it felt right. With a contended sigh, Julie leaned back and watched her baby with soft eyes as she gently brushed her daughter's crown of downy hair.

The song ended abruptly and a new one began, something melodic with softly strummed guitar. Swaying slowly back and forth to the music, she stared down at the incredible little life in her arms, a soft smile playing about her lips.

_I love you little lady._

"..most.. beautiful thing.." came a soft whisper beside her, almost lost in the music, "..I've ever.. seen."
The world came to a shuddering stop.

Slowly, Julie turned.

Rowan was lying against the mattress, his head turned her way, his brilliant blue eyes focused softly and completely on her. As she stared at him in shock, they dipped to the little one nursing at her chest, and rose again, damp with tears.

"Julie," he whispered, then swallowed hard, his face twisting in a grimace. "Ow.."

A wave of emotions washed over her, so many, and so opposite in nature, she didn't know what to do or say, she just stared back at him. He looked away briefly, his bleary gaze taking in the room, the speakers on the floor - which brought a smile to his face - and down to his wasted body.

He raised a thin arm, twisting it to look at the IV taped to the back of his hand, and wiggled his pale, narrow fingers. "Jesus.."

"Are you really here?" Julie asked suddenly, her pulse thrumming at her neck, "For real?"

He turned to her, his eyes confused, his mouth slightly open. He looked so incredibly ragged, her heart went out to him.

But she pulled it back. He'd done this to her too many times. Run away too many times. This was it. It didn't matter that she'd just had his child. If he couldn't be here for her, for them, after all of this, she was done.

Rowan's eyes lowered, and for a moment her heart squeezed painfully, so sure she was that he was about to fall asleep again, to retreat from what was just too hard.

But he didn't. With a big breath and a brow furrowed in determination, he slowly pulled himself up.

Julie watched him, her mouth opening, a small smile tugging at her lips. It faded quickly as she saw him from the side... how thin he'd truly become. "God... Rowan.."

He wasn't done though, and looked down at the wires stuck to his chest for a moment, before struggling to pull them off.

"Ow," he mumbled, as his shaking fingers plucked them off one by one.

Julie blinked. "Rowan? What are you-"

With an irritated noise, he pulled on his IV lines, dragging the metal stand over with a harsh screech, as he tried to shift towards her.

"Rowan, it's okay, I can-"

"Stupid.." he mumbled, and scowling, he lifted the tape from the back of his hand, winced as he pulled out the needle, and pressed the tape back down as blood bloomed underneath.

"Oh shit," she squeaked, "Don't do that!"

He slumped back against the bed then, his eyelids sinking. "It's okay," he whispered, then blinked his eyes wide. "Jesus... I'm exhausted..."

Julie's heart squeezed in answer. "You would be." Leaning forward, she cradled her daughter as she
reached for him. "Just rest, it's-

"No more resting," he sighed, and turned to face her as he pulled himself up again, smiling with tired eyes. "Julie, I'm really here. I promise..." The words fell away as his gaze drifted down, and blinking, frowning, he stretched out a hand, to gently trace along the skin of her throat and collarbone.

"Julie.."

The touch was wonderful and her skin shivered under his fingertips, but his expression made her realize what he was tracing.

The scars.

She sighed, and shrugged with a flat smile.

"No," Rowan whispered, eyes anguished as he shook his head, rejecting her reaction. Slowly, struggling against medical tethers and atrophied muscle, he drew closer.

Julie's gaze fell and blurred, and she wiped away the first hint of tears.

When his hand brushed her cheek, his fingertips cool and dry, the tears rushed out in earnest, and she finally folded against him as he circled her with a thin arm.

He held her close, simply and quietly, as she cried.

"I'm sorry," he whispered after a long silence, as his lips brushed her forehead. "I'm so sorry I wasn't here."

Julie opened her eyes, puffy and wet with tears, and nodded.

"Thank you," she said quietly, and listened to his breathing as he gently stroked their baby's head, his fingers twirling through a little curl of hair.

"God... she's beautiful..." he said softly, his voice filled with awe. "You know... I almost thought I'd dreamed this."

The song changed around them again, into something defiant, a rap with a fun beat that didn't suit the moment, and Julie frowned.

"This album is schizophrenic," she whispered against him.

Rowan laughed.

Julie blinked.

Slowly, she lifted from his shoulder and stared at him.

He smiled back, his eyes searching hers.

"What?"

But she didn't want to say. Because it was... odd, and she didn't know what it meant.

His laugh... was different.
"What?" he said again, the smile falling a little. "Is everything okay?"

Nodding, confused, and trying to cover it up, she looked around herself for the burping cloth, and quickly flipped it over her shoulder. The music only added to the awkwardness, and she suddenly found herself wishing for a remote.

Rowan sank back against the bed again. "Sorry," he sighed. "I don't have much energy." Frowning, he held his arm up again. "Why do I look like a boney?"

Julie smirked as she brought her daughter to her shoulder and gave a few gentle pats. "You were out a long time."

Rowan stared at her, and his eyes grew huge as they darted to their baby and back.

"Holy shit..." he whispered, "Nine months?!"

Julie gave a surprised laugh. "What? No!"

"But..." Rowan said a little tentatively, "You weren't... showing. You never..." He frowned. "Julie... why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?" The frown grew deeper, and his eyes dipped into memory. "Wait... is that why you..."

Julie echoed his frown, as she gently guided her daughter to the other side of her chest and lifted her shirt again.

"Why I what?" she asked, as her little girl made another good latch and Julie felt a swell of pride, smiling down at her daughter.

_We got this!_

When she looked up, Rowan was staring.

"Rowan, why I what?"

His eyes popped up. "Uh..." Then he shook his head. "Sorry, distracted." His eyes drifted down again and he frowned. "Does that... hurt?"

Julie smirked. "It did, a little. But the last two have been great."

"Oh," he said softly, as his eyes fell again. "That's good."

"Rowan," she said in a low tone. "I'm up here."

Grinning, he looked up, then yelped, cupping himself over the sheet. "Oh shit..." Lifting the sheet he gave a low moan. "God.. they did it to me again!"

Julie raised an eyebrow, then had to hold back a laugh. "Oh. Yeah." She shook her head at him. "They had to, it's not like you were getting up to go."

"Yeah, I know" he sighed. "Just..."

She blinked, and pointed at herself. "Wait.. were you just turned on by this?"

Rowan looked down, and back again. "No..." Then he squirmed, and tried to shuffle back a little closer to his side of the bed. "Maybe.. ow..."
"Rowan!" she laughed.

He smirked at her. "Sorry, you just.. flashed me. I haven't seen your boobs for..." He raised his eyebrows. "How long was it?"

Julie sighed. "About six and a half months." Her eyes fell, and she gently stroked her daughter's cheek as her mouth tightened. "A very long time."

"Jesus," Rowan whispered, and sank back on the bed again. His eyes dipped to their little girl and he frowned. "You went through all that... alone."

Shrugging, Julie looked up, giving him a small smile. "Not totally alone. Nora was always around. Your dad too, he checked in on me all the time. Brandon did too, and he gave us a bunch of baby clothes... We're buried in baby stuff actually, though most of it's back at the apartment." She smirked. "There's very little apartment left really, it's just mountains of baby stuff now."

She looked at Rowan, but his eyes were elsewhere, his brow drawn in a frown.

"What?" she asked.

"I think I said something bad to Bran, but I can't remember what... it's kind of fuzzy."

"You didn't recognize him," she said softly. "That's what your dad said."

Rowan frowned deeper. "Shit."

Julie watched his sadness grow, and tried to think of something to say. He didn't need to dwell on that right now.

Pursing her lips, she smirked. "Also, you called me 'mom'."

Rowan looked at her in shock. "I did not."

Julie nodded, the smirk turning into a grin. "Oh yeah you did."

Flopping his head back, he groaned. "Oh god... sorry. I must have really been out of it." Raising his head again, he smirked at her, his eyes dipping to the baby. "But you are a mom now, so technically..."

"Nope!" she exclaimed, still smirking. "Not getting off that easy!"

He laughed again. A really bright sound that bubbled out of him without reservation.

Julie stared at him, and she couldn't help herself as the smile spread on her face. "Rowan..."

Grinning, he turned to look at her, his blue eyes shining. "What?"

"Your laugh," she said softly. Then felt bad, and wondered if she should have said anything at all. Would it be weird?

"What about it?" he asked, his smile slipping a little.

_Dammit, I shouldn't have said anything!_

"It's... different," she said, then rushed to fix what she felt she'd done. "Didn't mean that in a bad way, it's just... it's different."
The smile turned into a frown as his eyes left her to stare at the record player across the room. "Oh."

"Rowan," she said softly, and reached out for his hand. His skin was cool and a little too dry in her own. "It's the brightest sound I think I've ever heard from you. I've never heard you laugh like that before, and it just... took me by surprise. I didn't mean to upset you."

As his gaze rose to hers again, she smiled and squeezed his hand. "You sound really... happy."

His smile grew, and he squeezed her hand back, looking down at it briefly as he stroked the webbing of her thumb.

"I am, Julie."

"Yeah?" she said.

"Yeah..." His eyes grew sharp and bright, a strange mix, as he looked at the record player again. Past it, really, and she stared at him, trying to work out what he was thinking.

The song came to a close, and there was a sudden breathy count down through the speakers. Julie turned to look, confused, and the song seemed to start for real as a heartbeat rhythm pulsed around them, layered with gentle guitar strumming and piano. The man's voice weaved in then, soft, intimate... beautiful.

Julie smiled, loving it.

Then her jaw dropped.

Because Rowan was singing along.

"..your heart's against my chest... your lips pressed to my neck.. " He sang softly, perfectly in tune, but rough, through a throat that must have been terribly dry. "I'm fallin' for your eyes.. but they don't know me yet.." His eyes locked with hers and he smiled. "and with a feeling I forget..."

"I'm in love now.."

She felt her heart burst in her chest. "Oh my god.." she whispered. "Rowan?!"

He laughed again, and then coughed, violently. Grimacing, he turned away, looking for something. "There any water?"

"Oh, uh," she stammered, still stunned, "Yeah, um.." She groped for the call button, because his tray was just too far for either of them to reach.

Bella came in only moments later, brightly smiling, as usual, and quickly rushed to Rowan's bedside as her smile got, impossibly, wider.

"Rowan! You're awake!" she cried. "How wonderful!" Then her gaze fell to his hand, and the discarded wires dangling to the floor, and the smile slipped a notch. "And you've been tearing... oh dear. Tsk tsk..." She bent down to pull the wires to the monitor up off the ground and dragged the whole assembly away. "Stupid broken thing, didn't even alarm on us out there..."

Rowan and Julie exchanged a look.

"But this," Bella chirped, drawing Rowan's hand up and lightly tapping the bandage as she took his pulse, "We can't have this, and ooh, that's some lovely music isn't it..." The nurse glanced away at
the speakers as her hips gently swayed to the song.

Julie giggled over their daughter as Rowan gave her another strained look. Then he glanced up at Bella, "I just wanted some water. Maybe something to eat? Maybe get this," he pointed down at himself, "out?"

Bella looked up from his hand intently, bright smile restored. "Can you walk around on your own yet?"

"Uh..." Rowan stammered, "I don't-

"We'll be leaving it in until you can," she said smartly, and quickly brought the tray over as Rowan gave Julie a desperate look.

She tried so hard not to laugh.

"Here's some water," Bella continued, bringing the plastic cup to his hand, "try slow sips sweetie, nothing too quick, and I'll be back with something safe for you to eat. I'm afraid there'll be no steaks or pasta for your first real meal, no matter how good that might sound."

Rowan just stared at the glass in his hand. "I didn't-"

"Stephen will be so happy," Bella burbled over him, "and your Dad's been so worried, I can't wait to tell him!"

As Rowan glowered darkly and sank against the mattress, nursing the cup, Bella turned to Julie.

"How's the new mother? Have you picked a name yet?"

Julie froze, feeling suddenly very awkward. "Uh.. not yet, but-"

Bella seemed to disappear and materialize at her bedside almost instantly, and gave her daughter's head a little pat.

"Oh, that looks like it's going well, are you still having pain?"

Julie looked up at Bella, blushing. "No, I think we-"

"Wonderful," the nurse sighed, and her smile grew warmer as she gazed between Julie, the baby and Rowan. "You have a beautiful little girl you two," she said softly, and pointed sharply at Rowan, "Daddy, you need to get better real quick so you can give mommy some support, okay?"

"Okay.." Rowan mumbled in a small voice, sinking further into the bed. Julie snorted without meaning to, then quickly clammed up as Bella turned intently to her, waggling the same finger. "And you mommy, you're the most important person in this room. You take care of yourself, and let the new daddy do what he can. Don't do everything for him, okay?"

Julie blinked, nodding rapidly, and Bella's gaze fell to her daughter.

"And you, sweet little child, you tell your parents to give you a name." Looking up at them both then with a bubbly giggle, she headed to the door. "I'll be back with some food!"

Then she left, shutting the door behind her.

"Oh my god," Julie laughed, staring back at Rowan with incredulous eyes. "What just happened?"
"That's the Bella tornado," Rowan said with a smirk. "Stephen's the only one who can work with her. I couldn't. She'd never let me finish speaking."

Julie watched as he took a contented sip of water, and the smile fell from her mouth. For some reason, she hadn't made that connection. He used to work here, so of course he'd know Bella... but...

"Oh my god," she whispered.

**What would happen now?**

Rowan looked at the baby and back, his eyes growing wide. "What?"

Julie glanced down at her daughter, confused for a moment, before shaking her head. "Oh no, she's fine." Looking closer, a small smile spread on her face. "In fact, she's fallen asleep." With a soft noise of affection, she gently pulled her baby up again to rest against her shoulder. The little one stirred only briefly, ice-blue eyes opening and closing again, before stilling to sleep, and Julie smiled happily as she looked at Rowan.

"Babies feel and smell amazing," she sighed.

Rowan laughed. "Yeah, they do."

At her curious look, he smiled. "I had seven years on Bran, I used to hold him all the time."

"Oh..." Julie said softly, "Wow.. I keep forgetting about that."

He shrugged, his smile turning a little sharper. "We're the same age now, it's hard to remember." He raised a hopeful eyebrow. "Can I hold her?"

Julie gave him a tentative smile. "Are you feeling strong enough? She's not light."

"She's my daughter," Rowan answered, his eyes bright. "I'll always be strong enough."

The words stirred something beautifully warm inside, and Julie's smile grew. Shimmying closer, she lowered their baby into his arms.

"Support her head.. there you go," she murmured, and then she had to stop speaking because the sight of her daughter in his arms made her want to cry.

Rowan held her effortlessly, his thin arms supporting her just right, and he leaned down to kiss her head. "Jesus.. she's beautiful."

Julie laid down alongside him, her head on his shoulder, and folded her hand around Rowan's.

"Yes she is."

All was quiet for a moment, until Rowan made a soft noise, and Julie glanced up at him.

His eyes were wet with tears.

"You kept her safe Julie..." he whispered, and a tear spilled down his cheek. "Through all of those terrible things... when I couldn't, you kept her safe."

The tears rushed to her eyes, to answer his, and she smiled.
"I'm so sorry," he mumbled, his eyes closing in pain, "I'm so sorry about all of it... I never..."

"Please," Julie whispered, and cradled his cheek as she kissed his brow. "Let that go. It's the past. Leave it there."

Their eyes met, and smiling softly, Julie leaned in to kiss him, but Rowan turned away to look down at their daughter again.

"Bella's right."

Frowning just slightly, Julie looked down as well. "About what?"

Why'd he pull away?

"She needs a name," he said softly, stroking their baby's shoulder with his thumb.

Julie sighed and gave a little smile. "Yeah. Well, I have an idea... but I didn't want to name her until you woke up for real."

Rowan gave her a carefully neutral look.

"Diane?" he asked.

Julie almost laughed, the expression on his face made it totally clear he didn't really like the idea.

"My mom's name?" Julie said, and smirked. "Does she look like a Diane to you?"

Rowan looked down at their daughter, then back, clearly relieved. "No, she doesn't."

"How about Claire?" Julie offered, and it was her turn to look pensive, though she tried to hide it.

Rowan grinned. "She doesn't look like a Claire either, but that's nice." The grin softened to a smile, and his eyes settled on her intently. "You said you had an idea."

Julie smiled back, and felt strangely nervous all of a sudden. "Yeah," she answered, nodding. "Yeah, I was thinking..."

"Gertrude," Rowan blurted out suddenly. "No, Anastasia. Wait, Edna? Ooooh, I know - Milicent. Or, we could just, you know, mash our names together. She could be Rowlie, or Juwan, or..."

Julie didn't think her face could be any more scrunched up, and felt a rush of relief when Rowan started laughing again. The sound actually woke the baby, and their daughter's beautiful blue eyes blinked up at them both.

And as she stared down into those eyes, the color of a glacier, of the deepest coldest ice, it came out, just like that.

"Hope."

Rowan looked at Julie, his eyes filled with wonder, and a gentle smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as his gaze fell to their daughter.

"It's perfect," he breathed. "I love it."

Julie grinned, her vision swimming with tears, "Yeah?"
"Yeah, I really do," he said, nodding. "Hope," he echoed softly, and pressed his finger into his daughter's palm. She closed her little fingers around his and her tiny mouth opened and closed. He laughed. "I think she likes it."

Smiling brightly, Julie pressed in against him again and sighed. Everything felt good. Felt right. Slowly, her eyes closed, as all of the stress and worry of months seemed to sink away in a moment.

As she was beginning to doze, Rowan started to sing along to the music again, softly, as he stared down at their daughter. Julie watched him, marveling at this incredible gift that she'd never known he'd had. His voice was still rough, but he held the melody, and there was something raw and vulnerable in the shape of the words that tugged at her heart.

"And all I've done for want of wit... to memory now I can't recall... so fill to me the parting glass... good night and joy... be with you all."

"Rowan," she whispered, as he grew silent again, and then wasn't sure how to continue.

Smiling up from Hope, his blue eyes turned to hers. "Yeah?"

"When did you..." she started to say, then stopped and tried again, "You can sing?"

He gave a little nod. "Yep."

Her eyes grew as she stared at him, waiting for more. But he didn't say anything else, and she flailed, incredulous. "Why haven't I ever heard you sing before?! You've got a great voice!"

Rowan's gaze drifted away, towards the record player. The album had just finished and the needle skated off the vinyl loudly, before the arm drew back with a plastic click.

"For the same reason I won't be working in this hospital anymore," he said with a big breath, "Or flying, at least, not until I can learn it for real."

And then he turned to her, and his eyes were bright again, intent, and a little fragile. And she realized he'd just answered the question she hadn't quite asked before.

It shocked her. It shouldn't have, but it did. She'd talked to Marcus about his big change, Sarah too, and how strange it was for them now. In fact, Marcus seemed the hardest hit of any of the other once-dead she'd talked to. He'd obviously lost something important to him, and unlike his usual habit of just burying everything in a joke, there was a kind of brittle honesty to him now that was hard to get used to. But, he was also one of the few dead who'd pushed hard to keep his old job. He was still working at the school, and struggling a little, but seemed to find something in the struggle that made him happy.

But... with Rowan... what would it mean to him? She hadn't even thought about how he might react, she'd been too focused on just waking him up. Was it a good thing? Or would he miss them too? The skills he used to have?

But as soon as he spoke, she had her answer.

"I'm free, Julie," he said, his voice trembling on the edge of an emotion that swept her up too. Squeezing his hand, she held him closer. "I'm finally just... myself," he whispered. "The singing, playing music, making music, that was always a part of me. I had a band in high school, in college too, I think I told you about that..."
She nodded. He had, but he'd related it like it was just another fact. Like, this is what he did. Not who he was. The way he sang - it was very much who he was. A revelation she hadn't expected.

"It just got... lost," he continued, gazing down at Hope. "Buried." He let out a huge sigh and looked up at her again. "But now... I'm not muddied with anyone else anymore, I'm not smothered with hundreds of others hanging over my shoulder."

His chest rose and fell with another sigh and he closed his eyes. "No more Jack, or Caleb. No more... Perry."

Julie squeezed his hand. He needed to know that wasn't important. That it didn't matter.

When his blue eyes opened again, there was something in them that surprised her. Something a little fearful.

"It's just me now, Julie."

Julie searched his eyes, smiling to counter his fear. "Why do you look so worried?" she asked. "That's wonderful!"

He nodded, "It is.. but..."

"But what?"

"I don't know... what that's going to mean for..."

She waited for more, but he didn't finish. He just looked down at their baby, at their joined hands.

"For?" she prompted, but something twisted inside as his meaning slowly dawned on her.

"Us."

"Us?" she echoed, frowning, the twist in her gut tightening.

"Yeah," he said, squeezing her hand this time.

She sought his gaze, and he finally gave it to her. "Why?" she asked.

"Because it's just me, Julie." he answered softly. "I'm... not like I was before. I'm not..."

Julie sighed. "This is about Perry isn't it."

He grew quiet.

"Isn't it?" she asked, knowing the answer.

Rowan finally nodded. "Yeah."

"Because he's absolutely gone, and you're worried that will change everything?" Julie said. "That, maybe I won't love you anymore? Or... you won't feel the same way about me?"

He shrugged, and didn't answer for a long while. "Maybe."

Julie giggled, then she stopped as her thoughts wandered to a moment before. Wait a minute... Her eyes grew wide. "Is that why you did that?"

"Did what?" Rowan asked, looking worried. "What'd I do?"
She giggled again, unable to help herself.

Rowan frowned. "This is serious, and you keep laughing."

Julie drew a hand over her mouth, but her eyes were still dancing, and a smile tugged at the corner of Rowan's mouth.

"That's why you wouldn't kiss me?" she finally asked him, laying a gentle hand on his chest.

Rowan's gaze dipped suddenly as the hint of a smile dropped, and she had her answer again.

"Oh Rowan," she sighed. "Silly."

Now he was frowning, and she felt bad for the choice of word. But he didn't understand something important.

"It's not silly Julie. Jesus, you've already said my laugh is different. The singing. That might seem like small stuff, but there's more to come." The frown grew deeper, and he pressed his head back against the bed and glared at the other end of the room. "I'm not Perry, and I'm not R anymore... and... I think that's who you fell in love with."

Julie frowned up at him. "I didn't realize how worried you were about this. I didn't mean to make light, I'm sorry."

He looked back at her. "It's okay, I just... it's always been there. I've always had this big question, and now... I'm afraid of the answer."

The words made Julie smile.

"Well.. I'm not," she said softly.

His blue eyes fixed on her again, questioning, crisp with worry. "You're not?"

She shook her head, still smiling. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I know who I fell in love with, and he's still here, lying in front of me."

Rowan sighed and looked away. "Julie, you don't understand."

"Rowan," she said, her voice strong and warm. He slowly turned back to her and her smile grew bright as she searched his eyes, needing him to see. "I fell in love with a man who was trying so hard to be more than he was. A man struggling to find himself, and fighting to live."

His eyes widened, but not with any kind of fear. There was something open and hopeful there now.

"That man is still here. That man just clawed his way out of a coma to come back to me." Her gaze fell to their daughter, now sleeping in his arms, and she gently stroked her daughter's cheek. "To us." Smiling, she looked back up at him, raising a hand to trace a line across his brow, as if she could smooth his worries away. "So I'm not afraid, because I have my answer. You'll always be a man who fights for what's important to him. Who seeks the best of himself. That's the part of you I love, and I always will."

Rowan's gaze grew soft as she spoke, and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.
"The fact that you've just added singing to what I love about you, holy crap," Julie giggled. "And it doesn't hurt that you're as sexy as hell."

His mouth split wide in a sudden bright laugh, and she grinned, loving that sound. Gazing down at himself then, he gave her a cockeyed look. "Even now?"

"Ah," Julie smirked, crinkling her face. "Okay... no. I mean, you're handsome, but the boney look is not doing it for me."

He laughed again, and the sound gently faded to a smile as he leaned in closer, until his beautiful eyes were all she could see. They were like oceans, deep, familiar, warm, and she felt herself drawn in.

"Thank you," he said softly.

Julie smiled back, a little surprised. He'd never said those words like that before.

When his eyes dropped to her mouth, and rose again, she knew he was about to kiss her, and the tiniest part of her wondered if there really was something to what he was saying.

Because as he drew closer, and he cradled her cheek with his cool fingertips, and those brilliant blue eyes grew soft and deeper still, he felt... different.

And for one terrifying moment, she was as scared as he had been moments before.

But then, their lips touched, and the tenderness of his mouth against hers, the soft press of his skin, and the warm rush of his breath as he tasted her and drew the kiss deeper...

... burned all of those thoughts and doubts away.

They became hunger and love, and flesh and heat, and desire so raw and powerful they would have stripped to hearts alone to take the other in whole...

...but a little voice called out.

A soft burble, that made them remember...

That one was Rowan.

The other Julie.

They were each other's answer.

And Hope needed to be changed.

;) Thanks for reading everyone, hope you enjoyed it. I love these two together. Btw, the songs I've quoted, as some might have guessed, are from Ed Sheeran. Love that man's music.
Rowan stood on the tarmac, leaning on the cane he'd been using in his rehabilitation, hating the fact he needed one. His gut twisted uncomfortably as the jet came to a stop in front of their small gathering, and he let out a slow breath to steady his nerves.

He was not looking forward to this.

But, he'd volunteered to do it, so he had to suck it up.

The Colonel gave him a slap on the arm and stepped forward to meet the disembarking group. Rowan hung back, and glanced at the man in front, before looking back down at his hand, the knuckles white as he grasped the head of the cane.

*Dammit, just look at him.*

Releasing a sigh, he raised his head again, catching Joshua's quick glance his way, before the man, flanked by two of his own soldiers, stepped forward to grasp the Colonel's offered hand.

The handshake was short and stiffly formal, and both men walked back from it with haste, neither being too comfortable with the contact. The Colonel shared a few words that Joshua nodded to and Rowan didn't hear, pointed to a few soldiers, then gestured towards Rowan, who stood as tall as he could as he met the man's gaze.

Joshua looked over him quickly, noting the cane, then glanced away, his gaze sweeping between the two soldiers beside Rowan. Then the man walked over while talking briefly to the soldier on his right, who Rowan didn't recognize.

Rowan didn't say anything as Joshua approached. There wasn't anything he could really think to say.

Joshua stopped in front of them and nodded towards the Hummer parked nearby, not meeting Rowan's eye.

"That our transport?"

Rowan tried not to sigh and failed, then nodded, then realized Joshua wasn't looking at him so he needed to speak up.

"Yeah, I'm going to dr-"

Joshua had already walked away, signalling to his men to follow.

With a sharp look at the Colonel, Rowan gritted his teeth and took his steps, slowly and carefully, towards the vehicle.

Joshua had already climbed inside and was looking away, towards the far terminal - something Rowan was thankful for as it meant the man couldn't see him working so hard just to walk.

It'd been a tough month and a half. The coma had left him with very little muscle strength, and
some frustrating learning difficulties. He'd had to build up the strength to use his legs again, and had only started walking on his own a week ago. Trying to concentrate on anything for a long period of time, even something as simple as playing the guitar, left him irritable, with a headache only the strongest painkiller could touch. It'd been hard. And it'd been even harder on Julie, who'd had to shoulder raising their baby while he was stuck in hospital.

They were doing alright now though, and he threw himself at every diaper change and middle-of-the-night comforting he could, to try and make up for it.

Hope had started smiling in earnest and making all sorts of noises, adding her own hilarious harmonies to his songs, even mimicking his popping fish sounds when he gave her baths. She was moving more, responding to them more, and growing more beautiful every day.

He adored her. When the physical crap got him down, all he had to do was think of her popping away in the bathtub to turn his mood around. Thinking about her at all did the trick actually, the popping was just a bonus.

Smiling with the memory as he reached the Hummer, Rowan slowly clambered inside, acutely aware of Joshua watching his struggles.

But the man never said anything. He just crossed his arms over his chest and stared out over the city as they drove.

As they neared the spot, Rowan's stomach twisted into even more fascinating knots, and he had to consciously stop himself from wringing the life from the steering wheel. Joshua glanced his way a couple of times during the trip, but kept to himself mostly, save for the time he pointed out the football stadium to his men. One of the Colonel's soldiers piped up in answer, and suddenly they were all talking in earnest about the game, the outsiders absolutely fascinated by the plays the soldier started to share. The guy had been at the final Superbowl, hosted by their city only a few months before playing football became the absolute last thing on anyone's mind.

Rowan learned a lot then, about Joshua's experience of the game. They didn't have a TV in town to watch, 'cept when Joshua was really young, but they read the heck out of some magazines, and snuck out a few times to catch a couple of games through their closest neighbor's window. They'd pieced together what they could of the rules from what they'd read and seen, but it was an eye opener to see something so huge, like a temple almost, dedicated to it.

"We'd always make it back before Dad got too wild on us," Joshua added, his mouth curled up in the slightest of smiles. "Caleb always seemed to know..."

The smile disappeared, and Joshua never finished the sentence, returning to gaze out at the passing buildings and streets.

Rowan sighed again, and kicked himself mentally for doing so.

After a sharp turn off the main street, they finally reached the spot, and Rowan pulled up to the curb just opposite the alleyway.

His stomach was doing cartwheels now. Why the hell had he offered to do this? What was he thinking? How was this going to be good for anybody?

The Colonel had been keen, of course. Accepting the request had been a good diplomatic move, a way to add yet another settlement with some substantial firepower - one that had experienced a revolution of sorts - to his fold. And the Colonel hadn't demanded Rowan play along either. The
man had given him an out - all Rowan had to do was show John where it'd been, and if it wasn't in a spot that'd been cleared, they'd handle the remains and the exchange without any need for contact between the two of them.

But something drove Rowan to do this personally. A sense of responsibility, of culpability. But not of guilt. He was done with that.

And man was he kicking himself for being so damn responsible now.

It took him too long to get out of the car - Joshua was already standing at the mouth of the alleyway, his pose stiff, his gaze set down its length. His soldiers were hanging back at the car, and as Rowan shuffled his way forward, he smiled at the Colonel's men and gestured back towards the Hummer.

"I got this," he said, turning back towards Joshua.

"Sir, our orders were to-"

Rowan turned back to smirk at the soldier who'd spoken. "Seriously, stop calling me sir. I'm fine. We'll be fine."

The man, a heavy set soldier with deep brown skin and bold eyes, stared at him a moment longer, stared at Joshua even longer, then nodded and stepped back to the group.

Rowan finally reached Joshua, who did not turn to look at him, but stared at the opening, taking in its size. His gaze lighted briefly on the garbage cans and dumpster about half way down, across from two doors set in the brick wall of what used to be a restaurant.

Following his gaze, Rowan was surprised to see that the alleyway was basically spotless. Completely trash free. The bins were empty, and looked almost new.

*Jesus, did they mop?*

It shouldn't have struck him as funny but it did, and he immediately felt like shit.

"Where'd he come from?"

Joshua's voice bounced back oddly from the opening, and Rowan glanced at him, momentarily confused.

"What?"

"Caleb," Joshua said shortly. "Where'd he run here from?"

"Oh. Um."

Rowan scrambled to bring up any memories that might help him answer that question, but he had no help from Caleb's side, all of that was long gone. His memories as a corpse weren't much help either, slippery and fragmented as they were.

"I don't know," he said finally. "He was trying to get out when I came in."

Joshua let out a tense breath, and Rowan caught the man glancing at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Show me everything. Tell me everything. Every moment."
Aww fuck.

"Joshua, I don't se-"

"Please," Joshua said quickly, in an oddly broken voice.

Rowan swallowed, feeling suddenly terribly sad, but he nodded, and took a few shuffling steps in.

"I smelled him," he said quietly. "I came in, and he was just coming from that door." He pointed to the one on the right, tagged with some kid's name who was probably long since dead. "I think he'd just tried to open it."

"Why didn't he just run past you?" Joshua asked faintly, from behind him.

Rowan drew in a deep breath. "He was shocked, like I'd taken him by surprise. Didn't seem to know what to do for a moment, looked all around, maybe for a weapon, I don't know, but I got closer."

He closed his eyes, reliving the scene. God, he didn't want to do this. Go through this again. Everything else had faded so comfortably into the background, he'd been free for the first time since it'd all started and it'd felt so good.

"And?"

Slowly opening his eyes, Rowan looked at the space where Caleb had been, and saw the man again in his mind's eye - the shocked expression, the growing panic, and the sloppy lunge he'd made to get past.

"He tried to get past me," he said flatly. "I grabbed him."

"And?" Joshua said hoarsely.

Rowan turned to look at him. "And I killed him. Here." He pointed to the ground to his right.

They'd obviously tried to remove the stain, but it had stubbornly clung to the concrete. A diminished patch of variegated browns spread in a wide, ugly pool at the spot.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, staring down at it. Jesus, he'd left a big mess. The Colonel said they'd cleared this sector almost a year ago, and the body had been carefully removed and cremated, the remains labeled with the address and stored. Caleb didn't have any ID on him, so it'd been yet another anonymous corpse until Joshua reached out.

"How?" Joshua asked. "Show me."

Rowan looked up at the soldier.

"What?"

"Show me how you killed him."

Joshua's face was impassive, his brow heavy in shadow.

Rowan shook his head. "No."

"Please," Joshua said quietly, still not looking at him.
"What is the point of this Joshua?" Rowan snapped. "What good does this do?! It doesn't help him!" He stabbed his finger down at the stain. "Doesn't help you! Sure as fuck doesn't help me!"

Joshua calmly lifted his sidearm, and pointed it at Rowan's chest.

"Show me."

Rowan sucked in a breath to yell out, but Joshua cocked the handgun and tilted it at him.

"You yell, your men die. You die."

Rowan's mouth dried to dust as he glanced over Joshua's shoulder and saw the Colonel's men standing, unarmed, covered by Joshua's soldiers.

_Oh shit._

"Joshua, what the hell are you doing?" Rowan asked, as his chest grew tight with fear.

"I'm asking you to show me exactly how you killed my brother," the man answered evenly.

The gun didn't waver, and Rowan felt a target on his chest like it was burning.

"Are you going to kill me Joshua?" Rowan said, as calmly as he could. "You just going to execute me over the spot where your brother died?"

Joshua sighed. "I might be some years too late, but that's better than never, right?"

_Oh FUCK._

"Joshua, don't do this," Rowan said quickly, "You'll never make it out of the city. You'll be leaving your community leaderless."

The man shrugged. "I made arrangements before I left, just in case. Morrissey will take my place."

Rowan's heart started to pound in his chest, and he searched frantically for something to say, to appeal to Joshua's sense.

"Morrissey's a prick, Joshua," he stammered, "That's a bad choice." Getting a little frantic, he glanced around the alley, trying to find anything that might help him get out of this alive, but the place was too _clean_. There was nothing he could use but the fucking cane that was holding him upright!

_Shit!_

Joshua was smirking. "Yeah. Yeah he is. Good head for strategy though, and knows the strengths of his men. He'll do."

"Jesus Christ Joshua, I have a child, you can't-"

Joshua leveled the gun at his head. "STOP wasting my time and SHOW ME how he died!"

Rowan let out a ragged breath and stared at Joshua for a moment before nodding.

"Okay... okay."

He searched back through slippery grey memory again and sought to find the moment once more,
but it was hard - the gun pointed at his skull was no small distraction.

Images of Julie and Hope kept intruding, and his eyes got a lot more damp than he'd meant them to.

But finally he reached it, and he was back there again, and Caleb was trying to run past him, and he snatched an arm out - no longer grey, but flush with life, and grasped thin air.

"I grabbed his arm, and-"

"Which one?"

Rowan glared at him. "His left, he was running that way," he pointed, "He was facing the exit, I wasn't."

"Go on," Joshua prodded, then he shook his head, "No, wait, better if you show using me." He walked over then, to the dumpster, and laid his gun on it before signalling to his men.

"Going to get physical! Keep them covered, ignore us!" He yelled, then turned back to Rowan who was watching him in confusion.

"Using you?" Rowan asked, frowning.

Joshua nodded, and stepped close to him. Then he took Rowan's hand and pressed it against his upper arm.

"Do to me what you did to him."

Rowan looked at him skew eyed. "You want me to tear your throat out, bash your head against the ground and eat your brains?" He laughed, the sound a little strained. "Tempting, but brain's been off the menu fo-"

One moment he was talking, the next he was lying on the ground, staring up at Joshua with a splitting headache, having smacked his skull against the concrete.

"Oww," he muttered, cradling his head. "Dammit Josh."

Joshua kicked him. It wasn't hard enough to do any damage, but it sure as hell hurt.

"You don't get to call me that Rowan," the man said in a low, dangerous voice, "you got that?"

Rowan glared at him as he got up on his elbows. "Can I have my cane back?"

Joshua picked it up from where he'd kicked it, and held it out to him. "Now show me."

Rowan snatched it away. "Fine."

It took him a while to rise, but eventually he was back on unsteady legs again, and nursing the growing bump on the back of his head.

Then he tried to pull Joshua into the right spot. Wasn't easy while leaning on a cane.

"Okay, he was where you are, I was here. I grabbed him on the arm." Rowan wrapped his fingers around Joshua's upper arm and tried to crush it... didn't work, and Joshua just stared at his hand with the slightest smirk.
"Then what happened?" Joshua asked.

Rowan sighed. "Getting to that." He closed his eyes and tried to settle back into his old headspace again. It was a lot easier when he was grabbing something for real.

But the images turned bloody, and Rowan scowled, not wanting to be here again.

But if Joshua wanted it, he was going to get it.

Rowan opened his eyes and felt his muscles hit the memory. Immediately he yanked Joshua over, and his other arm wrapped around the guy's skull, wrenching his head to one side to expose Joshua's throat. He struck-

Or at least, would have, if Joshua hadn't punched him sharply in the gut.

Rowan doubled over Joshua's fist and fell back onto the concrete, curling up as he tried to breathe.

"Why didn't Caleb do that?" Joshua muttered, frowning down at him.

Sucking in a breath, Rowan shook his head and tried to speak. "W...wouldn't... work," he gasped, then rolled around his stomach again. "Fuck Joshua... how'm I s'posed.. to show.."

"Sorry." Joshua sighed, and reached down to help him up. "Reflex."

Rowan swatted his hand away and glared up at him. "If you're going to shoot me.. asshole, just do it. I'm not playing your stupid game.. anymore."

Joshua shrugged. "Okay." Then he walked over to pick the handgun off the dumpster. "I can honestly say you're the first guy I've ever shot in the head twice."

Rowan's heart stuttered. Jesus Christ, the guy was really going to do it. His mind raced again, finding no options for escape, and flicking repeatedly to Hope's face - her smiles up at him as he changed her, her features soft in sleep as she lay in Julie's arms...

He couldn't leave her without a father. This couldn't happen.

Quickly, he raised his hands, as Joshua drew level with the gun.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that, I'll show you everything you need to see, I promise," he stammered quickly, trying to hold the man's gaze, "Please give me another chance... please."

Joshua said nothing for a moment and would not meet his stare. Then he shrugged, and tucked the gun in his holster.

"Continue," he said flatly, and stood back where Rowan had last held him.

Feeling a rush of relief, Rowan allowed himself to breathe, and slowly, painfully pulled himself up again. Then he pointed at Joshua's throat.

"I bit him, and he-"

"Where?"

"Joshua, this going to take all day and night if you keep interrupting me."

Joshua stared over his left shoulder coolly. "Going to take even longer if you keep complaining
Rowan glared at Joshua, and the soldier clearly did not care, or meet his gaze, so he sighed, and pressed his finger against the man's throat.

"Here," he sighed again, hating what he was about to say, "I tore out his jugular and some muscle. A lot of dead do.. did. it. You get meat, and they stop fighting quick."

Joshua's face betrayed a cascade of emotion, a quick flickering of shock, anger, and sadness, and Rowan looked down, dropping his hand.

"I'm sorry," he whispered again, his voice terribly faint.

"What'd he do?" Joshua asked, after clearing his throat.

"When I pulled away," Rowan continued, "he staggered back a few steps, still screaming, holding where I'd bitten him, then..."

Rowan stopped, seeing too clearly Caleb's face in his memories - twisted with the absolute horror of knowing he was about to die.

"Fuck," he whispered to himself.

"What then, you bastard," Joshua growled.

"He fell... there," Rowan said quietly, his face twisted in sadness and regret, his hand trembling as he pointed at the stain. "And I fell on top of him, and I..."

He couldn't continue, and looked up at Joshua in anguish.

The man's eyes were livid. "And you..."

"I'm sorry Joshua," Rowan squeezed through a throat now thick with tears. "I'm so fucking sorry."


"Yes," Rowan whispered, as a tear fell down his face.

"You shattered his head against the pavement, and you ate what was inside."

Rowan nodded, no longer able to speak.

Suddenly, his legs were crumpling underneath him as Joshua knocked his cane out again, and he landed hard on the cold pavement, his wrist bending awkwardly as he tried to stop his fall.

"Ow... fuck," he groaned, grabbing his wrist before rolling onto his back, trying to get his eyes on Joshua again.

"That's perfect," Joshua whispered, and he pulled the gun from his side.

Eyes bulging, Rowan tried to back away on his elbows, but Joshua snapped the gun up level with his head.

"No, stay right there. Right where it happened," Joshua said. Then he sighed. "Please."

Rowan looked at the concrete he was lying on, and his heart sank in his chest. The stain spread
around him like a dirty pool.

"Joshua, please," Rowan said, his voice breaking, his hand raised defensively, "Please don't do this... I know I took your brother's life, but I wasn't in control!"

"I know."

"Then what's shooting me going to fix?" Rowan cried, "It's not going to bring Caleb back!"

Joshua's expression grew terribly resigned. "No, it won't." The gun lowered slightly.

The soldier turned then, towards the mouth of the alleyway, and nodded at his men standing guard over the Colonel's soldiers. Rowan followed his gaze, then snapped back to Joshua as the man stood quietly looking down at him, the gun still in his hand.

"Please forgive me Joshua," Rowan said in a strained voice, "It's the only way you'll get any peace. Shooting me won't do it."

Joshua released a heavy sigh, as his face grew sadder still. "No, it won't." His mouth curled in a bitter smile. "I forgive you Rowan. Thing is... I don't forgive myself. Never should've let my brother go. Never should've let dad hurt him so bad. I'm here to make amends, and your men will make sure I get some real peace."

There was a sound, from the alley opening, and Rowan looked over, his mind running over what Joshua had said. My men? What?

The Colonel's men had somehow regained their weapons, and had forced Joshua's soldiers on their knees. Only then did the one who'd insisted on coming with Rowan turn and raise his rifle at Joshua.

"DROP IT! RIGHT NOW!" he yelled, glaring from under a gnarled brow.

Rowan's gaze flicked back to Joshua, as the man gave him a small, sincere smile.

"I want to thank you for bringing my brother back to me," he said quietly. "It was a hard time, but a gift I'm grateful for."

"Joshua, what-"

The soldier roared again, cocking his rifle, "DROP THE GUN OR I WILL SHOOT!"

Rowan spun, flinging his hand up at the soldier, "No! Don't!"

"Goodbye Rowan," Joshua sighed, and he purposely shifted forward, exposing his chest towards the entrance, and jerked the gun towards Rowan's head.

Rowan didn't think - consumed in a terrible panic, he somehow found his legs beneath him and launched himself up, slamming into Joshua as the crack of a rifle echoed through the alleyway.

Something hot smacked him hard in the shoulder, spinning him around as they both fell to the ground. Grunting against the sting, he flailed for Joshua's gun and wrapped his good hand around it, ripping it from the soldier's grasp.

"Don't shoot him!" he roared out, as the heavy thunk of boots echoed towards them. "Don't hurt him!"
With a pained gasp, he tossed the gun down the alleyway, where it skittered under the dumpster and out of sight. Then he twisted back, needing to keep Joshua in view, to make sure the man was safe and wouldn't do anything even more stupid.

"Dumbass!" Rowan yelled, as Joshua, eyes fixed in shock on him, was pulled to his knees by the Colonel's men, "You think Caleb would want this?" he cried, the words spilling from him in an angry rush. "You were the most important thing in his life, you fucking idiot! He wanted you to live! He wanted you to be happy!"

He winced then, clutching at the wound, and blood ran warm over his fingers. "Fuck! Everybody stop shooting me! I'm done with being shot!"

"Wasn't going to shoot you... gun wasn't even loaded," Joshua muttered, as the soldier cuff him roughly and brought up a comm.

"Incident at retrieval site, one shot," the soldier gave Rowan's shoulder a quick look over then continued, "Flesh wound. Area secured."

Rowan looked up at the man indignantly, "Doesn't feel like a flesh wound," he mumbled, and shifted his hand. "Ow."

"You took that bullet for me," Joshua said quietly, staring at him as the soldier headed to the dumpster for Joshua's gun, answering his comm as he walked.

Rowan made an annoyed noise, "Didn't really take it," he grumbled, "I just gave it a high five as it passed."

Joshua laughed, and Rowan looked up at him in surprise - the sound was bright and real.

Then the man gave a heavy breath. "I'm sorry I scared you. But I figured a little fear where my brother felt the worst fear was fitting." He grew quiet then, and when he raised his head once more, his eyes were red. He tilted his head towards the opening. "My men looking this way?"

Glowering, Rowan looked, then turned back and shook his head.

Joshua crumpled, bending awkwardly with his hands behind his back, as his face scrunched up.

And he started to cry.

Rowan blinked, and the anger eased from his face as he watched the man, stunned.

"Joshua.. I..." he whispered, and the words fell away from him as Joshua's tears grew deeper. The hurt pouring from the guy was palpable, and Rowan couldn't help himself. Shuffling awkwardly, he maneuvered next to him, and lay his bloodstained hand tentatively against the man's shoulder.

The soldier stiffened, and blue eyes turned his way, tight with grief.

"Don't.. touch me," Joshua whispered, lowering his head again.

Rowan lifted his hand, returning it to the wound on his shoulder. The bleeding had slowed a little, but it still stung.

He sighed, and tried to remember something from the moment before he'd broken the wall. Something Caleb had wanted him to pass on. And it came to him, word for word.

"Caleb wanted me to tell you something," he said, and felt Joshua still beside him. "So what I'm
saying now, it's from him. Not me." Taking a deep breath, he let Caleb's words fall from his lips, trying to say them as he would to Brandon, and they echoed oddly from the alley wall, over the mottled bloodstain on the floor. "I love you brother. It was real good to be with you again. To laugh with you again."

Joshua gave a choked cry beside him, and Rowan looked down to find those eyes fixed on him, wide with disbelief.

Rowan couldn't look at him for the next words, because they weren't really his, but he still said them as sincerely as he could. "You might be the eldest Joshua, but this time I get to go first."

Caleb's smile came to him then, and he tried to echo it, as Joshua's eyes squeezed in tears again and he cried in earnest, his sobs hard, the sound almost punching through the air around them. "And I will be watching over you... always."

Then he let out a slow breath, and he pressed his hand against Joshua's shoulder, and this time the soldier leaned into him and Rowan held him as he cried.

And he thought about Brandon.

The moment in the hospital had obviously really hurt his brother, because they'd only had stiff conversations since then, and Brandon's visits during his rehabilitation were sporadic and short.

And Rowan still didn't understand why it had hurt his brother so badly, not when it was all back to normal now. His dad couldn't explain it either, Brandon had just shrugged it all off.

His gaze fell to the bloodstain. To the remnant of Caleb. Joshua's brother was just a stain on the ground, and dust in a box now.

Rowan's heart clenched, and he jerked up suddenly, needing to stand. Everything was fine for a minute, until something twitched that shouldn't have, and he ended up stumbling, practically falling on top of Joshua as his legs shook beneath him.

A soldier appeared quickly, handing him back his cane and giving him a steadying arm. As Rowan started his laborious walk, another car pulled up beside the Hummer just outside the alleyway, and more soldiers spilled out.

The Colonel emerged then, and strode quickly to Rowan's side, quickly taking in the bullet wound.

"I need a medic here," John snapped back at his men, then he glared at Joshua, who was still kneeling, head lowered. Glancing up at the big soldier standing nearby, he nodded to the gun in the man's hand. "That his?"

"Yes sir," the soldier answered, sliding the chamber back before freeing the mag. "Empty as he said."

"I need a medic here," John snapped back at his men, then he glared at Joshua, who was still kneeling, head lowered. Glancing up at the big soldier standing nearby, he nodded to the gun in the man's hand. "That his?"

"Yes sir," the soldier answered, sliding the chamber back before freeing the mag. "Empty as he said."

The Colonel sighed, staring back at Joshua. "What the hell were you thinking, boy?"

Joshua glared up at John, and Rowan had the distinct impression it was for calling him 'boy'. The thought brought a smile to Rowan's face, but he quickly sobered, and reached out his good arm to the Colonel.

"I'm not pressing charges," he said, and winced, retracting his arm to hold the wound again as the medic appeared at his side. "You should let him go."

"Oh, you're not pressing charges?" the Colonel echoed sarcastically. Glowering down at Joshua
again, he nodded at his soldier to pull the man to his feet. "I sure as hell am. You don't come into
my town, boy, try and shoot my people."

"Um, technically sir, they weren't shooting anybody," another soldier said, stepping forward with
one of the visiting men's rifles. "None of their weapons were loaded."

"Thank you.. Gimmel.." the Colonel said with a sigh. Shaking his head, he approached Joshua.
"What was your game plan here? Were you trying to get yourselves killed?"

"Colonel, th-ow!" Rowan snapped, raising an eyebrow at the medic treating him.

"Sorry, but you keep moving," the woman said defensively.

When he turned back everyone was looking at him. "Sir," he started, wanting to keep on John's
good side. "The situation's been resolved peacefully, and-"

"You were shot, son."

"By your own man," Rowan offered back.

"Because you got in the way," the big soldier blustered, then stepped back as the Colonel shot him
a look.

Rowan tried to continue, "They had no intention of hurting us-"

"My jaw's bruised," the other armed escort said suddenly, holding his mouth. "Think I'm about to
lose a tooth."

Everyone turned to stare at the man, and he slowly lowered his head. "Sorry."

When the Colonel turned back to Rowan, his expression was pained.

"Your point, Rowan."

"My point is that Joshua needs to go home to his people," Rowan replied, holding John's gaze.
"He's their leader, and they're the only family he has left. What he did here," he threw his hand
sloppily at the alleyway, "ow.. wasn't aimed at us. Wasn't aimed at me. He was aiming at himself."

The Colonel's brow drew inward, then back sharply, and Rowan knew the man had finally realized
what Joshua had been trying to do. Joshua's own soldiers looked a little surprised as well, and
Rowan wondered just how much they knew about their leader's real plan.

John turned to the soldier, and while Rowan couldn't see the Colonel's face, he could hear a heavy
emotion clear in the man's voice. Something choked and regretful. "You stupid kid, why'd you.."
He shook his head, and he stepped closer, clasping his hand on the man's shoulder. Joshua looked
up at him darkly, and the Colonel sighed. "I'm sorry son. My words are harsher than they should
be."

Jaws dropped around the entire group, and Joshua looked like he'd been slapped with a fish.

"Son." John said quietly. "That's not the way. There are people counting on you. You're needed.
Never forget that." He glanced at Joshua's soldiers and back. "The fact that your men were willing
to support you here, shows just how much weight you carry. How much respect you've earned.
You do not throw something like that away, no matter what." He sighed, the sound heavy with
regret. "You never give up. Not on them, and not on yourself. You understand me?"
Joshua stared at him hard for a moment, but slowly his eyes eased, and he nodded.

"Okay," the Colonel said, and gestured for the big soldier. "Uncuff him, give him his brother's remains, and get him back to the airport. Call ahead to get Dale on prep."

"Yes sir," the man replied, nodding to the Colonel. Then his eyes sought Rowan, darting briefly to the shoulder wound. "Sorry about that sir."

Rowan shrugged painfully. "Ow.. It's okay. Stop calling me sir."

Joshua kept his gaze lowered as the soldier released him, then he shook his head. "This is not how I thought today would go," he said quietly, his voice a little small and lost. "I don't know what to do now."

The Colonel slapped him on the back. "Go home, apologize for roping your men into this, and do something in honor of your brother."

Joshua looked up at him, then shrugged.

"Guess it's time to get drunk."

"If that's your way," John said, and his voice took on a stern tone. "Here of course, we don't allow alcohol, but we-"

"That's a travesty right there," Joshua said over him, glancing around at the group. "I feel sorry for the men under your command."

"And the women," the medic behind Rowan muttered under her breath.

"Excuse me?!" John said, clearly offended.

"A man wants to have a drink with his friends, or after a hard day, he should be able to," Joshua said bluntly, and crossed his arms across his chest as he faced the Colonel.

"Or a woman," the medic offered again, this time loud enough for everyone to hear, as she put the last bit of tape in place on the bandage over Rowan's shoulder.

Joshua glanced over at her. "Drinking is a man's business."

"Excuse me?" the medic answered, her voice rising.

"Now just a minute," the Colonel growled, turning from her to Joshua, "I restrict alcohol for the safety of my community, it's-"

"What did you just say?!" the medic snapped, and Rowan at that point realized things were about to get ugly.

He discretely shuffled towards the mouth of the alleyway, as the Colonel started to hear from his other soldiers - voices raised tentatively, helpfully, suggesting that surely a drink every once in a while, in moderation of course, wouldn't pose a threat to the security of a rebuilding nation.

Alleyway cleared, Rowan walked slowly, awkwardly, wincing as his shoulder complained mightily about the movement, and finally reached the Hummer. The keys were in the ignition where he left them, and he slid into the seat, glancing back at the crowd in the alleyway. The Colonel looked a little harangued, and Joshua was standing stiffly, arms crossed defensively, as the medic gestured violently at his face, her features flared in indignation.
Rowan smiled. *He'll be okay.*

Nodding at the thought, he struggled to turn the steering wheel as he put the vehicle in gear and pulled from the curve. His shoulder was stinging, and made everything hard, but he managed to take the exit ramp for the interstate they’d cleared out of the city, and headed towards the industrial center. Once he pulled off the interstate and through the main outer gates of the power plant though, he was lost.

The place was huge. He could see the main towers thrusting up towards the sky from a nest of buildings, and it was bizarre, the smoke stacks were completely inert, the sky above them clear.


Overgrown cracked roads too, but the Hummer didn't complain. Not like the convertible.

He bounced up to the guard gate and poked his head out, asking for Brandon. The soldier pointed him towards the bank of transformers off the side of the main cluster of buildings, adjacent to a wide stretch of open land. He could see people there working out in the open, laying and wiring panels up to the transformer grid, and that's where he headed.

It didn't take him long to find Brandon, but it took forever to reach him, thanks to the fact that the road didn't extend between the rows of panels. Abandoning the Hummer, he took his slow and steady way out to his brother, who was bent over one of the them, hooking up some wiring from a long cable snaked down the entire row.

By the time he'd reached Brandon, he was sweating, and his shoulder was livid. It was warm out in the open, and the sun was bouncing blindingly off the clear panel coverings as if they were mirrors.

"This is cool," he said, coming to a stop behind Brandon as he took in the whole field.

His brother jerked up and blinked at him in surprise, sweat glistening on his forehead.

"Oh hey! Didn't know it was you," Brandon said. "Thought it was- Jesus Christ, Ro! Is that blood?!"

Rowan smirked. "I get mistaken for him all the time." When his brother didn't share the joke, he sighed. "Sorry, yeah, that's blood."

His brother dropped the tool he'd been using and reached out to the wound. "What the fuck happened to your shoulder?" His eyes grew huge. "Is that a gunshot wound?!"

Rowan rubbed his eyes and nodded. "Yep. Just a flesh wound though, so... hey, look, I came-"

"Just a flesh wound?!" Brandon yelped. "How the fuck did you get shot?! Who shot you?!" His brother frowned then, and something sharp crossed his eyes. Anger. "Wait, was it that guy you were seeing today? Did he do it?!"

Rowan shook his head. "No Bran, no. Listen, I wanted-"

"Holy shit Ro," Brandon growled. "I'll kill him."

"Brandon!" Rowan yelled.

Brandon jumped. "What?!"
"Shut up and listen!" Rowan snapped. "Please!"

His brother recoiled, his eyes growing tight with hurt.

"Shit!" Rowan cursed, and shook his head. "No, don't listen to me, sorry, I didn't mean to yell. I'm not feeling very good and it's been a really crappy day so far. To answer your question, one of the Colonel's soldiers shot me, accidentally, but... ignore that for now, I've got something to say."

Brandon crossed his arms over his chest and said nothing, he just frowned.

"I love you Bran," Rowan said.

His brother's arms dropped, and his eyes opened wide in surprise. "Uh..."

Rowan waved him quiet. "I know you're upset by what I did back in the hospital, but I don't know why you're still upset. Please tell me."

Immediately, his brother pulled the shutters down, and looked away, bending over to retrieve the tool he'd dropped.

"It's nothing," Brandon said, returning to his work with a shrug. "Forget about it."

"It's obviously something Bran," Rowan sighed. "Tell me."

"Nothing to tell."

Smirking, Rowan shook his head down at his brother. "I seem to recall this guy, who looked a lot like you, telling me that I needed to share. That I had to stop 'shutting him out'. Do you remember that guy?"

Brandon snorted.

Rowan continued, his voice weary. "I'm being shut out, and I hate it, and I just came away from a guy who tried to kill himself because he let his brother leave after a fight, after his brother had been hurt, and now he doesn't have a brother anymore."

Brandon grew quiet, and stopped working on the wiring, stabilizing himself with the tool he'd been holding, pressed into the dirt.

"We didn't fight," he said quietly.

"But you left hurt," Rowan answered back.

"Because you'd forgotten me," Brandon sighed. "You didn't know who I was."

"I knew who you were Bran, eventually. I just didn't believe it."

Brandon shrugged.

"You felt... forgotten?" Rowan asked, and something finally started to make sense.

Brandon started twisting the tool, gouging at the dirt.

"I'm busy Rowan," he said, his voice tense.

"You felt forgotten," Rowan said again, thinking out loud, ignoring his brother's attempts to avoid
conversation. "Like... how you said Dad always seemed so focused on me, when I was dead, and couldn't see you. Like he'd forgotten you were there? It was like that again?"

Brandon finally stopped digging, and looked up at Rowan. He seemed surprised. "Well... yeah."

"Bran," Rowan whispered, and he sank awkwardly to the ground to sit in front of his brother. "Jesus, I'm sorry. My brain was a mess when I woke up, and... Dad was a little broken way back then bro. He was like an old record - he just kept skipping."

With a non-committal shrug, Brandon sank back on his feet. "I know that, that's why I didn't want to talk about it. It just hit a nerve, an old one. I dunno." Shrugging again, he fiddled with the tool in his lap, trying to clean the dirt out of the creases. "It was like... like I was invisible. Like I didn't matter again. Like it was just you and dad. Again. Really dumb, I know."

Brandon's voice was thick, as if the emotions were just skating underneath the words, threatening to spill.

*Shit. Way to go, me.*

"You matter Bran," Rowan said, as emphatically as he could, "You matter so much. To me, to dad, to Sarah..." Something hit him then, something really important, and he smiled. "Jesus, Bran... to everybody."

Brandon looked up from the pointless fiddling in his lap, and smirked. "Everybody?"

Rowan nodded. "Yeah."

"So, the entire world then?" Brandon sniped, the smirk listing. "Sure, that makes sense, absolutely."

Rowan grinned. "For real."

His brother snorted and glanced around the field, his gaze ping ponging between the other workers. "Uh huh." Then he smiled back at Rowan. "Thanks for talking to me Ro, it means a lot. And Jesus Christ, go to the hospital, get your shoulder looked at."

Rowan shook his head. "No way. Done with hospitals. Any time I step into one bad things happen, doctors get hurt. And you're not listening to me."

"About me being important to the entire world?" Brandon said with a snort. "You're right."

Grinning, Rowan stuck up a finger. Brandon looked at it, looked at him, and raised an eyebrow. "What's that for?"

"I'm about to illustrate a point. Follow the finger."

"Ro, seriously, I have to get back to work, these panels ain't gunna lay themselves." Brandon snorted again. "Lay themselves.. heh.."

"Bran, focus."

His brother sighed. "Fine. Illustrate away."

Rowan poked the air to his right. "Julie and I basically saved the world here, right?"

Brandon laughed. "Oh!" he cried, "Yes, I feel it now, my importance... it's so obvious! YOU saved
Smirking, Rowan drew his finger back. "I fell in love with Julie because I was different, I was a thinking, feeling dead guy."

"You," Brandon said, pointing at him sharply, "Were a SNAC."

Rowan's train of thought was completely derailed. "I was a snack?"

"You were a SNAC - a Sensitive New Age Corpse. The importance Ro, it's really smacking me in the face here. What the hell are you talking about?!

"Jesus Bran, just listen," Rowan sighed, and he drew his finger back, all the way to the left. "I was different from the very beginning. Why?"

Brandon snapped his fingers and looked up thoughtfully, "Wait, I know this one, just a sec, it's... it's... the size of your head, isn't it? Your gigantic cranium made you a supercorpse and now-"

"Because of the music, Bran," Rowan said, smiling gently.

"Uh..." Brandon frowned. "Huh?"

"Music made me different Bran. Right from the start. It pulled a little bit of me back, reconnected me to a piece of myself, after the dark had stripped everything away. I built on that, even after the music died. I found more connections to who I was, regained just a little more... humanity. And then I met Julie."

His brother stared at him, completely serious. "Oh." He tilted his head. "Ro, you never told me that before."

Rowan shrugged. "Didn't like talking about being dead. You know that."

"Yeah, I know," Brandon said quietly.

"Who gave me that music, Bran?" Rowan continued, his eyes fixed on his brother's suddenly evasive gaze. "Who went out of his way to bring me something I loved, and surround me with it, when I died?"

His brother's eyes finally met his, and they were fragile under a soaring brow.

"I did?" Brandon said in a small voice.

Rowan nodded, smiling. "You did."

"You saved the world Bran," he said, and his smile turned into a brilliant grin. "Good job."
The day of the wedding was a bright and frantic day, filled with last minute preparations, panicked rushing to the site, and endless fussing by friends and relatives who wanted to make sure that everything went perfectly and exactly right, though there was no chance it ever would. It rained, then cleared, then rained again, then the clouds parted for real this time and the sun shone over the ceremony, brilliant and golden, turning every hanging drop of rain around them to sparkling crystal.

Through it all, the maelstrom of bustling activity, of panicked driving through the streets, of faces concerned, joyful, fretting, grinning, reciting, and crying around them, Rowan, Julie and Hope moved with a calm assurance that drove everyone just a little nuts, smiling, shrugging and nodding their way through the preparations, grateful but knowing that what was really important had already been won.

They met on the bridge looking out across the city, where they'd watched the wall fall over two years ago. He in a smart black suit and red tie, she in a stunning white dress and red sash, and the rest of the world fell away from them as they grasped each others hands. He was her world, she was his, and the words that spilled from their mouths were true, filled with promise, and spoken with a love that moved everyone around them to tears.

Then the ceremony was over, and they drew together, smiling, lost in each other, and never more in love, and their lips met, soft and sweet and strong. It lingered, long and deep and finally, they pulled away, smiling into each others eyes.

Someone poked Rowan in the back, and he turned around to see Brandon and Marcus, dressed in the same black suits and ties, grinning and looking out over the city.

"What?" Rowan asked.

"It's beautiful!" Nora's voice came from behind Julie, and they turned to see her bouncing with Hope in her little red dress, eyes wet with tears, pointing toward the city. Behind her, smiling shyly, was Sarah.

Julie and Rowan caught each others eyes in confusion, and looked.

And there, spread out over the city in a vivid arc of color, was a glorious rainbow.

"Oh my god," Julie whispered, and her eyes welled with tears as she looked out over the scene, threading her arm around Rowan as he pulled her close. "It's perfect."

"Yeah." Rowan smiled and caught her eye. "Just like you."

Julie grinned and squeezed him tight, her eyes bright as she looked up at him. "I love you Rowan."

"I love you too Julie," he answered softly, and brushed his lips against her hair as they turned to watch the rainbow shimmer over the city, bright in the light of mid morning.

"Let's have ten more kids," she said softly, gathering Hope into her arms and pointing the rainbow to their daughter, her eyes dancing with delight.

"Okay," he said, nodding gently.
Rowan blinked.

"Wait... what?!"

**The End**

:) Well, there you go folks. I know this was just a tiny little thing, but something I've wanted to post for a long time. :) I don't go into much detail, because at this point it's not about the detail (not for me, anyway), it's just about the knowing, that all is as it should be, and finally complete.

Btw, it's always annoyed me that Jonathan, Teresa and Nicholas made fun of the snow globe in the commentary of the first movie, basically saying that they had no idea why it was pointed out, made such a focus of, that there wasn't any point to it. That really bothered me, because I'd found it incredibly symbolic. You have two people meeting in an embrace over a bridge. A bridging of two worlds - the dead and the living - that changed the world. I thought it was awesome, and then found out they just threw it in there.

Well, guess what Rowan and Julie just got married over?

**TAKE THAT LEVINE! ;D**

Now that I've got that out of my system, I just wanted to say how amazing this experience has been. And I want to thank everyone for reading, and sharing your thoughts with me along the way. That kind of interaction is a gift, and it's precious to me.

Also, I want to say that Marcus is poking me in the brain and saying 'psst, you're not finished'.

**DAMMIT MARCUS!**
"Like this?" Marcus asked, his tongue protruding in effort as he strangled the neck of the guitar.

Rowan gave an encouraging smile and tilted his head. "Well.. that's.. sort of right, it's...", He leaned forward to adjust his friend's fingers for the chord, then sat back again.

"This?" Marcus asked again, twisting his fingers like an arthritic ape, before smashing down against the strings.

The guitar screamed through the amp, and Marcus kept going, strumming above the bridge in a frenzy that left Rowan wincing.

"Marcus, that's.."

"POUR SOME SUG-ER ON MEEEE!" Marcus roared, throwing his head back with a wild scowl as he thrashed against the strings and the room filled with the squeal of tortured electrics. With a few sloppy stabs of his foot against the nearby pedals, the sound started to wail, hiss and reverb back over itself until it plateaued into pure noise, ridiculous and not unlike standing next to a jet engine.

Rowan jumped forward, "Holy shit, Marcus, stop, you're..."

There was a muffled pop, and the room fell suddenly silent, as a thin tendril of smoke wafted up from the small amp.

"...going to blow the.. amp," Rowan finished slowly, staring down at the speaker.

"Damn," Marcus swore, looking down at the little black box, before his mouth broke into a big smile as he looked back up. "That was EPIC!"

Rowan smirked at his friend. "It was... something."

Gaze falling to the guitar again, Marcus clenched the neck, trying to bend his fingers over the right strings. "I don't think I'm getting this."

"It's only your third lesson Marcus, you just need some practice."

With a knowing smirk, Marcus looked up at Rowan. "Nah. I think I need more than that."

Rowan smiled down at him. "What d'you mean? You'll get it - let's just try the G chord again."

Marcus sighed and shook his head. "It's not worth it Rowan, I don't have what you have. I don't have the talent for this, and my fingers... they just don't give a shit."

Rowan opened his mouth, ready to give some encouraging words, but he smiled instead. Marcus would see through it. His friend had an amazing bullshit meter.

Instead, he sat back down on the old sofa chair, and tugged at the stuffing through the worn arm covers as he smiled at his friend.

"How's it going at the school?" he asked. "You still enjoying that?"

Marcus gave him a strained look. "Dunno if 'enjoyed' is the right word." His mouth eased into a
smile. "It's hard, but... I can't give it up. I love those kids."

Rowan grinned. "You still singing that rabbit song?"

His friend shot him a warning glare. "You know, Ed promised me he was going to keep that to himself."

"Yeah, and he did." Rowan smirked, "For six months."

Marcus snorted, shaking his head. "They love that song. I'll be singing it for the rest of my life. It might end me."

Rowan laughed at that. Marcus handed him back the guitar then, and he took it, stepping out into the main part of the store to hang it back on the wall. There was a young kid hanging around the record trays, thumbing through the blues section, and Rowan waved at him to catch his eye.

"Need any help?"

The kid looked up through a curly mass of red hair and shrugged with a small smile.

Rowan ducked his head back to Marcus. "Be right back." Stepping out between shelves stacked with speakers and old record players, he made his way over.

"See anything cool?" he asked, smiling at the young man. The boy was probably in his mid teens, lanky, wearing a thick jacket against the snow building up outside. The kid's hazel eyes were wide and bright, and Rowan grinned as he saw the record the boy had been holding.

"King of the Blues?" he asked. "You a B.B. King fan?"

His grin grew as the kid shrugged up at him again.

"Let's find out," he said. Pulling the record up and waving the boy over, he walked to one of the players along the far wall and opened the plastic cover.

"Ever used one of these before?" he asked. When the kid shook his head, Rowan slipped the vinyl out of the sleeve and handed it to him. "Just drop it on top," he guided, nodding as the kid wiggled the record over the spindle, "raise the lever, yep, pull it over and lower it again. You got it."

Horns blared out of the speakers as the needle made its way over the first track, and Rowan grinned, his head nodding to the rhythm. "Wait for the guitar, it's fun stuff."

The kid waited dutifully, his fingers tapping along his sides to the beat, and he smiled as the first playful picks of the guitar jangled out of the speakers.

"You play?" Rowan asked.

The boy shook his head, and his gaze drifted to the guitars against the other wall, before he looked back at Rowan.

"I don't have a guitar," he said quietly, and looked down at the record as it spun, raising and lowering the needle a little with the slight warp.

"But I want to learn." He looked back up at Rowan then. "I want to play like you do."

Rowan's brow raised. "Like I do?"
The kid nodded. "Yeah. You played at our community day couple of weeks ago. You were awesome."

A big smile spread on Rowan's face. "Thanks," he said. "What's your name?"

"Stuart."

"Stuart, you're from Smithfield right?"

The boy nodded.

"Think you can get out here once a week?"

Smiling, Stuart nodded again. "Yeah, I come in with mom for supplies, she's down at the market right now."

"Cool. Come by next week, same time, and I'll show you some basic chords. That sound good?"

The kid grinned, his eyes bright, and nodded. "Yeah, that sounds awesome." His gaze spanned the store, and he turned back. "Do you have any of your stuff?"

"My stuff?" Rowan asked, confused, before he realized what Stuart meant. "Oh, you mean my music?"

"Yeah," Stuart said, nodded. "It was really good. I have a CD player at home if you've got a CD? I can trade for it." The kid reached into his jacket then, and pulled out a small leather bag with a drawstring that he started to untie.

Rowan shook his head. "Not yet, but hey, how bout you borrow this..." He led the kid to the CD bins and flipped through the rock section, before pulling out an album by The White Stripes, "...and bring it back next week for the lesson? If you really like it, we can trade for it then."

"Cool!" Stuart grinned and crammed the bag back into his jacket as he reached for the CD. "Are they good?"

Rowan grinned. "Yeah, I think so."

"Hey Rowan," Marcus called as he emerged from the demo room with a wave. "I'm going to head out."

"No, wait," Rowan called back, turning away from the kid. "Hold up!"

"You're busy, man, it's cool."

"No, I need your help with something, just give me a minute." Rowan turned back to the kid then. "Let me know if you need anything else, okay?"

Stuart looked between them and shook his head. "I'm good, I gotta go meet mom." He smiled at the door before heading out. "Thanks for the CD - see you in a week?"

Rowan nodded. "Yep. Pick your favorite track, we'll have some fun with it."

Stuart gave him a huge grin. "Cool! Bye!"

Throwing a quick wave with a smile, Rowan turned back to Marcus, who was hovering around with some drumsticks, tapping them on the shelves.
"Hey," Rowan said, pointing his way with a grin, "see, you've got skills on drums."

Marcus smirked a little sharply. "Yeah, I can hit things real good." He looked out the front of the store, watching the kid race across the snowy street. When he looked back the smirk had softened to a sincere smile. "You're doing good things here Rowan."

Rowan watched him intently. "You're doing good things at the school too Marcus. You should be proud."

His friend looked down at the shelves, as he wrapped up with a little rapid fire rhythm. "Yeah, thanks."

"You talked to Emily recently?" Rowan asked casually, glancing up at Marcus as he straightened the records under his hands.

Marcus sighed, clasping the sticks together and propping his elbow up on the trays. "Nope. She doesn't want to hear from me."

"No?" Rowan asked. "How do you know?"

His friend lowered the sticks against the wood in a little regular tapping, and his voice flattened. "I don't want her to hear from me."

Frowning, Rowan ditched his pretend sorting and wandered over. "Why?"

With a forced breath, Marcus dumped the sticks back in the bucket and went to collect his jacket from behind the desk. "Because I'm shit Rowan. I was shit before the apocalypse, I forgot that, now I'm back to being plain old shit again."

"Jesus Marcus, you're not shit," Rowan snapped. "Why the fuck would you say that about yourself?"

Marcus gave him a bare bones smile. "Because it's true. I was an asshole."

"You were not," Rowan said.

"You know me before our little zombie rendezvous?" Marcus asked, the smile thinning further.

"Well, no, but-"

Marcus smirked, and shook his head. "There you go. Thanks for the lessons Rowan, I don't think I need them anymore."

"Hold on, just a sec," Rowan said, and he rushed over to intercept his friend. "You know what?"

Marcus stared at his chest. "What? And could you stop being so goddamn tall?!?"

"I don't think an asshole," Rowan said quietly, "would spend so much of his time, or work as hard as you do, teaching a bunch of little kids."

"Yeah, well..." Marcus said, and looked like he wanted to say something else, but his eyes dipped instead.

"And I think Emily knows that. And I think Emily is actually kind of impressed that you went back into it, even after the big change. That you're still trying, even though it's really hard, and it wears you out. And I think she knows that you do it because clearly, as you just told me, you love those
kids."

Marcus's gaze ping ponged around the room, avoiding his gaze, but Rowan could see something coming up from inside his friend, some emotion Marcus was trying to tamp down, as his friend started to shift uncomfortably on his feet.

"I think Emily knows that," Rowan said again, and he glanced back over his shoulder, searching through the white.

C'mon.

"Yeah?" Marcus finally mumbled in front of him. "How the hell would you know?"

Finally spying the figures approaching the door, Rowan turned back to his friend and grinned.

"Because I asked her."

Marcus' eyes snapped to his. "What?"

Rowan turned back to the door as the bell jangled and Julie stepped in holding an overly bundled Hope in her arms. Behind her, cowed in a black jacket, her eyes darting around the room as she gave them a tentative smile, was Emily.

Turning back with a broad grin, and trying not to laugh at his friend's shocked face, Rowan pulled his keys out of his pocket.

"Here," he said, and when Marcus looked up at him with eyes just on the edge of something vulnerable, he threw them up with a quick flick of his wrist, nodding as his friend caught them.

"Look after the shop for me for a few? We'll be back soon. Julie and I have to..."

He looked back at Julie, grasping for something to say, and her beautiful blue eyes turned to him, dancing brightly.

"Leave?" she offered, her lips pulling back in a smile, just on the edge of a giggle.

Rowan nodded back to Marcus, and almost laughed himself, as his friend stood there, keys in one hand, staring at the door, his face looking somehow younger than it had for months now.

"Yep!" Rowan agreed, and pulling his jacket from the hook by the door, he drew in to give Julie and Hope soft kisses, before nodding at Emily. "Hey, good to see you again."

"You too," Emily smiled back, and her gaze drifted around the store once more, before falling on Marcus.

Her smile grew soft. "Hello Marcus."

Rowan watched his friend's expression change into something he'd never seen before. Something hopeful and bright.

"Hi Emily."

Then his friend's eyes darted to his, and in them he saw a swell of gratitude, that quickly changed into something else, something in the little motion Marcus was making with his eyebrows, and the subtle shifts of his head.

Get out of here already.
And with a laugh he couldn't keep in anymore, Rowan took Julie's warm hand, and squeezing it softly, lovingly, he smiled and led his family out the door.

And into the great wide world.

The End (for reals)

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Hi everyone. So yeah, Marcus was persistent, and this is the true end of my story. It's probably also the end of my contribution to this universe, but I feel okay about that. At least, at this very second. ;) This has been one of the most creative, most amazing periods of my life. As you can tell, I sort of liked Warm Bodies, so huge thanks and much worshipful awe to Isaac Marion, and Jonathan Levine, and the cast and crew of the movie (Nicholas Hoult, Teresa Palmer, Rob Corddry et al). You started the story, and breathed life into the characters, and made me go creatively bonkers, thank you. ;)

Huge thanks to those who took time to leave comments through all of my stories. You've all made me smile the biggest of smiles. Thank you.

Big shout out to Aynessa for your comments on this story :D

To my hubby: I write about love from what we have. You are *my* Rowan. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!