Fear The Hunters

by Mishafer

Summary

(ON HIATUS) Uniting after Terminus's destruction, Gareth and the other five survivors seek out their next meal. However, living outside their home's walls is unfamiliar and they are anything but invincible. They are not the only ones willing to take life to extend their own.

AU where Gareth and his group live. Sequel to To Be Hungry. Could be read alone. Follows the show canon but with a few alterations.
This is a what-if/canon divergence—beginning in 4x16—where Gareth and the remaining hunters live after a more fleshed-out encounter with Rick and company. Can be read alone due to the prequel's canon compliant nature. Because of past confusion, I want to clarify that this story focuses on the surviving Terminants. The show's main cast do not play a major role after the hunters escape their death.

Happy reading and I welcome all feedback; compliments and concrit alike.

"Why should I apologize for the monster I've become? No one ever apologized for making me this way."

-The Joker

The campfire licked the cold night air in crackles and pops, creating a glimmer of life on the black landscape. Six warm bodies huddled closely around the flames and watched the man's leg sizzle and brown from the fire's heat. Once, they were teachers, accountants, high school students, and computer scientists. Now, they were hunger and instinct.

They needed meat.
Black Heron

Like most who found their way to Terminus, they arrived dirty and disheveled. Gareth learned their names were Rick, Daryl, Michonne, and Carl.

Rick was the obvious ringleader, his posture upright and forceful, with eyes like stone. Gareth smelled a hint of blood while he and Alex searched him before observing it came from his beard.

*Now how did that happen?* he wondered.

He couldn't see much of Daryl's face behind the dirty hair that hung in front of it, but he still didn't think he looked related to Rick or Carl. However, Gareth knew he and Alex didn't look much like family, having inherited their looks from two different fathers. Daryl also carried a very interesting-looking crossbow—they certainly didn't see too many of those come through there.

The real spectacle, though, was Michonne's katana. Gareth still had a negative relation to swords, being as he'd seen his father, Michael, the original leader of Terminus, killed with one. Yet he wished he could take a good, hard look at it, wondering just how battle-worn it was.

Michonne appeared to be the second most dangerous after Rick. Gareth could easily see her blade taking people's heads off in an instant and the woman didn't look like she would hesitate a second to do it.

Lastly was the kid: Carl. He seemed a little afraid of his own shadow, but had a hope in his eyes at the sight of the facility. Not a childlike one, but an honest one. Gareth had seen that look before on countless people who showed up on their doorstep. Their hope wasn't always extinguished. Cora had arrived with the same look and since she agreed to the ugly reality of cannibalism. Due to her smart decision, she remained breathing among them to that day.

Gareth ordered his people to take inventory of the items collected from their last haul of arrivals later, and focus on monitoring and accommodating the new people. A few residents hung around the courtyard, interacting and going about their business. It wasn't all a show to get new people to let their guard down. The people there were lucky enough to have the freedom to do things like recline, relax, and enjoy the sunshine for no other reason than to enjoy the sunshine.

Living in a former railroad termination complex sometimes struck newcomers as odd, yet most adapted to it with ease. The place seemed bigger on the inside than on the outside and much of the front was dolled-up nice and pretty. All a sharp contrast to the back where the community's hardened, bloody truth lay.

Rick and his group eyed the Terminants occasionally while the residents flashed them pleasant smiles in return.

"Well, if you want, we have a hose for quickie baths," Gareth attempted a joke as he sat across from the group while they dined on a fare of meat.

The way the four ate let him know they had been starving before they arrived. Daryl hadn't even bothered to use the fork and knife he was given as he wolfed down his share. Although he could tell they were trying not to show it, Gareth could see they found the meal delectable. Several times, he saw them begin to lose themselves in the pleasure of the taste and their expanding stomachs, nearly forgetting they were in a strange and uncertain place.

The four didn't respond at Gareth's remark, but Rick narrowed his eyes at him as he chewed.
Real barrel of laughs these guys are, he thought to himself.

He had a feeling about Rick, that he was the one to keep an eye on. Especially because of the bit of info Alex had pulled from him while playing his 'we're all buddies here' role. The question was who 'the other guy' who 'deserved it' was. They needed to get to the bottom of that before they made any decisions about the group's fate. Of course, for all they knew, the other guy might have deserved it and maybe they were just protecting their own. They couldn't pass judgment on anyone who protected their tribe in blood; after all, they did the same.

Gareth searched for clues on the dynamic of the group. The other three didn't seem afraid of Rick, although Carl was a little sheepish in general. Michonne appeared as an equal to Daryl, both born warriors.

They did seem like people who wouldn't cower away at any truth, no matter how dark and depraved.

"I'd love a hose bath," Carl spoke up with a tiny smile after several moments of silence, wiping the meat grease from his hands on his pants.

"Don't listen to him, man," Alex said as he strolled back over to the table from Mary's grill. "We got a shower system."

Alex, I can hear your uterus quiver, Gareth thought of his brother's enthusiasm at Carl's presence. Alex always hoped people with kids would stick around. Despite the fact that Carl wasn't a baby-faced child, Alex already seemed to like him.

Gareth watched Rick's hands vigorously work the fork and knife; he wasn't afraid to use something sharp. He then noticed the wedding band on his left hand and his eyes flitted to Michonne to scan for one. None.

Wife must be dead.

He then glanced over to make sure Alex had removed his wedding ring and saw he had, most likely having stuffed it in his pocket when the four weren't looking. Alex's wife, Theresa, would have to remove hers as well. It was best not to display the fact that they were someone's spouse who would at least be missed by one other person. They could be used as a hostage or something similar for that reason.

Mary, Mary, Mary... Gareth reminded himself to continue to call his mother by her name as part of protocol.

"Hey, Mary?" he called, turning to see his mother remaining by the grill.

"Yes?" she replied.

"You want to go get Cynthia to help show them around?"

Alex leaned forward. "Gareth, I can—"

"You're going too." Gareth halted him.

"Yes, certainly," Mary said with a smile as she turned off the appliance and made her way indoors. Michonne narrowed her eyes at her as she did so.

Alex stepped forward, a distressed look on his face. "Yeah, I'll be back with Cynthia in a minute, I
"Gotta piss like a racehorse," he said before moving in short quick steps in the same direction Mary had.

"Alex is our most eloquent resident," Gareth joked. Carl cracked a small smile.

"How many people you got here?" Daryl finally spoke.

"Forty-eight."

"How you keep the walkers away?" Rick asked.

"Fireworks, firecrackers. Any other noise we can make. Set off a little ways away, like a moth to a flame," he replied, observing the four had finished their plates. He wasn't ready to end the conversation, however. "How long have you had the crossbow?"

"A while," Daryl replied.

"We get to ask the questions," Rick stated.

Gareth's eyebrows twitched upwards. "Fair enough."

Rick fidgeted a small bit, looking around the place again and spotting a few people meandering about before turning back to Gareth. "How many walkers have you killed?"

Gareth thought it a dull question. "I'm not sure, two dozen, three dozen, five dozen." He shrugged.

"How many people have you killed?" Rick followed up, eyes boring into Gareth like hot lead. He felt a jolt of something resembling fear flush through his system.

"Ah, there it is." Gareth nodded.

"Well?" Michonne added.

"Aw, her first word.

For a few fleeting seconds, Gareth debated what to say. Directly? The number was five. He was indirectly responsible for the deaths of many, many others, but that wasn't ready for discussion just yet.

"Five," he answered.

"They deserve it?" Daryl asked. Rick gave his pack mate a sideways glance.

Gareth laughed, amused at Daryl's repeat of Alex's words. "Wouldn't have done it otherwise," he replied before pulling back his humorous tone. "They tried to take this place, I had no choice." He held back a considerable amount.

Former rape and murder of their own people, followed by feasting on their own tormenters wasn't a lunchtime discussion. Though maybe it was a dinnertime one.

"Well hi there," Cynthia's sunny voice broke through their exchange. The tall, redheaded woman stood grinning at the four new arrivals.

"Cynthia, you can take over from here," Gareth began, standing up, "and Alex too whenever he shows back up. And uh, Mary will show you around the gardens."
Rick glared down Gareth again, an air of suspicion on his face. He hadn't seen him give the wary look so intensely to anyone else there, just him.

Cynthia stepped forward. "Shall we?"
"Where's the fire, Rick?" Gareth asked with a complacent smile, sitting across from the four where they dined in the cafeteria. They had already been escorted to their quarters after their tour. By then, it was dinner time.

The group ate while their spines remained straight as if ready to spring into action.

Rick furrowed his brow. "What?"

"You just seem fidgety," Gareth said before glancing around the room, making sure enough people had weapons on them. They did.

"Hm," he replied, obviously not appreciating the joke.

"Hey so," Alex began as he approached the table with a tray in his hands, "there's someone else about your age here, Carl." He joined them at the table beside his brother. "She's almost sixteen I think."

Carl wiped his hand on the napkin that rested next to his half-eaten meal. "Don't see a lot of kids anymore," he responded, his eyes appearing to retreat inward.

"Well, I don't think she's here right now..." Alex scanned the room for her. "But hey, you might hit it off great, she's real nice." He reached over and lightly tapped Carl's wrist twice.

Rick jerked forward in his seat. "Don't touch him," he ordered. Alex promptly withdrew his hand as Daryl and Michonne ceased eating and stiffened their posture further.

"My bad, man. I'm sorry," Alex apologized before looking to Gareth.

"Whoa, take it easy, Rick," Gareth said, holding up his hand in front of the older man. Rick glared at him for a few seconds before exchanging a few hard stares with Daryl and Michonne.

"Dad, it's okay," Carl murmured.

"I won't ever do that again, promise," Alex proclaimed, as if Rick were a wild animal he was trying not to startle into an attack.

"You better not," Rick warned, still fixing his gaze on the nerve-struck Alex.

Gareth quickly trailed his eyes across the room to see if people had noticed. A few close by had averted their concern to the situation, while others farther away kept on eating. Theresa, Mary, and Kaylee watched them carefully from a nearby table while Theresa gripped her steak knife. Gareth gave them a slight smile to show the situation was under control and they reluctantly returned to their meals.

He then leaned forward in an attempt to grab Rick's attention. "Rick, we don't have claws, if we did, you would have seen them when we searched you. I'm sorry, you didn't okay touch that time, Alex won't ever do that again."

Rick turned to Carl again who had slouched down in his seat.
"Yeah, yeah," Alex began, "I um, I can go sit with Mary and Theresa and them if you want me to."

"No, Alex." Gareth argued, "It was just a misunderstanding. Right guys?" Rick nodded ever so slightly while the other three remained still. "Keep eating, going to bed on a full stomach is a blessing nowadays," he added, picking his fork back up.

Daryl scoffed lightly. "Findin' meat other than a squirrel or rabbit is the blessin'."

Gareth speared a slice of cut meat. "The woodlands with hardly any walkers are another blessing. Just set up some snares and we do pretty well."

"Seems kind of easy," Michonne remarked, narrowing her eyes at Gareth.

"Oh, no no, not always. Nothing's easy anymore."

* * *

Just putting Rick down with a shot seemed simple. It happened often enough to barely cause Gareth's heart rate to increase.

*Oh well, too bad, I kind of liked the guy*, Gareth thought. *At least he'll get to say goodbye to his friends in A before he dies.*

He felt bad for Rick in a small way. The ringleader's overconfidence and audacity was as admirable as it was stupid. Obviously, he didn't know who he was messing with.

"You ready to wind down for the evening?" Mary had asked a freshly-fed Rick, Daryl, Michonne, and Carl.

"After I get that hose bath?" Rick had returned.

"Of course, I'll show you."

And just like that, like so many times before, within five minutes the casual conversation had turned into a matter of life and death.

While the group was led to the showers, Rick recognized items on several people that belonged to the arrivals in A. Mike was the unfortunate one who wore the pocket watch Rick was ready to kill him over as it belonged to one of his people. And technically, he did. Rick used Mike as a human shield that Gina hit instead of Rick before they drove the four to the traincar.

Sometimes, people corralled before 'the talk' still hadn't put the pieces of the puzzle together. Gareth assumed someone like Rick would have figured it out, and if he hadn't, he'd be more than glad to tell him if the opportunity arose.

* * *

"So Gina can't aim a gun?" Theresa exclaimed, her arms folded where she stood outside the entrance to the killing floor.

"I talked to her, Theresa," Gareth began, standing in front of her, "she had her sights right on Rick's head, but he moved."

"Fillet those fuckers," she spat.

"They're about to be brought in. And Gavin and Mitch are prepping Mike right now, okay?"
He raised his eyebrows.

She exhaled harshly, her face tensing. "We need to tighten protocols."

"I don't have time for this." He held up his hand in an attempt to silence her.

"Make time."

"Goodbye, Theresa," he said, then turned and headed inside the killing floor. Theresa clenched her teeth before letting her arms drop to her sides and kicked an empty, plastic bucket a few feet to her right. It cracked on impact and fell over, alleviating only a small bit of her fury.

The act of bringing in new people after the Siege had always displeased her. She understood it necessary as it made them stronger, but new people hadn't been there during the attack. They hadn't had the horrific experience scar and change them, bonding them together. Newcomers just accepted because they wanted to stay alive.

Because of this, fresh arrivals never failed to put her off. Men especially, considering what strange males had done to her. Early on, Theresa had almost proposed the idea that they only accept women when they decided to allow people in again. Her initial discomfort with Martin—their first post-Occupation recruit—being the reason behind the thought.

Clenching her fists, she turned and proceeded to make her way to the traincar marked A, wanting to help retrieve part of the meat stock. Ready and willing to handle Rick and any other member of his group as roughly and inconsiderately as possible. Theresa hadn't been that close to Mike, but he was there during the Siege. She considered him one of her own, someone she shared a connection with despite that she didn't remember where he said he'd grown up. At least she could expel a small bit of anger by manhandling a few of those responsible.

As she stomped outside, the imagined images of shoving Rick or any of his people to the room where they would meet their ends filled her head.

"Hey, Theresa," a voice broke through her thoughts, "will you take this out to burn field?" Wesley called to her. She turned and saw him holding up a half-full black trash sack in his hand.

"I was going to hel—"

"They already got 'em," he interrupted.

Her shoulders slouched. "What?"

"Yeah, sorry. So, you can take this out back?" He raised the bag up higher.

"Why can't you do it?" she fussed.

"Geez, I'm sorry, okay? I'm supposed to be sweepin' up shells right now for Kaylee, and I've already wasted enough time talkin' to you. Plus, Gare's been ridin' my ass hard lately, so please?"

"Fine," she said as she stepped forward and yanked the bag from his hand before heading toward the area in impatient strides.

She assumed the sack was filled with leftovers the chained-up walkers in the feeding room hadn't eaten from the hollow clanking of bones she heard. But she didn't care enough to peek inside and see.
When she reached the burn field, she untied the top of the bag and dumped what did turn out to be leftovers onto the pile of decayed material. It didn't phase her all, not anymore. Her mind was so preoccupied with thoughts of her fight with Gareth and Mike's death that it may have well been a pile of brush and leaves.

"Theresa?" Alex's unexpected voice sounded from behind her while she gripped the bag's bottom and gave it a few last shakes.

She turned around and let the bag flutter to the ground, then exhaled a relieved breath. "Hey," she greeted with a small smile. "Were you up there corralling them? I was in god damn laundry."

"Yeah, I saw Gina shoot at Rick and Mike go down instead. Happened in what seemed like a millisecond, you know?"

Theresa nodded. "Yeah, I do know," she said before erasing the gap between them and embracing him tightly, resting her head on his shoulder.

Alex returned her hug, his arms against her middle back. "Hey, it's okay. Rick will be dinner tonight and we'll have Mike's funeral too."

Theresa nodded into his neck and inhaled the musky scent of his jacket before pulling away. "You wanted that watch, remember?"

He nodded. "And Mike bein' Mike, took off with it."

It could've been him, Theresa thought. As sorry as she was about Mike, she was certainly glad it had been him and not Alex. Thinking of losing Alex, even for a second, made her feel like her chest would cave in.

"Hey, how did you know I was here?" she asked.

"I asked Wesley and he told me, said you didn't seem too happy so..."

Theresa smiled at his concern. "Hey I'm... I'm sorry about Carl, I know you liked the kid." She wasn't a bit sorry about Carl himself, but she knew Alex always hoped kids would stay.

He shook his head. "Nah, it's alright, it happens. And I didn't even know him, so I couldn't like him." He shrugged. "Well, I gotta go. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Okay," she replied, Alex's calming effects smoothing some of her volatile mood.

After he left, Theresa stood unmoving for a minute and thought of what was to come that day. The consumption of Mike's body for dinner as well as his funeral, and the meal of Rick and the others. She expected her stomach to be bursting and full that night.
One minute at a time, Mary had told Gareth.

When he was a boy, she would repeat those words whenever he felt overwhelmed. She had spoken them when the world fell apart and during the Siege. Those four words, uttered in her weak, quivering voice, had been imprinted on his brain.

This situation was no different. As the seconds passed, his mother’s mantra cycled over and over in his mind.

One minute at a time.

It took Gareth one minute to tear off his jacket and wrap it around the shoulder that had been grazed by Rick's bullet. It took another minute to lift Greg up from the ground and guide him inside. And another minute before an undead cornered them and took a bite of Greg's neck. Gareth raised his gun and shot them both in the head; he couldn't leave Greg to turn. Unlike how Rick, Daryl, Glenn, and Bob had left Gavin to. He had a strong feeling they had done that on purpose.

Another minute was what it took to make it to the church, stepping over the bodies people he had known and killing an occasional walker along the way. His intent was set on the infirmary’s stock of supplies when he pushed the door open. Inside, he found the woman who had instilled the minute-by-minute technique on the floor amidst an array of dead walkers.

He came to a sharp halt at the sight, his breath catching in his throat.

Who let... how did they get in... Who killed all of them? How—

"Gareth!" Albert's shaky voice called to him. He looked away to see the kid standing by the room's other exit with an AK-47 held at the carnage in the room's center.

"I'm so sorry, man. I got here too late. I saw some woman go in and let a bunch of them in here, I'm so sorry. I—I tried to get here in time," Albert sobbed, lowering the gun. "And don't worry about... you know. I—I already... in the head with..." He shook his weapon a bit.

Gareth didn't reply but stepped forward slowly, forgetting the throbbing pain in his shoulder. A hard ache rose in his chest when he turned his vision back to the floor and took in the sight in its entirety. Mary's face was unrecognizable, and her chest had been torn open so that her stomach pooled out of her, on full display. She was still as stone.

So still.

Not shaking, or running, or calling out for him. Just still.

He grew nearly as petrified as she was, the first time he'd stopped moving since the tank exploded. He knew he shouldn't be, he needed to keep going, to grab Albert, look for others and get out of there. But there was his mother, who he fought so hard to keep safe, a gory mess in front of him, in
the church that she named, of all places. And this time, unlike every time before, he wasn't there to save her.

*Was it quick? Did she think about me? Hope I'd come and save her? Or Alex? Oh god, Alex... is he still alive?*

"Gareth?"

"Th—thank you, Albert," Gareth forced out, unable to look away.

He gulped, forcing the pain back into his stomach, and pushed himself to put one foot in front of the other. He trotted across the room to meet Albert.

"We have to get out of here," Gareth said blankly.

Albert crinkled his forehead. "We can't just leave her here."

Gareth's heart sunk into his stomach. He didn't want to leave her there, but he had to. There was no time to bury her. Or have her funeral, or even cry over the horrible way she'd just died. But god, with every fiber of his being, he wanted to. He wanted the luxury to be able to mourn, to fall to the floor and bawl hysterically, but that wasn't his job. So instead, he stood stoically, feeling the rumbling of tragedy fill his center, but he didn't let it surface.

"I know, I—" Gareth was cut off by the door flying open behind Albert.

"Oh, thank god!" Theresa exclaimed as she stepped inside, a bag flung over her shoulder. "Have you seen Alex?" she asked frantically.

Gareth and Albert shook their heads. Theresa's face contorted with disappointment.

"What's..." she narrowed her eyes at the carnage them.

Gareth swung around to block her. "Theresa, you don't have to see that."

"No, no, I need to see it." She stepped past him and stopped dead in her tracks when she realized what she was seeing. "No..." she breathed out, her face contorting with grief. She shrugged out of her jacket and walked over in a trance-like state, placing it over Mary's face. Her eyes glazed over with hatred. "Those fucking people."

"Theresa," Gareth began, "come on." His voice came out rockier than he intended.

When she stood up and turned around, her jaw trembled before she spoke, "I was just in the infirmary. I can help with... whatever happened to your shoulder."

Gareth nodded. "Rick grazed me from the ground, I was on the roof."

"But the fences," Albert interjected, "we have to get out, right?"

"Yeah, we do. I'll be fine until then, but we need more ammo," Gareth said, the steadiness of his voice returning.

"And we have to find Alex," Theresa declared. "You looked right? At everyone out there dead?"
"I didn't see him," Albert replied, shaking his head. "Wait, what about Cynthia? Did you see her?"

"No, I didn't," Theresa replied, stepping back over to the two.

"Neither did I," Gareth said.

"You looked, right?" Albert pressed.

"Yes, of course," Gareth responded.

We're just going to leave her here!? A sudden outcry filled his head, unintentional. He willed it away.

"If they're here, we'll find them, okay?" Gareth assured. "Rick too."

No meat of theirs got to leave. None. At least they could find Rick, cook him on a spit. The rest of Rick's group? There were a lot of them and it might be a stretch, but Gareth and his people were good at what they did. A sterile room with experienced butchers or not, they could do it. And now, Gareth figured they had to.

The three then raced to the sorting room which had not yet been seized by fire, and equipped themselves with as many weapons and as much ammo as possible. Theresa snagged Michonne's katana, proclaiming she wanted to kill a samurai with her own sword.

Anxiety and dread from not knowing exactly what was to happen next plagued Gareth. First and foremost, he was a thinker, then a planner. And now his plan was wobbly at best, uncoordinated.

On their way out, Albert spotted Mary's bible in the library. It was unusual that she had left it there, but Albert wordlessly loaded it into Theresa's bag. He gave Gareth a look of sympathy as he did so. Gareth pretended not to notice.

Once outside, they saw many of the fences were down and even more walkers had streamed in. Gareth knew something was wrong when the first few had wandered up before the explosion happened. Martin was supposed to set off the firecrackers that day, and since he obviously hadn't, Gareth assumed the worst.

Theresa kept whipping her head around as they moved, no doubt looking for Alex. She paused for a few seconds as the two men climbed over the fence, apprehension on her face. Gareth thought she might say she was going to and keep looking for her husband. He shot her a stern look that prompted her to grab a hold of the fence and join them on the other side.

Gareth rubbed his injured shoulder and grimaced. "We should go see what happened to Martin, him not finishing the job can't be a coincidence."

Theresa raised her eyebrows. "We have to—"

"We'll find him, okay? I promise," Gareth interrupted before turning to Albert. "And Cynthia. If they're out there, they won't be far."

* * *
Terminus was Alex's home. He felt safe falling asleep there every night, and felt homesick when he was away for too long. The iniquity that lay within its walls, past and present, didn't change that fact.

Now it was like the world was ending all over again. The place he slept, ate, and leisurely sunned his skin, was going up in smoke. From the way the flames and undead spread across the place, he knew it wouldn't be worth trying to repair. And where would they get meat anyway? No stranger would walk into a burned-out work-in-progress. Their trap was non-existent.

But just like last time, he could easily be without the comfort of a warm shower and clean clothes as long as he wasn't alone. His first three thoughts when he saw the tank exploding were Mary, Theresa, and Gareth. In times like those, most find out who they truly care about, but none of the people Alex thought of surprised him. Even Gareth, whom he felt he hardly knew anymore, he would be beyond devastated if lost.

Several times, he came close to shouting for them, but held back since he would likely attract more walkers. Or Rick and his people who he assumed would kill him on sight purely for having been a resident there.

Alex crisscrossed almost the entire compound, searching for anyone living. He instead came across many of his fallen Terminants. One of whom was Gina who he saw being swarmed from far away. He had to hold back his desire to kill the walkers who had done so, being that it would be a waste of time. After he had spent so much time searching, he figured if anyone had survived, they would have made it out by then.

With a half-loaded handgun in his holster, he headed for the fence, approaching the stockyard where they housed the people they intended to devour.

Wait, he thought, recalling the still had people inside most of the cars. Do I let them out? I can't just let them die of dehydration in there... He considered it a cruel fate, despite what many would say was the much crueler fate they had been awaiting before.

No, he had to leave them. The second he opened the doors, he knew they'd recognize him as their captor and try to kill him. Armed or not, they could take him down with their bare hands if they wanted, or shove him into a hungry walker. Yet again, he had to choose himself over the plight and certain suffering of strangers.

When he turned the corner and made it to the stockyard, he was halted by the sight of the open door of the car that held the Occupier's leader. The idea of seeing the man out of his prison, unrestrained, terrified him. Like a nightmare, he then tried to push himself forward, but his legs wouldn't work. Any second now, he thought, the leader would grab him, push him against one of the cars and do god knows what to him.

Alex heard his name being called from a short distance away and flinched violently, thinking at first it was the man he feared. He felt relief when he realized the voice clearly came from a woman. At that, he forced himself to step forward through the air that felt like slush. He turned the corner to see Cynthia—oh god, Cynthia!—standing in a small field of dead walkers with a handgun held to her side.

"The fuck are you doin'!" Alex shouted at her. "Come on!"

She shook her head rapidly. "No, no, look!" She pointed her free hand to a body that rested by her
feet, one Alex assumed was another dead walker.

Alex sighed and jogged forward over the assortment of undead and set sights on what was the leader's body before him. "Oh..."

The leader was bitten in the neck, his unkempt hair soaked in a puddle of blood that had leaked from the wound from his neck as well as a wound in his head. One he assumed Cynthia had put there. Alex would have been lying if he said he didn't take an ounce of pleasure from seeing him like that.

"It's over, Alex," she said, appearing inappropriately at ease.

"Yeah, yeah, it's over," he offered her a reassuring smile. "Now we have to go," he urged just as he spotted two walkers appear from around one of the cars behind her.

"Go on, kick him."

"What!? Cynthia, come on!" He flitted his eyes back and forth between her and the undead that lumbered toward them.

"Like this." She brought her leg back before launching it forward and hitting the leader's side with force.

Alex knew it would be pointless to argue Cynthia when she got like this. "Fine," he agreed before giving the body's head the front side of his shoe, breaking just enough skin to mat his boot with a smidgen of blood.

The action made him worry for a split second that the leader would lift his head, or grab his ankle, even though he was obviously dead.

"Okay," Alex said as he took hold of Cynthia's hand and led her away, fleeing toward the back fence where few walkers had made it.

"Wait!" Cynthia exclaimed as she pulled her hand from his, but kept her pace, "where's Theresa? And Mary and—"

"I don't know," he interrupted as he stepped over the body of another Terminant. He glanced down at it only long enough to ensure it wasn't any of the three people his mind was fixed on. "I haven't seen her, or Gare, or mom, alive or dead, so they must've gotten out." He managed to keep his voice straight despite how many times it tried to crack.

When they reached the fence, Alex shook its metal grate. "Come on."

Cynthia handed her knife to him and took hold of the grate, pulling herself up while Alex stood behind her, ready to catch her if she fell.

"Oh, shit," Alex mumbled as a group of five walkers staggered forward.

He pulled the gun from his holster and held it out, attempting to aim at one's head. His hand shook from the stress, but he managed to take four out before the weapon clicked empty.

Cynthia made her way over the top of the fence before stumbling down, unsteadily reaching the
ground. "Hurry!"

Alex placed his gun back in its holster and sprang forward, knifing the last walker in the head. He then turned, shuffled over the fence and met Cynthia on the other side.

"If they're alive, they're gonna be followin' Rick and his group, don't you think?" Cynthia asked breathlessly.

"Yeah, yeah they will be."

*Follow them? And then what? Have a smorgasbord?*

Chapter End Notes

I guess you can tell I axed poor Mike and Greg for Alex and Cynthia. I never developed those two guys anyway so, sorry bros.
Lost

The guy has nine lives, Gareth thought upon finding Martin miraculously alive in the shack where he had been stationed.

"Shit." Martin flinched as Gareth dabbed his bloodied ear with his sleeve he'd dampened with bottled water. "Yeah, yeah, it was the bitch with the short, grey hair. Same one Albert saw," he breathed out, eyes fluttering shut again where he sat up against the wall.

Albert nodded along from where he crouched next to Gareth and Theresa.

Gareth felt a sense of déjà-vu come over him from being so near Martin. Months had passed since they last fooled around as Gareth had put a stop to it. Their relationship had begun to near monogamy status which he sought to avoid. Since then, his thoughts of Martin in a physical sense dwindled. They didn't interact much other than what was required living together. The two got along well, but the leader didn't consider him a friend—if they ever were.

"Hey man," Martin began, turning a bit toward Albert, "Cynthia's quick with her long legs, she could've made it."

Gareth didn't expect to hear something so optimistic and encouraging from Martin of all people. Must have a concussion, he half-kidded to himself.

"Can you stand up?" Gareth asked.

"Yeah, I can try," Martin replied as he bent his knees and pushed himself upwards. Albert and Theresa stood up while Gareth guided Martin up by his wrists.

"You good?" Gareth asked. Martin nodded and Gareth released his grip and stepped back.

Theresa then unsheathed her handgun, sprang forward and pressed it against the side of Martin's head. "You white trash piece of shit!" she shrieked.

Martin froze in place while Gareth and Albert raised their hands. "Whoa, whoa, what the hell are you doing!?" Gareth demanded.

She swung her head around. "What am I doing!? This is his fucking fault!" She turned back to Martin, who from what little could be seen of his face, appeared frightened. "Ugh, I knew it, I knew you'd fuck us all one day. I just didn't know how bad."

"Theresa, put it down. We don't kill our own." Gareth said, sliding one foot forward slightly.

"He's not 'our own.' He's a stray dog that Alex, Alex, who you know could be dead right now because of him, felt bad for and threw a bone. God, biggest mistake he ever made." The barrel of the gun pressed into Martin's head with more pressure.

"Theresa, can I—" Martin began.

"Martin, shut up," Gareth halted him, worried he'd say something to anger her further. "Put it
down, Theresa."

"Oh yeah, wouldn't want to lose your old fuck buddy."

The remark sent a wave of offense through him, but like the other array of feelings he'd been dealt that day, he swallowed it.

"Come on, Theresa," Albert added, his eyes wide.

"You know what happens to people who kill their own," Gareth warned.

Theresa shook her head, her face falling from anger to despair. "No, because of him our own are dead. So this is what we should do."

"He's not the enemy," Albert said.

Gareth took a careful step forward. "We can talk about this, just put the gun down, and we can talk."

Martin breathed through his mouth in short breaths, looking to the floor. "I—I'm sorry," he said gently. Theresa scoffed.

"Hey, look at me," Gareth said. Theresa reluctantly turned her gaze to his. "Don't misplace your anger. We are the same people, and the more of us there are, the better. He didn't do this, but he saw who did. And they'll pay, I promise you." he finished with a reassuring smile. "Come on, put it down."

Her eyes reflected inwards and she stayed silent for several moments. The only sound was Martin's forced, apprehensive breaths.

Theresa eventually slid the barrel of the gun down an inch before lowering it completely and holding it at her side. Martin exhaled a long sigh of relief and hurried to Gareth's side.

Gareth took one step and extended his hand outwards, gesturing towards her gun.

She shook her head. "No."

"Just for now."

She pressed her lips together and handed him the weapon before rushing past him and out the door.

After she exited, Martin stepped forward in front of Gareth. "I'm the fuck-up?" He pointed at his chest. "That bitch is crazy, she's gonna get us killed!"

Gareth raised his hand. "Martin, calm down."

"Her husband might be dead," Albert added.

"Yeah? And so might his brother and your... whatever Cynthia is to you. And you don't wanna kill me."

Albert didn't reply, but he crossed his arms stiffly.
"If this were still Terminus," Gareth began, "we'd call a meeting and issue her a punishment. But you know what? We don't have that luxury right now." He then walked over to the bag Theresa had left on the floor, knelt down and rummaged through it.

"Here," Gareth said as he pulled a bottle of aspirin from the bag and stood up, extending the medicine to Martin.

"You didn't by chance grab anything stronger, did you?"

Gareth breathed out a laugh. "There wasn't enough time to unlock the case." They had kept opiate painkillers locked in a glass cabinet due to several residents having a taste for getting buzzed.

"Yeah thanks," Martin grumbled and grabbed the bottle from his hand, opened it, then shook two pills into his hand. Before Gareth could offer him water, Martin swallowed the medication dry and resealed the cap.

"You don't want any water with that?" Gareth asked.

"Nope," Martin replied flatly.

"Someone should talk to Theresa," Albert interjected.

"Yeah, I'll go talk to her," Gareth said. "Martin, you focus on un-swelling your face." The injured man threw him a sarcastic smile.

Why did I ever hook up with him? Gareth thought as he turned and opened the door.

After he shut the door, smelling a hint of the smoke that still billowed from his former home, he found Theresa hunched over on a tree stump. Her hands were folded and eyes trained on the ground. He walked over to her and knelt down beside her.

"He can't be gone," Theresa said without looking to him. "There were people burned so bad you couldn't tell who they were anymore, but I..."

"He could be alive. Just got out a different way," he reassured.

She lifted her head up and turned it to him. Her face reddened, but without tears. "Then where is he? He would've known to come this way, like you said."

"What if he is dead?" Gareth wondered. For the first time since the ordeal began, he realized he would have lost his entire family.

What did I last say to him? What did I last say to mom?

He couldn't remember, he racked his brain trying to recall what it was, but came up blank. The last thing he had said to his father was 'dad,' called out in a panic before his neck was impaled by a sword. And Chelsea, it was simply 'see you later' before someone had yelled that she'd been bitten. Followed by that awful, sinking, and hopeless feeling.

God, is that what Theresa feels like right now?
"I want to find him too."

"Do you?" She asked with attitude. "Really? Because you don't seem that eager." She shook her head and turned to stare straight ahead.

The accusation sent another wave of offense through him. "I'm not the enemy either."

Before she could reply, the cabin door swung open with a loud creak. "I'm ready to go," Albert declared with Martin behind him.

Gareth stood up. "Yeah, we are too."

* * *

Cynthia told herself everything was fine.

*It's fine.*

She and Alex jogged through the woods, searching for signs that the living had passed through recently. Neither looked back at the smoke that rose from their home as they did so. They didn't need to.

Because it was fine.

"Alex, we don't actually know which way they went," she said after they'd stopped to break.

He attempted to catch his breath before replying, "Rick and his people would've gone this way. Out of the cars and straight over the fence."

*He's so out of shape*, Cynthia thought. She opened her mouth to tell him when she realized it probably wasn't the time.

*God! Here I am, everything is gone and I'm thinking about how out of shape he is? Albert, my best friend could be dead... but I didn't see his body. A lot got burned, but I'd know his body if I saw it, torched or not. And Theresa and Gareth and Mary! I bet they're all alive. And even Martin, maybe —*

"Hey, I said we need to track," Alex breathed from beside her.

She hadn't heard him. "Oh, right. Sorry."

"You do remember how, right?" He put a hand to his hip and inspected the ground in front of him.

She nodded. "Yeah, of course. But, I don't see no shoe prints."

"Well, keep an eye out."

She watched Alex as he crept across the ground; he carefully examined the area, looking for shoe prints, grass or leaves flattened, bullet shells, anything. He was clearly upset, she knew because he kept placing his hands on his upper thighs when they began to visibly shake.

Cynthia held out her hands to see if she was trembling too, she wasn't. It confused her, she was
easily rattled, but in this case she felt calm. Then she realized it would probably come later, once the shock wore off.

"We left so many things," Cynthia spoke. The clothes on their backs, a bullet-less gun and a knife was all they had escaped with.

"Just... track, okay?" He glanced up at her before beginning to stroll forward.

"Sorry." She trotted over several feet in front of and joined his endeavor.

Alex then stopped and squeezed his eyes shut. "I—I can't concentrate. I need to..." He stepped over to a tree and leaned his back against it.

"Hey, don't freak out now."

He attempted to brush the dark, tangled hair from his forehead without much success. "You know... all this time... we're the weak ones."

Her eyebrows furrowed, surprised to hear Alex say something so harsh. "What?"

"Sorry, no, I'm the weak one. Out of that whole place, I shouldn't be here, man."

Cynthia nodded. "No, no you're right. I'm weak too, everyone knows it, or knew it. They talked about it, behind our backs mostly. I shouldn't be here either."

She knew he was right. They were both squeamish, they had the most trouble accepting cannibalism in the early days. And they hoped arrivals would stay more than they hoped they would meet their dinner plates. Both shared the same kind of soft spot Gareth always warned not to let grow too big.

What if...what if we don't find them? Or not for a while? And we have to eat? And we found someone... maybe Rick or part of his group... or anyone. Could I... do that? Could we do that?

Just once, they had butchered someone. After they reclaimed Terminus, everyone had a hand in butchering the dead Occupiers. Except for Albert, who was eager to end his own life, possibly with one of the carving knives. But those men weren't people to them. They were animals, monsters. People they knew hadn't been ruined and corrupted by the world, they were born ruined.

She could live with what they did at Terminus, it had taken time, but she'd accepted it out of necessity. But Cynthia had never directly killed anyone before, she knew Alex had. At least one person, an Occupier he had used an automatic rifle to madly spray bullets into.

Panic began to rise in her at the realization of what she had lost, and what she may have to do. She dropped to her knees. "We need to... track," she forced out, attempting to remain complacent.

Alex sunk down along with her and rested his elbows on his knees, burying his face in his hands.

"Alex, we..." Her jaw quaked. "We're wastin' time. We can't get upset, we can't... We..." Her voice broke.

An impulse to cling to the devastated man overcame her. She shimmied forward and wrapped her arms around him, her hands meeting just below his neck. Fear that he would reject her struck, but
he accepted and curled his arms under hers, resting his hands on her shoulders.

Despite the way her skin had flushed and heated from running, she welcomed his warmth and lay her head on his shoulder. She wished she could fall asleep right there and wake up back in her bed.

Alex was a good one to be stuck with, she thought. Not many other Terminants, except for Albert, would embrace her in a time like this. Although, maybe that was a bad thing, she mused. He had just said they were the weak ones. Stopping to hold on to each other for dear life? If Gareth were there, he'd never let them stop for a hug.

They stayed wrapped around each other for a minute, the sharp panic in Cynthia's gut subsiding, before the rustling of brush sounded. The two jerked apart and to their feet and spotted a very decayed walker moving toward them. Cynthia sighed, glad it wasn't Rick and his band, but disappointed it wasn't any of their people. Hustling forward, she pulled out her knife and stabbed it between the eyes.

Pulling the blade out and allowing the undead to crumple to the ground, she turned back to Alex. She noticed his eyes were wet with tears, and found hers were as well when she raised her hand to them.

"Let's keep trackin'." She re-sheathed her knife.

Alex wiped his eyes with his sleeve. "Yeah, yeah I'm sorry I freaked out. But um, I think we should head to the shack."

"But you said they went this way."

"I know, but we're more likely to run into Rick and his gang." He shrugged.

"It's out of the way."

"Yeah, but think like Gareth for a sec. If you were him, where would you go?"

She puckered her bottom lip. "Fair enough, yeah, he would go there."
Parched with thirst, Alex and Cynthia hiked through the woods toward the cabin. To add to their anxiety, the leaves beneath their feet crunched and crackled with every step, loud enough to alert any nearby walkers. It had been almost an hour with no creatures in sight, which was fortunate considering the two only had a single weapon. The pair moved on cautiously.

Alex kept swallowing while they walked, trying to coat his dry throat with enough saliva to mask his dehydration. He and Cynthia hadn't said a word to each other since deciding to change course. He waited for the moment when she'd stop in her tracks and fall to her knees again, but she didn't.

Besides water, his thoughts centered around the three people he cared for the most. They were the only things that made him want to continue through the dangerous woodlands. Even his anger for the people who destroyed their home was overshadowed by his desperate need to get to them.

*I'm doing all of this for them,* he thought, trying to distract himself from his pounding heart. *This is all going to be worth it once I know they're safe.*

*Theresa.* He imagined ecstatically embracing his wife again, shouting the nickname she only allowed him to use: Tess. He thought of the times he'd been stoned or sleepy and tried to call her Theresa and Tess at the same time and it came out "Tessresa." He thought it funny how those were the types of stories he remembered while the world was burning. Just for that moment, Alex allowed himself a slight smile.

*Mom.* When he was little and frightened of the monster under the bed, she had held him tight and promised that she would never let them hurt him. Now the roles were reversed. He needed to get to her. He needed his mother's comfort.

*Gareth.* He had sworn that the monsters never existed in the first place. Even though Gareth's hard realism bothered him at times, Alex felt the only reason he was still alive was purely because of his older brother. He thought himself weak and wouldn't feel any bit of safety until he found his brother. He needed protection in his life, and Gareth was strong.

Panting, Alex swallowed hard once more. Just being thirsty for a swig of water or hungry for a plate of dinner tended to trigger recollections of the dreadful feeling. And now that he didn't know where or when he could satiate his body, those feelings could consume him again. Panic permeated through his body at the thought, mixing with the terror that the people he loved may be dead, or will be.

He swallowed again.

Cynthia then halted dead in her tracks and pointed down at the weak trail they followed. "Alex, look! Hey, I think these are Gareth's shoe prints!" she exclaimed, looking up at Alex. Her eyes were bright and excited.

Alex's eyebrows twitched upwards, but he refused to get his hopes up before he was positive that the prints were his brother's. "Really?" He stopped beside her and crouched down. "Yeah, I—I think you could be right."
"I know his shoe prints, okay?" she said, sensing his uncertainty. "I cleaned those boots from one of our meat stock and said, 'hey, you like this style right?'"

Alex wasn't 100% positive yet, but he nodded because he didn't doubt her memory.

* * *

Just Gareth's? he asked himself while he further inspected the ground. No, there were others. He looked for small ones, like women's feet, but most of the prints lay on top of one another. The only reason he could make out what looked like Gareth's was because they were in a patch of light sand in the front, clearly leading the way.

Yeah, that'll be Gareth.

* * *

Theresa stared daggers into Martin as the four trekked, tracking the signs of Rick and his posse. She could tell he felt her glare as he kept chewing on his lip and exhaling loudly while she did so. If Alex were dead, and she found him dead, she would kill Martin. She didn't even have to consider it, she knew she'd raise her weapon and fire at point-blank range against his temple. What would happen afterwards wouldn't be pretty. She'd be expelled from the group, if not immediately considered an enemy. But would Gareth actually go so far to do that the woman his brother loved? Who knows? Despite his rigidity and love of planning, Gareth could be unpredictable.

Regardless of what Alex's fate was, she would find Rick and dine on him and his irritating son. The one Alex liked but didn't admit to liking. Her heart sank. Committing such acts in revenge for someone so gentle seemed like an insult rather than justice. There was no way she could forget about it though.

And Mary, for god's sake, Mary. She was the woman who ushered in the broken-hearted Theresa when she came to Terminus. The woman who couldn't hold back her desire to embrace her during the Siege. The woman who ran her hands through her hair the night they took back their home and feasted on their tormentors. The woman who offered her acts of compassion in the midst of such brutality. The kind that allowed her to grip at a few last strings of humanity and hold on. The woman who was now dead at the hands of a stranger.

Mary didn't have as soft a heart as Alex. She was more like Gareth than she knew; she'd take out every last member of Rick's group if she were still alive. And despite Gareth's cool and collected nature, she knew they were on the same page about that. They would eat their home's destroyers for Mary.

"I hear them," Gareth half-whispered, holding up his hand and halting the three behind him.

Theresa held her breath, listening for the sounds of the large group through the still trees. She picked up the twinge of a familiar voice, one a bit rusty with a definite Southern drawl. Rick.

Stupid prick.

Albert took a great stride forward before Gareth stopped him. "Whoa, whoa, it's daytime. Too soon."

The youngest man pressed his lips together in frustration, but didn't go any further.
"We need to hold back for a little bit, we're too close," Gareth stated.

"What? What if we lose 'em?" Martin objected.

"We won't," Gareth replied instantly. "And uh, you look like you're getting cold." He looked Martin up and down.

Martin had his arms crossed and kept shifting on his feet. Theresa figured she ought to be a good Terminant and help him out. "Here," she began, pulling the bag off her arm, "I grabbed this from the sorting room." She retrieved a black hoodie and extended it to Martin. She resisted the urge to lob it at his face instead.

Martin accepted the garment and put it on, crossing his arms once more. "We done standin' around with our thumbs up our ass?"

"Not yet," Gareth responded. "We need to sit down and take a break," he said as he strolled over to a nearby tree and lowered himself against it. The other three stood still. "Trust me. Please."

Trust him. Do I? God, of course I do.

The rest of his group then followed and sat down beside him.

"Is that Alex's jacket?" Gareth asked Theresa as she tried to get somewhat comfortable.

She nodded. "Mh-hm, I put it on a few minutes before the explosion because I was feeling cold." Her voice was small. She wondered if that jacket would be the last thing she would have left of him. That and her wedding ring.

They had gotten the bands from two arrivals who declared they'd been married thirty years. The rings sat in the sorting room for months before Alex and Theresa decided to have a wedding. They figured using bands from a couple who had been together so long would be good luck. Some luck.

They passed around a bottle of water from Theresa's bag, taking uniform sips, just enough to avoid dehydration. It was silent except for the sound of their breathing.

"I can't hear 'em no more," Martin commented.

"Might just be the blood in your ears," Theresa said, regretting her remark immediately.

"Guys," Gareth interrupted in a warning tone. No one else said a thing.

Theresa analyzed the chipped, baby blue nail polish on her fingernails. She and Kaylee had spent an evening applying it along with sugar and lemon juice facials the week before. The two had grown fairly close. Theresa felt a pang of anguish at the memory of seeing Kaylee's body burned like a used piece of charcoal.

It already seemed like ages ago that she had engaged in something so fun and normal. Terminus was certainly not normal. For some, it was hell and for others, heaven. But when it was one's heaven, it allowed for the hell to rest on the back burner. Forgotten, at least for a little while.

Her adrenaline surge had subsided. Her muscles felt heavy and a weight rest on her back. She knew she'd have to shake it off if she wanted to survive. She yearned for the energy to kill those who had done this to her and her people. Although the instinctual drive of hunger would soon take
over, and rid her of her lethargy for sure.

After their brief rest, they continued on course. Theresa tried to remember what she was doing exactly 24 hours before. She thought she was eating dinner with Alex, Mary, and Kaylee. The meal consisted of two large cuts of meat on her plate, fresh yellow squash, and steamed zucchini from their garden. She recalled Alex wrapping his slices of vegetables in slabs of meat to mute their taste due to his dislike of vegetables.

Gareth was droning on about their plans with peppy confidence. Typical. She felt bad for him, bad that he'd elected himself a leader who had to keep his lid on at all times. His face when he saw his mother gave away his clear devastation. But now, he seemed as calm and collected as ever, much like after the Siege. That poor, scared, starving man who had to make outlandish plans and suggested they do such horrific things.

"So what? Did they think we all dropped dead and wouldn't follow their asses?" Theresa remarked along the way. The mess of shoe prints they followed were large and easily traceable.

"They're smart, but they're stupid," Gareth replied. "That's what happens when you get too cocky. You lose."

Is he talking about himself too? He never admits he's not perfect.

The sound of a nearby voice then caught her attention. Hope rose in her from the fact that it sounded male, and too close to be their prey. "You hear—"

"Shhh." Gareth silenced her. "Sounds like maybe two, I can't tell—"

"I'll go," she offered. "That's too close to be Rick and his."

Albert stepped forward. "Yeah, yeah, I'll go too."

"No, let's just listen," Gareth said.

Theresa held her breath and tried to pick up on the voice again for a long while. Nothing. It was silent. "It's probably just a walker," she said, discouraged.

Snap.

A twig broke from close by, from the same direction the voice had been heard. Gareth took several steps forward, looking alert and ready to attack.

For a second, Theresa wondered if she were dreaming when Alex appeared from the woods and flung his arms around Gareth. She'd had many dreams where people long dead would show up, always causing her to wake up with great pain.

This time though, it was real. Theresa raced over to see Gareth actually embracing Alex back, a small but genuinely relieved smile on his face. Alex was certainly happy to see him. So much so he hadn't noticed her yet.

Theresa couldn't help but grin. "Alex!" she shook his shoulder from beside him.

He looked up and his eyes grew wide. "Aw, Tess!" He let go of Gareth, stepped over to her and
hugged her tightly, lifting her off the ground. He buried his face in her neck, trailing kisses up to just above her ear before planting one on her lips.

The rush was back, although this wasn't like the adrenaline. This one was warm and safe, briefly making her forget the raw hatred she so desperately wanted to act on.

"I thought I'd lost you." Her voice came out just above a whine.

"I thought I'd lost you," Alex returned at the same pitch.

"Theresa!" Cynthia's voice called. She hadn't noticed Cynthia had shown up too. Theresa lifted her head and stepped back from her husband a bit to see the red-head beaming, her arm around Albert's shoulder.

She's happy to see me? she thought as she smiled and offered her a wave. Martin stood back quietly during the whole ordeal, which gave Theresa a degree of satisfaction.

"Hey," Alex began, still gripping Theresa's wrists as he looked over the four other people, "Um... where..." The joy on his face began to falter.

Oh god, he doesn't know? He didn't find her?

Alex turned to his brother. "Gareth?"

"I found her in the church," Albert stated, stepping forward alongside Cynthia. "I saw someone, a woman, go in and let in walkers. And I... I found her and put her down. I... didn't get to her in time."

"I saw her too," Martin interrupted, "she was the one who blew up the tank."

Cynthia gave a horrified look and raised her hand over her mouth. "Oh my God."

How did both of them not find her?

Alex's jaw quivered. "I—I didn't see her. I went in the church. You mean someone just..." His hands fell from Theresa's grip.

"You really that surprised, man?" Martin cut in.

Alex tried to blink away tears and shook his head. "No man... no I'm not. I just..."

Theresa waited for Gareth to do something, to hug his brother, or put his hand on his shoulder, anything. If anyone should be comforting Alex, it should be him. But Gareth just stood by, his lips parted slightly.

Theresa moved in and embraced Alex again, nuzzling her face against his neck, but he stayed still.

"I didn't find her either," Cynthia began, "I ran through there though, I did." She choked-up.

"We caught their scent," Gareth finally said, a comforting tone to his voice. "We're going for them. We're fucking going after them, guys." His jaw was set, and he looked back and forth between the distraught Alex and Cynthia. "It's just like last time."
Chapter End Notes

The real, real shit starts going down next chapter, don't worry!
The six caught a good earful of Rick's group throughout the first chilly night. Unfortunately, Rick and company weren't yet vulnerable enough for an attack. That, and Gareth wanted them to believe they'd escaped, for them to enjoy their last few hours of false freedom from those oh so awful cannibals.

He smirked at the fact they didn't know what was about to happen to them. They walked around as if they could burn the earth beneath their feet wherever they went and live to tell the tale. He couldn't wait to wipe that pride off their faces.

The rival group didn't say much to be overheard in the darkness, however. And from what little they caught of their faces, they looked grim.

Must not be the celebrating types, Gareth mused.

Gareth had already mentally planned out his celebration which may or may not have included Rick's liver on a gold platter. He wondered since now he had developed such a palette for human meat, if his upcoming meals on two legs would taste better than the first ones. The feast on the Occupiers that fateful night was a hearty and almost orgasmic one. Yet still, the shadow of doubt that remained over whether or not he could dine on innocent people numbed a fraction of his taste buds. But now, any shred of doubt was eradicated, and in its absence he was given a great sense of peace even amid the chaos he navigated now. And in turn, he anticipated his next meals would be incredibly delectable.

Another thing he had no doubts about were his people. In the beginning, he had promised he would always keep them safe and well-fed. It didn't matter who had ended up by his side after Terminus' fall. They were his tribe.

Alex was his brother and he loved him, even though he couldn't remember the last time he told him so. Despite their shared lifestyle, they had always been and would remain two very different people.

Theresa had become his sister-in-law, and while he did harbor some fondness for her, she could be combative and brash. Her threatening to kill Martin just about made him snap.

Cynthia, while admirable, was something of an odd one. Ever since the Siege, her 'proper etiquette' had gone the way of the world.

Albert had been the second youngest at Terminus and now the youngest of their group. Gareth was proud that he had kept himself alive after the Siege despite his initial lack of eagerness to do so.

Martin was the odd man out. He was the first arrival they took in after the Occupation they didn't butcher. Regardless that the man never quite understood the spirit and mantras of Terminus, he was one of Gareth's people all the same.

All of them were his kin despite whatever issues he may have with them or vice versa. That promise was written on the walls of the church.

The hunters further tracked their prey as the next day progressed. Rick and his group had settled in
a church of all places, giving Gareth a degree of confidence in his desire to snatch just one at a
time. It would make them paranoid, crazy, even, wondering where their teammates could have
disappeared to.

Cynthia and Martin followed several of them to town during the day where they had traveled
alongside an apparent member of the clergy. They had hopes of getting close enough to grab one.
Unfortunately, they didn't, but they did happen to catch a peek at three of them laughing. The
couple—whose names Gareth reminded them of—Glenn and Maggie. And the other girl whose
name they overhead was Tara. They were actually laughing.

* * *

Cynthia and Albert tailed the archer and the woman who killed Mary, coming close to snagging
them before their bounty drove off in a hurry, which the group thought odd. It was disappointing
being that the grey-haired woman was one of the ones they wanted most.

The second time was the charm. Finally, someone let themselves be alone. One of those who were
pushed in front of the trough on the killing floor, no less. It gave Gareth an air of satisfaction when
Martin and Cynthia showed back up with nice guy Bob.

Theresa and Martin did the cutting since they were the most skilled with knives. Gareth sat by in
case the poor guy woke up during the act. He didn't want him to; it wasn't as though he had a
personal vendetta against Bob or anything. The man just happened to have aligned himself with the
wrong people at the wrong time.

Gareth watched Alex, Albert, and Cynthia while they readied the campfire for cooking, curious to
see how they reacted. Cynthia didn't glance over once, which Gareth assumed was on purpose. The
girl continued to be afraid of things like spiders and had avoided the butchery scene whenever
possible. Alex, however, did glance over a few times with an expression of apathy that gave
nothing away.

Theresa and Martin bickered as they had done many times over the past day and a half while they
sawed past the man's bone with Michonne's katana. Gareth ordered them in no uncertain terms to
shut up. Bob's leg was then wrapped up after that. He had lost a bit of blood during the act,
although not enough to spell a quick death.

The hunters were silent while they ate, more so than Gareth anticipated. They were as quiet as they
were upon their first meal of human meat. It didn't taste like total victory, not yet. Unlike the first
feast, they hadn't won, though now they had pulled the first thread loose.

Gareth decided to put an end to the silence. "He tastes like a fourth of July barbecue." Better than
he thought he would.

Cynthia giggled at his remark, an odd sound in the heavy dark.

Little did they know their endeavors were imperfect. When Bob began screaming of his walker
bite, it was a slap in the face. Gareth didn't think he'd ever felt his intelligence insulted so much. A
hard kick to the amputated man's face shut him up, alleviating only a tiny bit of his wounded pride.

Why, why did we not check him? Why didn't I think of it? He was standing by himself far away from
the church. So he wasn't just stupid, he was going off to die.

Before, at Terminus, he had reasoned that virus from the person's infection would have been
cooked out by the time it reached their dinner plate. He wasn't entirely sure of his belief as he
hadn't ever wanted to test it out, but he had to stay confident regardless of its truth.

"We'll just dump him back at the church, then go on as we planned," Gareth declared. The others remained rattled while they stood around the flames. The exception being Martin and oddly enough, Alex, who hadn't spoken a word of worry.

"I'll do it," Theresa offered daringly.

Gareth nodded at Theresa. "Alex, go with her. Take him back, leave him right in front. We'll meet you half way." He hoped Alex's presence would help soften Theresa's volatility.

Theresa then hurried over to the unconscious Bob. "Alex, come on," she urged. Alex stepped over, knelt down and wrapped his arms under the man's shoulders.

Gareth lightened his expression. "Remember: quiet as a mouse, guys. Quick as a cat."

* * *

"Set him down. Here, right here," Theresa insisted after they reached the church. The two lowered the man onto the ground gingerly. Alex's muscles groaned with relief when he released the weight.

He then stared down at Bob for a few brief seconds, the face of an imminent death. Thinking of his mother, he sought pleasure from seeing him like that, yet didn't find any. No satisfaction. Mary was still dead, after all.

"Alex, come on," his wife said in a loud whisper.

He snapped out of it and backed away. Theresa took a hold of his forearm and began to lead him away from the candlelight-filled building. But while they slunk away, their ears perked to the movement of the loose gravel from the other side's parking lot.

"Get down," Theresa whisper-hissed as they shuffled over and concealed themselves at the edge of the wooded area. "Let's just see..."

"See what?" Alex asked.

"Who it is." She watched the darkened landscape with intense focus. Alex swore she licked her lips.

A man and a woman emerged from the wooded area from near the back of the church to their right. Theresa scurried toward them. Alex didn't know what else to do other than to follow her, assuming she intended to take them captive.

She unsheathed her gun as the members of Rick's group continued toward the church. Before they could react, Theresa sprang forth from beside them and raised her gun at the two. "Don't move, don't say anything. Do, and you're dead."

The man and woman halted and both raised their hands. Alex drew his rifle from its holster on his back and doubled the pressure. Through the moonlight, he could distinguish their startled features well enough to recognize the pair as Glenn and Maggie.

Alex wondered what Theresa's plan was. Kill them now? Take them back to the rest of their group? Did they even recognize them as being from Terminus? Not Theresa, he didn't think she had laid eyes on them when they arrived. He had, though. He gave a greeting just before they were ordered into A at gunpoint.
Sure enough, Glenn and Maggie's faces fixed on him with a look of recognition. Alex stiffened his posture, attempting to convey dominance despite that his heart pounded so hard he could hear his pulse.

Theresa shifted a step back, at a diagonal distance from the pair. "Walk," she commanded, gesturing her head back to the way they came.

Maggie and Glenn complied, hands still raised. Alex was nervous while he trailed their shadows because they still had their weapons on them. But he figured he and Theresa would take them once they were out of sight of the church.

Theresa signaled for Alex to stop once they made it beyond several trees and an assortment of brush. Far enough away for anyone at or near the church to see them. "You, put your weapons on the ground and step five feet back," she said with a harsh glare.

Alex got the idea to put more heat on Glenn, so he slid a foot forward and extended his rifle closer. "And don't try anything," he warned, thankful his voice came out strong and clear when his heart still raced.

Maggie threw a worried glance at Alex's action before lowering her right hand to her belt and taking hold of her knife's handle. She then set it on the ground and stepped back the five feet, both hands raised again.

"Your turn," Alex told Glenn. Glenn repeated Maggie's action with the gun in his holster, meeting Maggie by her side.

"Is that all?" Theresa asked. They nodded. "Really? Your ringleader didn't teach you how to hide wood shivs on you?"

"No," Maggie replied through clenched teeth.

Alex stepped sideways toward his wife, cocking his head to the side. "Let's just knock 'em out." Theresa puckered her lips and nodded.

He then reversed the rifle, strode over behind Glenn and whacked him in the back of the head. Just like the butcher's actions with the baseball bats. Maggie let out a whine when Glenn fell over.

Alex swallowed hard, uncomfortable at her expression of fear. He then promptly moved over and knocked her out as well.

Placing his weapon back over his shoulder, he then moved over to the knife and gun on the ground. "Gare and them will be happy we got these guys," he said as he crouched down and took the handgun.

Theresa shook her head while she made her way over to Maggie. "No, we need to do something first."

"What?"

Theresa knelt by Maggie and proceeded to search her. "Just... I need to do something. Not kill them. I just have to..." She slid her hand in Maggie's pocket.

She needs therapy, he realized.

Gareth wouldn't like that, not really. They would be diverging on the plan. However, he didn't want
to deny her something that would make her feel better.

"Okay," he agreed.

After Theresa equipped the knife and Alex searched Glenn, finding a bit of ammo in his pocket, they dragged the two away as far into the woods as their arms could stand to. They settled in a small clearing illuminated by enough moonlight to see what they were doing. The two captives' hands were bound behind their backs and around two trees with their own shoelaces. It wasn't the most secure form of bondage, but it would have to do.

Alex hadn't expected Theresa to do this. After the Siege, she had grown a penchant for violent reprisal that he still didn't have half of. He thought maybe she would hit them, verbally assault them, or something else. Instead, she and Alex sat there in front of the two waiting for them to awake with only the sound of crickets in their ears.

Maggie began to nod awake, her head moving from side to side.

"Hey," Theresa growled, "Maggie. Wake up."

Maggie's eyes fluttered open and filled with panic when she realized she had been bound. She whipped her head over to Glenn. "Oh..."

"He's not dead, not yet. He will be. Both of you will be. And your friends," Theresa assured.

Maggie shook her head and pulled at her restraints. "No, no. You don't have to do this!"

"Oh my god, you are always so stupid. You don't get it, you never get it!"

Alex didn't know what to say, he didn't feel like talking, or doing anything really. He felt like the woods around him were a black tunnel he wandered down with no end in sight.

"Where's Bob?" Maggie asked.

"I guess you're not that stupid then," Theresa taunted. Maggie's face flushed with anger. "We left your friend in front of that church. You just missed him."

Glenn made a muffled sound from his throat. Maggie looked over at him, concerned. "No one else has to die."

"He your boyfriend?" Theresa asked of Glenn.

Maggie turned her gaze to Alex. "Do you wanna do this? This what you want too?"

"I ain't got a choice, man." His voice was soft.

"No, there's always a choice. Th—"

Theresa sighed. "God, shut up. I asked if he's your boyfriend. Is he?"

She looked back to Theresa. "He's my husband."

Theresa raised her eyebrows. "Oh, we're married too. So for our double date, we'll have Rick for dinner."

Chapter End Notes
Poor Bob poor fucking Bob I felt bad writing some of this because poor Bob.
Bound and Gagged

Alex rested on the cold, hard ground, one knee folded lazily up against his chest. Theresa berated Maggie and Glenn from beside him, telling tales of Terminus' history and promising harsh retribution. Both were things that would typically rouse Alex's emotions, but none of her words impacted him at all.

"You know they'll find us," Glenn proclaimed of his group. "And you won't want to be here when they do. It doesn't matter if you took Carol and Daryl, they'll think you did. Rick will think you did." His voice was strong despite the circumstances.

Theresa exhaled a long breath. "You still don't get it, do you?"

Alex remained surprised by Theresa's actions. She wanted them to understand why they did what they did, which she had never cared about before. What had changed now?

"Have you ever been raped, Maggie?" she asked point-blank. "Or you." She turned to Glenn. "It can happen to anyone."

Maggie's eyes reflected inwards.

Theresa nodded and clasped her hands over her folded legs. "So you have."

"No, um," Maggie began, tentative, "I—I almost was. Once."

"Almost. You're actually lucky then. I'm glad, really I am. I wouldn't wish it anyone, not even you. God, I lost count of how many times I was raped. I'm not even sure they all took a turn, but they probably did."

Alex cringed inside, he hated when Theresa spoke of it in specific terms. He had been the one to tell her she needed to be able to say what happened to her out loud, but that didn't mean he liked hearing it.

"You remember Mary? Up in the front at the grill? She was Alex's and Gareth's mom and my mother-in-law. She used to offer to go in my place. In any of the girls' places when she could. She was an incredible woman. Was."

Mom, Alex thought, heat pressing up against the back of his eyes. When the thugs agreed, his mother did go in place of the other women. He thought her so brave and so strong for her sacrifice. He and Gareth had offered themselves to the men in place of the others as well, only to be denied with vulgar remarks about how they weren't interested in the men.

"So, at least you have an idea of what it's like. What happened to the guy who did it?" Theresa's voice neared a conversational tone, departing from its previous viciousness.

"He's gone, it don't matter," Maggie replied.

"No, what happened exactly?"

"She doesn't have to talk to you," Glenn interjected. "We don't talk to murderers and cannibals."

"The longer you talk, the longer you'll stay alive, man," Alex said, his first words in a while.

"So, is he dead or not?" Theresa pressed further.
"Dead," Maggie spat.

"Did you do it?"

Maggie didn't reply.

"Maggie," Theresa began, sighing, "how about this: say you're trapped somewhere by rabid dogs for weeks on end with nothing to eat, and you and your group are starving. Then finally, finally, you figure out a way to fight back and kill the damn dogs. Would you, fifteen pounds lighter, eat the animals or not?"

Maggie remained quiet.

"Answer me!" Theresa shouted, making the other three flinch. She didn't. Theresa then sprang crossways and roughly slapped Glenn across the face.

Alex jerked forward. "Tess! Come on, we need to take 'em back to Gareth."

"No! I'm not done yet!" she exclaimed, backing away to her former place.

"We gotta be done," he urged as he climbed to his feet. "They're probably lookin' for us. C'mon."

Theresa bolted up, her eyes wild. "Do you even get it? They killed your mother, Alex!"

"Damnit! I know that! There's just no point and sittin' here and tryin' to explain this shit to 'em, okay!?!" His own words stunned him. Rarely did he ever raise his voice in anger, especially at Theresa.

Her face froze in disbelief, her lips parted slightly. It was clear when she looked at the couple, she saw rabid dogs who needed to be punished. The same as she viewed the Occupiers. Alex tried to see the two in that way. They had aided in destroying his home, called the woman who killed Mary their friend, yet he couldn't muster the same hatred Theresa had for them.

In fact, the pair reminded him of him and Theresa. Glenn and Maggie met and married after the turn—information Theresa had pulled from them—and now they just wanted to stay alive. They weren't the Occupiers, they weren't sadists and rapists who caused pain just to cause pain. They were just two people trying to survive.

"I know this is hard," Theresa began, her voice lowering, "I know you still don't like all of this. But these people?" She gestured her hand to the couple. "They deserve it, they—"

"I hate it," he breathed out.

She blinked. "What?"

"I don't 'not like it,' I hate it. I've never been okay with it, never. Never. You know why I've even made it this long? It's 'cause I've always loved you and mom and Gareth and even bein' alive more than I hated it. But I've never been okay with it, even when I am, I'm not. It's a damn lie."

She squinted. "So you've lied this entire time?"

"Not on purpose. I'd never lie to you on purpose." He turned his head to Glenn and Maggie, their faces hopeful. "I don't... I don't..."

Want to do this.
He felt like sinking to the ground in shame. "I can't be like you."

She scrunched her face. "Like me? What am I like?"

"Well.. like someone who knows exactly what they want. Like... someone who doesn't dwell on all the crap I do."

"I don't dwell on it because it's pointless. You know that." She raised a hand to her hip. "So, you would really, really, really be okay with letting these two go if we could?"

"Them... yeah, maybe. But not Rick, not the pixie cut. I know what you're thinkin' and no, I sure as hell don't wanna let 'em all go."

"I think you would be okay with it if we did." She stepped forward. "Alex, you know what happens when start cutting them slack. It doesn't matter who they are, they're calories. If it's not them, it'll be somebody else. Come on, you know better than this. Don't be the cattle."

"Now you sound like Gareth," he half-mumbled.

She shrugged. "So?"

It had been an inside joke between the two. Whenever one of them would do something they deemed Gareth-like, as in fold clothes perfectly, or go on a tangent about their promising future, they would liken the other to Gareth. Except this time, neither of them were laughing.

"So nothing," he replied lowly.

He felt he had just received another of Gareth's trademark lectures, but it had come from Theresa. He wondered if she deep down thought him weak too. In honesty, he thought she could be overzealous. The way she spoke to Glenn and Maggie reminded him of his brother. Why? He wondered again. She didn't show any interest in conversing with Bob.

"I just have to have one of them go out and know exactly why, okay?" she explained as if she'd read his mind.

"They'll all know why as soon as we see 'em."

"No, no they won't. They need to know, really know. Just like last time."

"They will, alright? These two already do. As much as they possibly can. Now, let's take 'em back. Please?"

She pursed her lips and looked down for several moments before replying. "Fine."

* * *

"Until we don't have to anymore, this isn't going to be permanent, I don't want it to be. Just a few here and there until we find something else."

Gareth recalled his words on the last night his hungry people gathered around the roar of flames.

"I'm really sorry, sorry that it had to be like this. I know it's... disgusting." Disgusting. In the beginning, Gareth considered the act repulsive, despite how good it felt to be full.

"You taste much better than we thought you would." Men don't taste as good as the women, but Bob tasted incredible, and he wanted him to know it.
Time changes everything.

They put out the fire, leaving Bob's foot where it would eventually rot on the grate. A low growl rumbled in Gareth's gut as they did so, he hadn't been fully sated by the man's meat. Fatigue also wore heavily on him. He didn't think anyone had slept much the previous night when it had been their turn to between watches.

Gareth estimated he had slept two to three hours at most. His dreams had been fraught with nothing but the sight of his mother's body on the church floor. One of the dreams included Rick, Carl, Michonne, and Daryl crouched down, eating her raw meat like walkers. They stared at him the entire time they ate, their mouths covered in blood and organs as they shoveled in her pink and red flesh with their bare hands.

"If my timing's right, they'll be right in our meeting spot just about now," Gareth announced to his readied people.

"Gareth?" Cynthia asked in a sheepish voice from beside him.

"Yeah?"

"What about that baby?"

Gareth's eyes flitted to Martin—who didn't react—before turning them back to Cynthia. "You know don't I want to."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." She turned to Martin. "You didn't want to, did you?"

Martin scoffed. "What? Jesus Christ, of course not."

"Hey, come on, guys," Gareth instructed. "We'll be late, I don't want to get them too worried."

Equipped with weapons and determination, the four then set off further into the dark.

Cynthia followed by Gareth's side. "Gareth, I... if we can, can—can we please not... the baby? I mean, they're stayin' with that Father guy and we ain't gotta do him in too. Maybe... he can take her once we're done with the rest of 'em?"

He turned his head to meet her desperate eyes. "You know we might have to."

"I know, and if we do, then we do. But if we don't have to, then we don't have to. You always say that. Please? If we can? It's the last thing like this I'll ever ask, I promise."

Oh, Cynthia, Gareth thought.

Her concern over Judith stemmed from her former occupation as a 3rd grade school teacher before the turn. That, and he knew how much it pained her to have ended the pregnancy that resulted from her rape during the Siege. Especially since she'd told them she always wanted children of her own.

"Okay, if we can, we'll let the god wad take her." He decided she deserved a token, especially now.

She expressed a heartfelt smile. "Thank you."

The rest of the journey went on without a peep. Gareth attuned himself to each sound in search of possible threats. Every breath, every step, and every breeze kept him on edge.

When they arrived where they anticipated their fellow hunters to be, they instead found it empty.
"They should be here by now," Gareth breathed out, still aiming to be as silent as possible.

"Think they were captured?" Albert asked at the same volume.

"I don't think Rick's the capture kind of guy, I think he's the kill kind of guy," Gareth stated.

*Please don't let me have sent them to their deaths.*

"Or maybe they caught someone," he added in a brighter tone. "Let's keep on, the same way we came and went before. Waiting will just waste time."

They trekked along further, unease growing in Gareth's gut at the pair's absence. Once they neared the small road that led to the church, they halted in the brush beside it where they could safely survey the building.

Gareth could make out the candlelight still lit inside, but saw no one—including a one-legged Bob—outdoors. It struck him as suspicious, the place looked way too calm. "They *must* know they're being targeted by now. This could be one big trap," he contemplated.

*So they want to play, huh?*

"What if we went in? They might be out lookin' for us," Cynthia spoke up.

"No, not just the four of us. We need Alex and Theresa," he deflected.

"What if they got 'em though?"

"Then they're dead."

"Why don't we just burn 'em alive?" Martin grumbled. "Get this over with."

"You know that would ruin the meat," Gareth replied, unsure if Martin was kidding or not.

Martin shrugged. "It'd be divine justice."

"Didn't you want to reunite with your old shack buddy?" Gareth joked.

"Like crazy."

For someone who never seemed to care much about anything, Gareth noted Martin very much cared that his home was gone.

"I feel kinda weird, Gareth," Albert broke in with a tiny voice.

Gareth turned and strayed to the left before replying, "I told you, we cooked it. You're fine, it's just your nerves."

Albert muttered something inaudible just as Gareth heard movement a ways to his right.

"Whoa, whoa, draw your weapons, back off," he whispered just loud enough to hear.

The other three complied, concealing themselves behind trees and shadows where they could watch the area the steps sounded from.

Gareth withdrew his rifle and raised it, eyes fixed on the darkness. Having ceased breathing, he overheard what sounded like several people crunching through the leaves. One stride he thought
familiar, and focused on it. It sounded like Alex. Yes, it was Alex. He’d known that sloppy, heavy-footed walk ever since his brother took his first steps.

The question was who the other two or three pairs of feet belonged to. Someone must have hostages, it was just unsure whose side.

As the steps grew closer and closer, Gareth prepared his body for action, imagining himself a compressed spring.

Finally, he caught the first peak of the footsteps' owners: Maggie and Glenn. Their eyes were watery and they had gags stuffed their mouths. Gags which appeared to be the red and black striped socks Theresa had been wearing. Sure enough, Theresa and Alex then appeared right behind them, guns aimed straight at their heads.

*Good going guys.*

Gareth stepped out, relieved. "Great catch," he said, a victorious smile creeping onto his face. Cynthia, Albert, and Martin revealed themselves as well and joined by his side, weapons still prepared.

Theresa's face softened at the sight of them. "Thank god. You know, these guys were pathetically easy to catch. I wanted a challenge."

She bumped the end of her gun to the back of Glenn's neck. Glenn trained his eyes on Gareth, only Gareth. The terror on his face indicated stark recognition.

The leader edged several feet toward him, returning a fierce gaze. "The butcher number four of the day that almost was. Looks like we're kind of back where you and I last saw each other, Glenn."

"Which one of 'em goes first?" Martin asked.

"Women taste better," Gareth replied. Glenn rapidly shook his head, pleading with his eyes.

"No, no, Glenn. They do," Gareth taunted. "If you'd stuck around, you would've gotten to taste test for yourself." He took another stride forward. "You know something that is so sad about all this? We could have easily been friends. You and Maggie could've been happy there. We figured out you were a couple since we've been watching you, and could've used you as a selling point. Shown new people that Terminus was a place where a young couple is safe enough to be a young couple. I mean, after people got acquainted, we used Alex and Theresa behind you as a success story, being how adorable they are together."

Theresa's eyes wandered somewhere else at the last remark, as did Alex's.

*Or not adorable? Uh-oh.*

"Well, anyway, I bet they're wondering about you by now," Gareth said. "And since we're dangerously close to your pack, we should head out. You'll be our last haul of the night."
The hunters marched their two captives through the woodlands and back to the campsite they had used the night before. It took a bit longer to get there, but Gareth had decided they should put a bit more distance between their two groups while they dine on the pair.

"The plan went a little...awry," Gareth explained from beside the quivering Glenn and Maggie while they traveled. "Your friend Bob? Had a nice big walker bite on his shoulder." From the expressions on their faces, it was clear they were aware of the fact.

"Don't matter no more," Martin added smugly.

When they reached the dark campsite, Theresa and Alex shoved the two to the ground. Gareth breathed in the remnants that lingered from the previous night's fire. A calm sense of clarity overcame him. Their momentary hiccup in the plan was over and they were now back on track.

Cynthia dug the lighter out of Theresa's bag and headed for the remaining campfire wood, assisted by Alex and Albert. Martin and Theresa kept vigilant at the area's perimeter.

Gareth made his way over to their soon-to-be meals as they gazed up at him with petrified eyes. "No, this isn't where we cooked Bob. We're moving around to deter predators."

Both Glenn and Maggie whimpered and struggled to speak through their gags, tears rolling from their eyes.

Gareth crouched down in front of the two. "Guys, don't worry. We'll be sure to knock you out before we do it. Much more humane. And of course that way, we won't have to deal with your squirming." He shrugged, an amused expression playing on his face.

He then turned to see Cynthia, Alex, and Albert with the firewood, still trying to produce a flame. As much as Cynthia concentrated, flicking the lighter with her thumbnail, all her work yielded were short, pathetic bursts of sparks.

"Guys?" Gareth pressed.

Cynthia said, brushing away the red hair that hung in front her eyes.

"You can still light with sparks," Gareth snapped.

Martin trailed over to the three and sighed, kneeling down beside Cynthia. "Here, I'll show you."

Gareth watched the two struggle to light the fire, growing impatient.

"Damn it!" Martin exclaimed. "I can't get it to..." The lighter had ceased sparking all together.

"We'll light with rocks. Alex, come on," Gareth ordered.

He and his brother searched the dark around them. Gareth kicked at the ground, hoping for his foot to hit something hard and solid, when a low moan sounded out of the woods many yards to his right. He whipped around to see a walker staggering toward them.

"Crap," he muttered.
Before he could react, another appeared right behind it. Then another. And another and another.

"Oh, shit. Guys?" Gareth alerted, keeping his vision on the undead and sliding out his rifle.

"I'll get them," Theresa asserted. She then rushed over to her bag of supplies and pulled out Michonne's katana.

Gareth didn't want her to attempt using the thing again; she'd proven incompetent with it in the previous day. "Theresa, please no, use your—"

"No, it's fine. I got this!" She rose the sword up with both hands as more undead poured from the woods. She then charged at them, slicing off a few heads while getting the weapon stuck in others.

Martin raised his rifle and began firing away at the undead, hitting the ones Theresa missed. Gareth joined him. Theresa then ran back to the campsite and tossed the katana on the ground and opted for her handgun instead.

"We gotta go!" Alex shouted.

Gareth knew the area was lost. As he and the other three began shuffling off, he glanced behind him and saw the ground empty. He looked back and saw Cynthia and Albert running off.

What the—

Oh fuck...

Glenn and Maggie got away.

Their captives were heading back toward the church, the last place he was about to run back to. He had to hope Cynthia and Albert could catch or kill them before they got there.

"East! Go east!" Gareth shouted.

Theresa grabbed her bag of supplies and as the swarm encroached on their area. One snapped at Alex's shoulder and another at Martin before they outran them, occasionally turning to fire at any that made it too close.

It wasn't clear to Gareth how long they ran. Sweat built underneath his clothes and on his face, which promptly was cooled by the chilly air. When they finally stopped, his lungs burned as if all the most oxygen in the world couldn't sate him. He looked around, vision foggy, and spotted a small field through the trees.

"Who stopped watching them?" Gareth breathed out. "Who was watching them," he stopped to inhale again, "then just totally stopped!?"

"We all did," Martin replied, laboring as well.

"Cynthia and Albert did," Alex chimed in.

"And you," Theresa added at Gareth.

"I was looking for rocks for the fire!" Gareth deflected.

"It doesn't take two people to find rocks!"

"We all fucked up, okay!?" Martin yelled.
"What the hell are we going to do Albert and Cynthia?" Theresa griped.

"I yelled that we'd go east," Gareth answered, starting to regain a steady breathing rate, "but if they heard us, then so did Glenn and Maggie. If they don't catch up with us soon, then we'll go west. If they come back with the happy couple, we'll do what we planned. They'll obviously tell Rick and his merry men where we were and what we were doing."

*Oh no.* Gareth had disclosed information about their plans to the pair. If Albert and Cynthia lost them, then they'll know exactly what they're up to.

"Hey Gareth, we know this place," Alex said.

"What?"

"We came on a run out here, way back when. There's a—"

"Bunch of ugly warehouses," Gareth finished, recalling the area from a run they made for building materials before the Occupation.

"And a lot of little houses."

"We could rest in a warehouse overnight, make—" The sound of footsteps cut him off. The four prepared for the worst, just in case.

Albert and Cynthia jogged out into the moonlight, breathless.

"I'm sorry!" Cynthia exclaimed, speeding in front of Gareth.

"Why weren't you watching them? You were right there!" Gareth barked.

"It's not her fault," Albert defended from beside her. "The girl she—she kicked her."

"In my face, see?" Cynthia pointed at her dirtied face. "When I was down by the fire."

"And Glenn had his laces undone and it just... spiraled from there. I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. I mean, we chased them, but a walker came out nowhere—"

Gareth raised his hand. "I got it."

"and I pushed it and—" he continued anyway.

"I said, I got it, Albert."

Albert silenced himself and wrapped his arm around Cynthia, who had begun to cry. Under the circumstances, her tears irritated Gareth more than anything.

"We're heading west, okay? There's a few warehouses we can stay in until morning about fifteen minutes from here. People would be less likely to check one of those than the nicer houses up the road."

"So we hunker down in the piece of shit?" Theresa said.

"Yep," Gareth sighed.

* * *
Dusty boxes, rusted metal and other useless junk littered the inside of the scroungy warehouse. Two very decayed walkers ambled around among the trash that looked like they'd been there since the turn. Theresa managed to take them down with her knife, having left the katana at the campsite. Gareth was pleased she would be unable to misuse the samurai’s blade anymore.

They had no blankets, no pillows, no source of comfort other than if they lay on their jackets—if they chose softness over warmth. The ground outdoors was plush in comparison to the cold, concrete floor.

Gareth and Alex took first watch while the others attempted to get some sleep. Alex had stepped out back while Gareth rest against the wall, legs bent, tapping the floor with the pads of his fingers. It was so quiet he could hear the breathing of everyone else in the room while they slept.

Gareth noticed Alex hadn't been inseparable from Theresa unlike their first night in the wild. Something had happened between them in the time they'd dropped Bob off and fetched Glenn and Maggie, that was clear. However, he wasn't about to ask what. He knew Alex would be miffed by martial questions from his brother.

After Alex returned from his several minutes spent outside, he tip-toed back over to Gareth and joined him against the wall.

"What were you doing out there?" Gareth asked in a hushed whisper.

"You want just the number? Or the specific details?" Alex attempted a joke.

*Oh, duh.* Gareth figured his sleep deprivation must be worsening.

Gareth smiled a bit. "Sorry, my head's somewhere else."

"No problem," Alex replied as he scratched at his cheek.

Alex's beard had already grown noticeably in just the two days they had been gone from Terminus. So had Gareth's. The lack of a proper wash had made their skin itchy. The power of suggestion made Gareth scratch at face as well.

He reflected on the luxuries they had at Terminus. The typical shaving razor had become somewhat hard to come by during runs as it was a hot item for survivors. However, they could make do with sharpened knives when they had to. It took practice, but one could manage a shave without any cuts.

The largest luxury Gareth missed were the swamp coolers during the sweltering Georgia summer. Air conditioners had been out of the question, they sucked down fuel like a town drunk does whiskey. But the swamp coolers needed just a smidge more power than a buzzfan. They had found a large supply of the appliances at an industrial hardware store before the Siege. They weren't in every room, but most bedrooms and areas like the kitchen, dining room, and rec room had them. They provided a humid cool, one that would cause most discomfort pre-turn, but to them, it was paradise.

Minutes passed while Gareth thought of what he could possibly say to Alex. There was no need to go over plans with him, he knew them already. It was ridiculous to him that it took him so long to find something to say to his own brother.

"You tired yet?" he finally asked.

Alex shook his head. "Not even a little."
"I've gotten so used to the same warm bed every night, that my back already aches from being on that hard ground." The pain reminded him of when he slept on the floors of the train cars.

"Yeah. Hey, how's your shoulder? You haven't said anything about it."

"It's fine, clean-ish. I'll live. You know I'm not like Martin who whines whenever he stubs his toe."

Alex smiled and breathed out a laugh, somewhat forced. "Yeah, he still bitches about his leg sometimes." He fiddled with his fingers, dirt caked underneath his nails before saying, "What if we don't find her?"

Gareth assumed he meant Carol. "We will. I promise."

He gave a solemn nod.

"I don't even remember the last thing I said to her." Gareth spoke without thinking.

"Neither do I," Alex admitted. "Can you believe that?" He turned his head to his brother.

Gareth analyzed his own uncleaned hands. "I have to."

"You think she... thought maybe one of us would show up and help her?"

He wondered the same thing.

"So did I," Alex continued to twiddle with his fingers, and through the dark, Gareth saw his a glint of a tear in his eye.

"So did I," Gareth said to himself just as much to the man beside him. "So did I."

Alex buried his face in his hands, emitting soft sobs. Gareth hadn't talked to Alex about Mary since her death, other than the fact that she was one of the reasons they were hunting. Now, Alex was crying next to his brother over their dead mother. There was no excuse not to do something, to not at least place his hand on his back in comfort.

So he did, putting his right hand between Alex's shoulder blades. He didn't react, it wasn't enough. He then scooted to the side and wrapped his arm around him, intending to let him rest his head on his shoulder. Instead, Alex moved around and clung to him, arms squeezing his back tight and weeping into his chest.

Gareth scanned the room to see if anyone had awoken and taken notice, but everyone remained still. Despite his hesitation, he didn't pull away. He embraced him back just like he did during the Occupation.

A sharp ache built in his throat accompanied by a flushed face; he was going to cry too. No, no he wouldn't let it happen. Not now. Not where anyone could wake up and see their leader crying.

Hatred was easy. Hunger was easy. Both had a clear-cut solution. But sadness and grief didn't, no way to tie it up and send it on its way. He'd long since replaced his sadness and grief with simple hunger and hatred. Yet this, this wasn't simple.
He desperately tried to hold it in. He took as deep of a breath as he could, trying to hold the grief at bay, but it was no use. The words his mother spoke the last time he'd cried in front of other people ran through is mind: "They won't lose respect for you for admitting you're still human."

The memory sent him over the edge. A large, hot tear rolled down his face and a low whine erupted from his throat. He buried his face on the top of Alex's head and let the tears flow onto his filthy hair, gripping his back tighter.

It was gone. It was all gone. His mother, Greg, Mike, Kaylee, Gina, Gavin, Wesley... Terminus was gone. The place that despite the horror of its past and present, was his home just as much as the apartment in uptown Atlanta he rented before the turn. The apartment where he had people take off their shoes before coming in. As as much of a home as the house he'd grown up in. Where he and Alex would run from the school bus into their mother's and father's arms in first grade.

Now the only arms of their family they had were each other's. Gareth had to admit, that despite the pain he felt, it felt good to have someone else's warmth against him. To let the mask fall away, even if only for a little while, and be a brother again instead of just a leader.
Yes finally, the showdown begins. I hope it didn't seem to too long getting here, but since it happened so quickly in canon, I didn't want to rush it here.

After vacating the warehouse, the group headed for a creek that Gareth and Alex had recalled from their trip to the area. When they arrived, they stripped off their clothes and took turns bathing in the clear water.

Alex and Theresa took the last turn. The ground dipped low in a secluded area, so they had privacy from the rest while they bathed. Watching Alex scrub himself, Theresa was tempted to make a suggestive remark, but decided to hold back due to the awkwardness between them.

She was hesitant to remove her own clothes beyond her bra and underwear, despite others' promises to stay away. The thought of being naked in front of another man other than Alex frightened her.

She mentally counted off the men in the group: it would be awkward with Albert because she knew he had a crush on her. Martin because he was Martin. Gareth would be innocuous, but he was still male and even the idea made her shudder. Cynthia wouldn't bother her, since they'd shared the female showers at Terminus.

Yet the grime under her remaining clothes bothered her too much, and she decided to undress anyway. "Um," Theresa broke the silence just after Alex had redressed, pulling on his jacket, "I can't stand just washing half of me. Could you stand watch while I take off my clothes? Just in case?"

Alex nodded and stood up without a word.

"I am not going to be Albert's first naked woman," she attempted a joke as he trailed over and stared up the small hill.

Unless you count the women we butchered. She wouldn't. They appeared not as women anymore, but as objects to be dismantled.

Alex didn't respond. Being on the outs with her very best friend, especially now, pained her a great deal. She had to get him talking to her.

Pulling herself to her feet, she unhooked her bra before pulling off her underwear. She then knelt in the creek, splashing the water on her skin, catching the dirt and sending it back down in grey trickles.

Is he not even going to look? she thought of Alex's continued facing away from her.

Rising up on her knees to ensure her body was fully visible, she decided she'd try something salacious regardless of their rift. "Do I look like a siren? Or a mermaid?"

Alex turned around and his eyes skimmed her body up and down. "You look good." His lips
curved into a slight smile—the first time since their argument—before turning back as quickly as he looked.

Even under the circumstances, she felt strange being unclothed in the presence of the perpetually horny Alex and getting a weak reaction. She lapped water onto her face, silently pouting.

After she finished washing and reclothed, she wished she still had the socks she used to stuff in Glenn and Maggie's mouths. A drop of satisfaction returned from memory of their inhaling and tasting the dirt and sweat from her soiled garments.

To prevent further blistering on her feet, she took an assortment of fresh green leaves and packed them in the back of her shoes. Even in the dead of "winter," green plants still grew plentiful in Georgia.

She then stood up and made her way to beside her husband to make another attempt at breaking the ice. "Hey, remember when we played that game where we pretended I was a mermaid who just got her legs?"

Alex breathed out a slight laugh and lowered his head. "Oh god, that's right." He turned around and rubbed at his forehead. "And I was the sailor who found you and taught you how to use your newfound holes. From that stupid anime porn I used to like, god. That was so stupid." He chuckled.

Theresa smiled, thankful she at last got more than a sentence out of him. Mentions of sex always got him talking.

He then took a deep breath, his face falling serious, and looked into her eyes. "I know... I know they killed mom. They killed everyone. They fucked everything. And I wanna get 'em too, okay? I really, really do after thinkin' about it, and about mom... I mean, we would've gotten 'em anyway. We'll get anyone we can. It's just, I couldn't stop thinkin' that..."

"They didn't laugh while they did it." She had reflected on Alex's reluctance, trying to get into his mindset when he said taunting them was pointless. What she came to realize was they were not the exact same as the Occupiers. In action, yes. In reason, no. And that was what bothered him.

"We never, ever had anything personal against any of 'em who came through. At least I didn't."

"And you think I do? Or... did?"

"I just know it's always been different for you, and how much you hated it when we first startin'lettin' new ones stay. Like Martin, who I insisted we give a shot. And you know, if I'd have known how much you would've turned out hatin' the guy, I would've never vouched for him."

"Like I said before, you were just being you."

"Cattle."

She took a step forward. "No, no. Hey, listen to me." She took his hands in hers. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that when I said it. I didn't mean you were cattle, I meant don't fall back into that trap. It's not like I'm immune to it either."

Alex scoffed. "Yeah, right."

"Yeah, right. You don't have to like it, or hold grudges like god knows I do. You just have to Gareth-up enough to keep going."
"I know that. That's what I've been doin' this whole damn time. And I'm fucking exhausted."

"I know, I know you are, but you have to keep going. Just enough to where the rest of the time we get to live. Like what you always tell me. For little things, like... like for how good the bath in the creek felt." She stared him in his weary eyes, noticing how beautiful they were even under distress.

He took a deep breath and said nothing for a few moments.

*Please, please, please.*

A firm squeeze to her hands let her know he agreed, the corners of his mouth twitching up. A smile broke out on her face and she squeezed back. Right before she moved in to hug him, Gareth's whistle cut through her thoughts. The scrawny rabbit Martin caught must be done cooking.

They then made their way back to the quick fire they'd rigged up to cook the animal, and sat beside one another on the ground before it.

The few bites of the meager, gamy flesh they were each given was a far cry from what they'd had the night before. And what they would have later.

"Don't take too much, Theresa," Gareth warned.

It was tough not to, despite its taste. She felt like she did in the early days where it seemed no amount of food could ever satiate her. When there were restrictions and controlled portions. She assumed everyone felt like that at the moment. Except maybe Martin, she didn't think he had ever truly been hungry.

"I'm ready for this game to be over," Martin declared, wiping his hands on his pants. The swelling on his face had begun to go down, but bruises lingered.

"And once we're done with them?" Albert asked, looking to Gareth.

"I told you," Gareth answered, standing up, "we're—" he grimaced in pain, reaching for his right shoulder.

"I knew you were lyin' when you said that was fine," Alex said.

"It is fine. I just...stretched it funny or something when I washed it earlier," he replied. "I told you, Albert, there will always be other places."

"I still think everywhere good's occupied," Cynthia remarked in a small voice.

"Then we'll *take it.*"

Theresa noted Gareth's volatile mood. Even he was shaken by their two failures in a row.

"I don't think I can keep this down," Cynthia then muttered, her face having grown pale.

"What? No, don't throw it up!" Gareth exclaimed.

"Leave her alone, this meat's disgusting. I'm lucky I kept it down," Albert defended and placed his arm around her. Cynthia covered her mouth with her hand.

"Go down to the stream and get a rag wet. You can hold it on your throat," Theresa suggested.

Before anyone could reply, Cynthia bolted up and ran back down the slope side. Loud retching
noises echoed up the creek cavity. Albert hopped up and jogged after her.

"Great," Gareth griped.

"Cut her a break. It's probably her nerves," Alex said.

"Mm-hm," Gareth replied, scratching the back of his head.

"We got time for a mini freak out."

Gareth sat back down on the ground. "Yeah, alright."

Albert then trudged back to the camp site. "She wants to be alone." He sat back down in his former spot.

"Fifteen minutes!" Gareth yelled in the direction of the creek.

Theresa then placed her hand over Alex's beside her, slipping her fingers between his and folding them under his palm. He reciprocated and folded his over hers. The pressure from her spouse's fingers reminded her of the weight on her chest, the one she had ignored. The one that crushed her with the fear that he might die later that night. Or she might. Or Gareth. Or Cynthia. Or Albert. Martin she wouldn't miss, of course.

She pondered, if later that night, they got into a situation where Martin were about to be killed and she could stop it or at least assist, then she could just let it happen. That is, if her purposeful lack of action wouldn't be witnessed. Although, that would be an enormous trust-break between her and Gareth, even if he didn't find out. She groaned internally knowing she'd save the infuriating outsider if she had to.

My god, but if Gareth died... what would they do without him? Or what if they all died? Or were taken captive? What would they do to them? She started to feel queasy, and swallowed roughly, not wanting to join Cynthia by the creek.

"Five minutes!" Gareth informed.

"What?"

*How long have I been sitting here?* She looked over to see her hand entwined with Alex's and instead saw her clenched fist on the brown leaves. Glancing up, she saw Alex kicking dirt over the fire. He, Albert, and Martin were helping clear the site.

*When did he get up? When did he let go of my hand? Have I been sitting here for ten minutes?*

"Theresa?" Gareth's voice sounded from beside her.

Her head jerked up. "What?"

"You're clearly not doing anything, go see if you can drag Cynthia back."

She nodded and stood up, then headed down to the creek bed. Cynthia sat at the bottom with her legs crossed, drawing designs in the wet sand with a stick.

Theresa strolled down and stopped next to her. "It's about time," she said.

"I heard," Cynthia replied without looking up.
"You are ready for this, right?"

Cynthia looked up condescendingly. "Does it look like I have a choice? Someone made that very clear."

"Well, that someone is right. Even if he is a dick."

Cynthia dropped the stick and stood up, staring with a dull expression.

Theresa shifted on her feet. "Hey um, while we're down here, I never got a chance to thank you for Alex. For helping him get out."

She shook her head. "I didn't help him, he helped me."

"No. You guys both helped get your asses out of there alive." She shook her head back.

Cynthia conceded, nodding slightly before clasping her hands together in front of her, looking at Theresa imploringly. "So... did you finally forgive me?"

Theresa narrowed her eyes. "For what?"

"Throwin' that vase at Alex," she muttered, ashamed.

She cracked-up. "That? I stopped thinking about that forever ago. You thought I was still mad?"

Cynthia rubbed at her neck. "Well, I still think about it. Does he have a scar?"

"A fading one."

"Oh, good," she sighed. "So... so can I give you a hug then?"

"Um... sure?"

Cynthia then rushed forward and squeezed her with all her being, making a small gasp escape from Theresa's lungs. The brunette lightly hugged the taller woman back, hoping the event would end soon.

"Ooh, when does the kissin' start?" Martin's obnoxious voice pierced Theresa's ears. They immediately separated to see Martin sauntering down the slope.

"Would you just fucking die already?"

"You're funny," Theresa bit.

"I just came to say get your guns. It's time to end this bullshit," Martin snapped back.

"Great, I'm starving," she declared as she and Cynthia walked past Martin up to the rest of the group.

Back at the campsite, she assisted her group in readying their supplies. Alex watched Gareth a bit more than she thought was usual, making her wonder why.

"Let's get this show on the road," Gareth proclaimed while he brandished the rifle in his hands.

* * *

The crickets were back. They chirped every night, no matter what, as if they hadn't noticed the
world had turned inside out. Gareth always felt it odd that the sun still rose and set just as it had before the change. The earth never cried over what had happened. The insects still buzzed, the rain still fell from the clouds to the ground, and flowers still bloomed as if the world hadn't ended. Because the world hadn't ended. The rest of the earth went on just as it did before—forward.

Clutching Alex and weeping onto his head was a pause, not one nature experienced. However, Gareth didn't regret it. He felt more centered now that he had gotten the need for a stop out of his system. Now he could keep moving forward.

And move forward, he did.

It had just passed nightfall, and the minor fill he got from the rabbit meat had long gone, like its mediocrity had vaporized in his stomach. He already anticipated the taste of their prey's flesh as he and his group hiked their way to the church, assuming they were still there. Even if they weren't, they could track them to their next destination.

Voices floated from the small, white building as they traveled down the road. Gareth gestured to the woods beside them and they moved to gather in them, hidden. He then tiptoed forward and ducked down, giving him a nice view through the greenery to the front of the building.

He spotted Michonne, Sasha, Glenn, Maggie, Tara, Abraham, and a man he couldn't make out. Sliding a few inches closer, he saw something in the unknown man's belt glint off the moonlight. 

Is that?

The machete with the red handle. It was Rick. Of course it was Rick.

He swallowed, his throat dry, and heart picking up speed. Why was he taken aback by this?

Was it the utter certainty the man had had that he would come out on top when less than a minute away from his death? Daryl, Glenn, and Bob had the fear of god in their eyes back on the killing floor, yet Rick didn't. In fact, Gareth could nearly see his own imagined death reflected back at him through Rick's eyes.

Just for a fraction of a second, he saw himself hacked, bloody, and limp from the slice of the blade Rick spoke of. The idea was just so preposterous at the time, like a flea promising a lion of its revenge, that he had to laugh. It was now clear the seriousness of his former captive's promise was true.

But that was okay, Rick could think what he wanted.

The rival group then started moving east.

Perfect.

"Alright, we'll hang a little bit," Gareth whispered, and backed up a step.

He then turned to survey the expressions of his people, beginning with Cynthia. Her alert eyes were paired with a frown, nervousness permeating her features. He stared at her long enough for her to look back, she gave a stern nod.

Theresa looked eager, fingers tapping on the barrel of her gun as she stood on her toes for a better view.

Alex, whom Gareth expected to look terrified, looked focused. Maybe he found that switch again.
The one he flipped the night they butchered their captors and stripped one of their torsos.

Albert looked about the same Cynthia. Although, he stood in the back, not seeming to be as interested in watching their prey depart.

Martin looked as eager as Theresa, some of which likely being because he had been promised Tyreese the super nanny. That wasn't to say he entirely trusted the guy, he never had. He could easily see Martin stabbing each of them in the back if it kept him alive, but he had never had a reason to. And Gareth made sure of that.

Many minutes crawled by as they waited for the group to get far enough away. Then, they finally emerged from the woods and began to advance down the road.

The church's windows were dark, but oh, there were people home.

"Alex, don't forget," Gareth whispered, reminding him of his special task—to paint the letter A on the building.
"We're hungry!"

There it was again, the voice of the man Alex feared. Not the one whose tears he could still feel spilling onto his head the night before. That other guy.

Whatever, it didn't matter. Gareth had been his brother again for a brief flicker, but for as briefly as he had been a warm human being, he had turned back into his typical field-commander self. So he listened to his brother's taunting after he painted the letter A on the church walls. Gareth had thought it a fantastic idea when he spotted an unopened bucket of black paint in the warehouse.

And who better than Alex to print the letter on the building; he was the artist after all.

After leaving the paint bucket and gnarly brush on the ground, Alex skulked along back to the rest of his group to the front of the church. He hung right next to Theresa, eager to be the one to protect her if need be.

When the front door creaked open by Gareth's hand, Alex clutched the fully-loaded rifle in his hands. Gareth step foot the large, dark and empty room, ceasing movement for a moment to take in the environment before venturing on.

Alex's eyes raced around the dark, hollow interior when he and the rest entered, bearing in mind that it could very well be where he would meet his death. Déjà vu hit him as he gazed out the windows into the night time woodlands. As a child, he would peer outside the sliding glass door in the kitchen at their backyard in the nighttime. The impenetrable black that stared back at him made him wonder if the house had been swallowed by a monster, and now he rested in its stomach.

A monster's stomach may be a fitting place, he considered. Somewhere they deserved to be. After all, his stomach was that of a monster's. Being digested by a roaring beast would be a deserving way to die, a—

"Alex?" Gareth whisper-hissed.

Alex blinked roughly. "Uh-huh?"

Gareth tilted his head to the back door by the right.

Alex frowned, knowing he would have to leave Theresa's side. But he nodded and complied, tiptoeing toward the door.

Finger firm on the trigger, he nudged the ajar door open with his shoe made his way inside. Meanwhile, Gareth chattered away to their unseen meat. He offered the preacher the opportunity to take baby Judith and leave. Just like he had promised Cynthia he would yet again before they set out.

Alex dearly hoped Gabriel would accept, not just for the child's sake, but for Cynthia's.

*Shit, Cynthia!* Alex nearly yelled as her arm brushed against his. He whirled around to see her lips framing the word "sorry."

"Go back," Alex murmured in return.
She shook her determined head. "I was supposed to follow you."

Oh, right. *Duh.* Alex nodded at Cynthia, embarrassed for not remembering the plan.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Gareth's light, teasing voice echoed through the building.

With Cynthia by his side, Alex crept around the room, senses edging like a radar around the room, searching for signs of life. From the other side of a lounge chair, his eyes focused on what looked like the end of a bent knee. He stepped closer to reveal whoever it was, and his eyes caught the warm body leaning back against the wall.

He took in the form—which was that of a man's—slim, hands folded, and eyes locked in shock on his own. The eyes were ones that struck a chord of familiarity, which he expected, he had seen each one of these people before. Yet these were ones he had known he would never see again. He thought he might be dreaming before he let his brain register where he had seen him before him.

*How in the fuck...?*

"Noah?" Alex breathed out.

The figure resembling the kid he met what seemed so long ago, narrowed his eyes before widening them in clear recognition. "Alex?"

"Hey, hey, how do know you know this guy? We ain't ever seen him before," Cynthia broke in, smacking Alex on the stomach, attempting to snap him out of the trance he was in staring at the boy.

Alex couldn't bring himself to speak, let alone absorb Cynthia's question. He was only able to gawk at the fear in Noah's eyes. The look he believed he would never see this person give him. The random person in a random place whom he gave a piece of candy and one of his drawings. Noah was never supposed to have a clue what he truly was, much less see him again. He knew who Alex was now, and that was a monster and he was inside his gut.

Noah undoubtedly knew what kind of people he had been hiding from. Rick and his people would have told him, making Alex wonder if Noah had made the connection yet. If he had fitted the pieces together of what they and Terminus were, and what the meat really was that they used to swap for Martin and Kaylee.

Already forgetting Cynthia's inquiry, Alex pushed himself into auto-pilot. Two words were all he needed to say in the next several seconds, and he forced out the order, "Get up."

Noah obeyed, raising his hands as the two focused their weapons on him.

"Front room, c'mon," Alex commanded, his voice straighter that time.

Noah's hands quivered as he climbed to his feet.

*The drawing!*

Alex suddenly wondered if Noah still had it. Maybe it was tucked underneath his mattress, or under a loose floor tile. Somewhere where the stiffs in charge couldn't ever find it, his little secret. A fresh drop of water to drink every now and then in the parched desert.

He wanted to ask him desperately, but instead stayed on track, marching Noah into the front room. Mission first.
"Got a live one!" Cynthia announced as she pushed their captive into view with the hand that didn't hold her revolver.

Alex spotted Theresa standing guard at the door on the other side of the room, curiously watching the situation.

He had told her all about Noah, about the candy he gave him and the drawing. How nice it was to have had a normal conversation with someone without the word "cannibal" eventually tainting it.

Gareth, like he had prearranged it, emerged from the shadows at the back of the altar. "Who the hell are you? Where did you come from?" he asked Noah, stepping down and over to the boy.

"H—his name's Noah," Alex answered for him, quietly.

"What?"

"I met him at Grady Memorial in Atlanta when we did the exchange. I don't got a clue how he got here."

Gareth shook his head slowly and broke out into a smile. "Small, small world. So tell me, Noah, how did you get here?"

Noah looked back at Alex with glassy eyes and parted lips. It told Alex that yes, he had figured out what the meat he had been fed was.

"Silence isn't your friend here," Gareth warned.

Noah turned his head back to Gareth. "I—I got out. Out of Grady. And these people, D—Daryl and the other, Carol—"

"Carol?" Gareth's eyes widened. "Where is she?"

"She got hurt, she's in the hospital now."

Gareth breathed out a long, exasperated sigh.

"Oh!" Cynthia chimed in. "That's where they drove off to! To Atlanta." She beamed.

"And why did they do that?" Gareth asked Noah.

"For Beth, one of theirs. They took her, like they did your two people. They want her back."

"That's why you're here," Alex stated limply.

At that moment, the church's front doors groaned open. The company jerked around to face the entrance.

*Oh shit.*

Alex stepped back, drawing his weapon up.

Who else would enter through the door other than Rick, followed by the other six who they thought had long departed to pursue *them.*

Gareth shoved Noah forward so that he was right at the foyer of the aisle, and bumped the end of his rifle against his head.
"Oh, no, no, no, no, no," Gareth gibed as the rest of the group flowed in, alert and prepared for battle. "You don't want to lose your ticket to two of your people, now do you? Carol and... Beth, is it?"

None of the group replied, but Rick squinted his eyes.

Gareth turned his head a small bit over his shoulder. "Hey Albert, Martin, stay where you are, keep an eye on them back there! We got this," he informed before turning his eyes back to Rick. "Or, we could take him up to Grady and get those two for ourselves."

"What do you know about that place?" Rick demanded.

Are those the 'crazy eyes' he told me he had on the killing floor? Alex thought of the ringleader's expression. Gareth told him he had never seen anyone so confident when so helpless—or when he thought he was helpless.

"Things you'll never know unless you drop your weapons and kneel," Gareth retorted.

"What's the point of us knowin' anything if you think you're gonna kill us, huh?"

"Because you think you're gonna win. Say there's a fifty-fifty shot, Rick. You drop your weapons, Noah lives, your samurai does some impossible karate and we end up on our knees. That sounds like what you think's going to happen, right?"

Alex realized no matter what, they were going to spare Noah. He was their way to Carol.

"Do it!" Alex shouted, startled by the pitch his voice reached.

Gareth didn't appear surprised, in fact, he didn't even turn his head or change his expression. He couldn't have expected his younger brother to bark an order, but that was why he always won at poker.

"You heard him," Gareth reiterated.

Rick cocked his head to the side, a vicious look crossing his face, before kneeling down slowly alongside the others. Alex caught every one of their eyes as they did so, including Glenn and Maggie's.

It was those two, and Tara, who looked the most scared. The couple looked just as terrified they did when he and Theresa held them hostage.

He started to think he could piece together their characters, like Gareth always did. Rick, Abraham, Sasha, and Michonne looked like they wouldn't hesitate a minute to lop his head off, wash the blood from their hands, then have a smoke. Maggie, Glenn, and Tara had an innocence in their eyes, one Alex thought he might still see when he looked in the mirror.

He wondered how blindly they followed their leader. Did they love him? Was he their family? Were they ever afraid of him? He recalled the map room, and the "other guy" who "deserved it." Since Carl agreed, he must have seen what bloodied his father's face.

Alex thought it was fair what Gareth did to one of the men after they broke out of the train cars, how he turned his head to mush. Although, that didn't mean it didn't scare him.

Sasha leered hard at him as the seven began to gradually place their weapons on the ground. As he pondered why she was focusing on him, she grabbed the pistol next to her feet, bolted back up and
fired it at the back left corner of the room.

*Theresa!?*

Alex whipped around to see if she had been hit and didn't see her at all. The blank space told him she was shot in the head and the world had ended all over again.

Before he could cry out, another shot from behind him sounded along with a flurry of sharp voices he didn't care to listen to. He didn't look back to see, only focusing on the space where his love used to be.

The still area then came back to life, and Theresa appeared, hesitantly climbing to her feet.

*She ducked! She ducked! She ducked!* The world had come back, his heart beat again. He had never been so thankful for her quick reflexes.

She gave him a nod and what he thought might have been a tiny smile.

*Thank god, thank god, thank god.*

Alex turned back to see Sasha on the floor clutching her leg, and Gareth with rigid posture, weapon back resting against Noah's head. Rick's group knelt on the floor.

Sasha glared at Alex once more, thoroughly confusing him. What about him in specific was so infuriating? Gareth was the arrogant jackass.

Then he got it. Sasha was Bob's girlfriend, and Maggie and Glenn must have told their group he and Theresa were a couple. Sasha was going for an eye for an eye.

For the first time since Terminus fell, his blood reached a rolling boil. Not that he didn't feel anger, especially at Carol with what she did to their mother, but he hadn't actually witnessed it. He didn't even see his own mother's body. He didn't have to try to bury the memory and attempt to move along to the next course of action. Not like how he had to when he'd seen what the Occupiers did.

*Jesus fucking christ, how does Gareth do it?*

This time, though, he saw it. Saw how angry the attempted killer was, determined to end his wife's life and cause him pain. He would have had to go over to her body, see the bullet hole in her head and brain matter spewed on the floor. That's what Sasha wanted.

*That fucking cunt is dead.*

Alex raised his gun and aimed it straight at Sasha's head to kill her, to give her the fate she almost gave Theresa.

"Alex, no!" Gareth yelled.

"What!?" Alex screamed.

Gareth didn't respond, instead looking back to Sasha on the ground. "You get to say goodbye to Bob?"

*You and your fucking foreplay.* Alex thought as he gnashed his teeth together.

"Fuck off!" she bit back, breathing labored.
Gareth raised his eyebrows. "It's a shame we didn't take another leg. The 'tainted meat' as he coined it, was cooked after all. And that was a whole day ago, and I feel fantastic."

If Rick's group wasn't angry before, they were now.

"Alright, everyone else. Out here," Gareth said. "Carl, Rosita, Eugene, Daryl, Tyreese. Whoever has the girl, give him to the god wad."
"I wouldn't have come here if I knew the service was slow," Gareth said, irritated with the rest of Rick's group's sluggishness. And admittedly, Martin and Albert's. Not that it had been very long since he ordered the rest of the company out, but he always used to say, "Time is money."

While waiting, he took a good look at Alex who still aimed his rifle right at Sasha's head, glaring at her like she was the only person in the room. His chest expanded and contracted with deep, ragged breaths. She remained on the floor as he did so, clutching her wounded ankle with a grimace, ignoring the burning stare. On purpose, Gareth assumed.

Gareth could almost taste the rich iron of bloodlust on his brother's tongue. The iron that precedes the final goal: the fatty, stick-to-your-ribs goodness.

He had wished Alex would get angry, really angry, for quite some time. During and after the Occupation he had been angry, of course he was, Gareth knew that. Yet the heavy shock and fear mixed with it in a way that had him caving into himself.

Now, Alex was finally on the same level he was; eager and willing to pull the trigger. He couldn't wait to let him do so when the time came.

While keeping a firm grip on the rifle he pressed against Noah's head, he turned just in time to see Albert lead Daryl, Rosita, and Eugene out, hands in the air.

Gareth noted Eugene's dismal expression, and wondered how the so-called scientist had stayed alive so long.

"Stop," Albert commanded the three.

"We ain't lyin'!" Eugene cried as he halted between Rosita and Daryl.

*Oh great, the "cure."*

"I'm a scientist, I know what caused all this. I just need to get to D.C. To—"

"With G.I. Joe, right?" Gareth asked.

"Ye—uh… you mean Abraham. Yes!" He gave several quick nods.

"He's tellin' the truth," Abraham interjected.

Gareth rolled his eyes. "Yeah right, pal."

He hadn't heard a future meal promise of a cure for the virus before, but meat had told him many
things to try to weasel their way out.

Once, a man told him that Birmingham, Alabama was still a fully functional city and he would take him there if he was freed. A woman once said she knew where a whole camp of "super, super fat people" were, and if they let her go, she'd tell them their location.

His personal favorite was the married couple who, over the trough, offered to have a threesome with him in exchange for freedom. Gareth assumed it was due to the fact that somehow it had come up before they were corralled that he was bisexual.

A "cure" for the disease would definitely go in his top five favorite bargaining chips.

From the opposite door, Martin then led out Tyreese, Carl, and Gabriel holding Judith in her basket.

Success.

"I'm glad you agreed Father," Gareth said. "So, either of you see Bob back there?" He looked to Martin and Albert.

"Uh, no," Albert replied.

"Hope was comfortable," Gareth said just for Sasha's benefit.

"You don't have to do this," Gabriel begged as he cradled Judith's basket tighter,

"Oh, I wish I had a hundred-pound deer for every time someone's said that. Because then I wouldn't have to eat people. But I do."

"I promise you, Gareth, right? There is forgiveness for everyone. Even someone like you."

Ugh.

"You're living in a world that doesn't exist anymore," he returned.

Martin then edged forward beside the man and the child. "Come on, padre, that's enough. Out the door."

At Martin's words, Judith made a whining noise and let out a few cries.

Oh no, she must recognize his voice.

"Get her out of here," Gareth ordered Gabriel.

Gabriel looked across the large room to Rick's dismayed eyes, and did nothing.

"Martin," Gareth said with a nod of his head.

Martin raised his gun a few inches and aimed it at the child. Gareth intended it to be a bluff, he had enough decency to not have him do that here in front of everyone. He hoped Martin had enough brain cells to pick up on the ruse.

"Don't!" Carl shrieked, and Martin froze as the baby's cries went on.

"Okay! I'll—I'll go," Gabriel proclaimed, slipping away from Martin. He then drifted through the church toward the door. Rick's eyes fixed on him as he did so, a glint of tears in them.
"Move, guys," Gareth directed Rick and the other five. They complied, and reluctantly cleared enough room for Gabriel to pass.

"It's alright, Rick. Your rug rat lives. Don't say I never gave you anything," Gareth spoke as Gabriel paused by the door. Rick kept his eyes on his daughter. "Say goodbye."

"This isn't goodbye!" Rick growled, jaw trembling while still looking to the fussy girl.

Cynthia took a step forward. "Gareth—"

"No," he stopped her, knowing she was going to ask to keep the kid.

"He ain't got a chance out there with her."

"It's not our problem," he told her without taking his vision off the two. "Go, now." His voice neared a shout.

Gabriel looked back at the rest of them one last time before nudging the door open and taking his leave.

Gareth then heard someone fall to the ground behind him. He whipped around to see Martin lying on his back with Tyreese holding his stolen rifle to his head.

"I said I won't! But I will! I can!" Tyreese bellowed.

"Get down! All of you!" Rick's voice sounded.

What!?

Gareth turned back around to see Rick on his feet, along with the rest of them–sans Sasha–with their reclaimed weapons drawn.

Rick fired a shot from his handgun, and a flash of heat crossed Gareth's left hand just as his right pulled the trigger intending to end Noah's life. He missed Noah, dropped his gun, and stumbled back.

Alex bolted in front of him and shoved Noah by his shoulder, then re-held him captive with his own gun. Gareth then looked down, to his horror, and saw his left hand mangled. The middle and index fingers were gone, blood had immersed his palm and had begun to run down his arm. The sight made him feel faint. He saw much, much gorier on a daily basis, but he never intended to see it on his own body.

"Aw, looks like Tyreese did the karate," Abraham quipped.

"Put it down and kneel, all of you! I can drag this out all night," Rick stated.

Gareth pushed his left hand into the hem of his shirt and wound it around the stubs. The pain throbbed with every beat of his pounding heart.

"The fuck we will!" Alex screamed, hands that held his gun to Noah trembling.

"Tyreese," Rick instructed, undoubtedly to kill Martin.

"Don't you fucking dare!" Albert warned, re-aligning his gun at Tyreese.

Each armed person now put the heat on their enemies, promising imminent bloodshed.
"Look," Gareth began, squeezing down hard on his left hand, struggling to pull his spine straight, "no matter what happens, we're both going to lose a lot of people. Now, there's more of you than us, but someone else of yours will die if you even fire one shot. So, how much do they matter to you?"

"They're my family," Rick declared.

"Then let's call a draw."

"What!?" Theresa cried.

"No, I made you a promise," Rick said.

That damn machete again. Gareth gulped.

"You know, maybe you got the right idea, maybe you could feed us," Rick goaded.

"Rick!" Daryl shouted with an edge of shock.

Gareth shook his head. "No, you wouldn't. Because you don't know what it's like to be hungry. I can tell, you've been out there, but you don't know."

"I don't care."

"But you understand. You have to. I'm sure you've been backed into a corner, met people out there who have done terrible things to you." He paused, reflecting back on the map room. "Who deserved it, Rick? Why did you have blood on your face when you came in the map room? What did you do?"

"What I had to."

"Then you do get it."

"Yeah, yeah maybe I do. But that don't mean I give a shit."

"Fair enough, but you do have to understand one thing, no matter which way this goes now. We didn't wake up one day and start this. Terminus… we used to help people, bring them in, have you done that? Accepted new people in?"

"Yeah, I have. One of 'em you made your dinner."

Gareth glanced down for a second. "What's the worst they ever did to you?"

"Nothin' I couldn't handle."

"Yeah well, we thought so too. We took in people, for a while, then we took in people who—you're lucky you never had to go through it."

"Theresa told me about it," Maggie's soft voice added.

"Well, I'm sorry you got the short of the stick, but that's not my problem," Rick deflected.

"We're a lot alike, Rick," Gareth said with a small smile.

"No, my people are good people. You and yours are just a bunch of damn walkers."
"Good people, huh? I think the last good person died a long time ago. You know, I was a good guy too once. Weren't you? What did you do before all this?"

"Cop," he grudgingly answered.

Gareth breathed out an amused laugh. "I'm not surprised. I used to design software. Mainly security systems, virus protection. Ironic, isn't it?"

"It's hilarious," Rick said, unamused.

He knew what he had to do now, and it pained him to even think it, but he forced out the words, "How about this? No one dies today. Something really out of character that never happens anymore. No one dies. We walk away. Because no matter what, we're both going to lose people here."

"Gareth?" Alex questioned, indignant.

God, did he not want to part ways. But this method had not gone according to plan. It was their third failure in a row.

Failure. The worst title Gareth could imagine.

Rick cocked his head to the right. "Am I supposed to believe that?"

"Yes, because we are clearly outnumbered. I see that now."

"Told you we should've roasted 'em," Martin mumbled from his place on the ground.

Gareth fought not to release a growl at the remark.

In all honesty, Martin was right. Gareth felt like an idiot. He had gotten so used to having immense manpower behind him that he forgot what scrapping in the wilderness was like.

They should have set the church on fire. There were vehicles to siphon fuel from, and lighting with rocks was not that hard. They could have boarded the doors from outside, then waited by the windows and killed those who did escape.

The idea that Martin was right and he was wrong unsettled him beyond belief. Yet he stuffed it down to deal with later if he managed to wiggle out of the disaster he had fashioned for him and his people.

Realizing that Martin's fire idea was a good one had hit him so hard, he swore he could smell phantom smoke.

Wait…

"The hell is that?" Abraham asked. "You got someone settin' fires out there?"

"What? No!" Gareth exclaimed in reply.

Rick heaved a sigh. "Gabriel."

"He would burn down his own church?" Cynthia asked.

Gareth then spotted the flames from the windows on both sides of him, and could tell it was heading toward the door. He guessed someone had surrounded the building with something
flammable.

The room then erupted into a stampede, Gareth barreling forward along with them. The flurry had him confused as to who were his people and who were not, so he opted not to attack. A few shots did sound, but he saw no one else fall.

Rick's group pushed past Gareth's and his people, knocking them aside along the way as they attempted their own escape. He spotted Tara and Glenn helping Sasha up by her under arms, and hoped Alex would fire on her then and there.

Yet Alex was indisposed along with Cynthia. They were both trying to climb to their feet after somehow ending up toppled over in an aisle between the pews.

Something heavy then hit Gareth from behind as he was half way down the aisle and knocked him flat on the ground.

"Motherfucker!" Martin cried out from on top of him as Tyreese scurried past. A sharp stab of pain from his and Martin's weight bearing onto his left hand made him let out a whine. He hoped no one heard it.

"Get up! Get up!" Gareth demanded and they both attempted to scramble to their feet.

Theresa and Albert were several feet away from the door when Rosita dashed forward and clocked Theresa square across the face, causing her to fall backwards against Albert.

Gareth and Martin had just risen when Abraham and Michonne held up their weapons at Albert and Theresa. They stopped dead in their tracks.

"No!" Rick commanded them from just outside the door. "We let 'em burn!"

Rosita, Abraham, Rick, and lastly Daryl, then raced out the door and slammed it shut behind them.

The six then bolted for the door and began trying to pull it open.

"I think they boarded it up with something!" Martin yelled, resorting to then pushing and pounding on it.

_They're fucking quick._

"It opens _this_ way!" Theresa shrieked, frantically tugging at the handles. "You're not going to get it open by _pushing_ on it!"

"Let's try the back! Bust out the window!" Gareth yelled.

"I think he set a ring of fire around the place!" Albert said.

_If fell into a burning ring of fire._ The lyric claimed Gareth's mind, almost making him snigger. As good in crisis situations as he could be, the fear would sometimes try to bubble up through humorous observations. The first time he had to fight off a walker, its staggering and groaning was so comical it made him crack-up. Much to the confusion of his then girlfriend, Chelsea.

Just as they began toward the back rooms, they heard the front door swing wide open.

Turning back around, Gareth froze in shock at the person who had saved their lives.
I think this is my first ever cliffhanger. Hehehehehe. >:D
Decisions

How in the hell...?

"Kaylee!" Gareth shouted.

The filthy girl's eyes widened into saucers and she shouted in return, "Come on! Come on!"

The group snatched up the few unclaimed weapons on the ground and bolted out the door. They hurried to the edge of the woods before turning around to see the church succumbing to the flames. The fire had finally reached the front door. A ring of hot orange licked its frame.

"Where did they go!" Alex wheezed.

Kaylee stepped back from the group and raised her hand to her mouth. "Oh my god... I thought you were all—"

"Which way!" he repeated.

She lazily pointed to her left. "D—down the road."

"Did you set the fire!?" Gareth asked.

She nodded. "I'm so sorry, I didn't know you were inside. I thought it was just them until I saw them boarding up the door and saying to lock someone inside. I knew it must have been someone from Terminus. Oh my god, you're..." She choked up.

"So why didn't you board the outside? If you wanted to burn 'em." Martin asked.

Kaylee scowled in his direction. "You're welcome, by the way. You know, for saving your fucking life."

"Just sayin'," Martin shrugged, taken aback.

Theresa shook her head. "But I—I saw your body!"

"No, you didn't. Obviously," she replied before locking her sights on Gareth's mangled left hand. "Oh my god!"

"Oh, that. Little mishap," he attempted to say without traces of pain in his voice.

She tapped the back of his hand with her fingers. "God, we need to get it cleaned before you get an infection."

"Yeah, of course. Let's regroup back at the school." Gareth set off, eager to reach their destination. The rest tailed him down the road.

Theresa kept pace beside him. "And tomorrow, we'll—"

"We'll regroup. Come up with a plan."

Alex jogged-up to meet him. "Gareth, no. Sasha—that bitch almost killed her!" he said of Theresa.

"There's thirteen of them and seven of us. We need to think about it." He attempted to keep his
voice straight.

The pain in his left hand was nothing close to the crippling humiliation. He had failed his people. Again. For the third, no, fourth time, if he counted Terminus' fall. He failed Terminus. He failed his mother. He had failed just about every damn thing in his life that he cared about.

"Gareth, come on," Albert pressed.

"Let me think!" Gareth halted in his tracks. The group did as well.

Gareth moved over to a nearby tree and leaned up against it, then let himself slide down to the ground. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

The rest stood and watched him, silent, until Kaylee said, "How's it feel? The hand?"

"Like sunshine and roses." He looked up at her. "So how did you get out?"

She paused at first. "I just ran. Down the tracks. Nothing really remarkable."

"How soon after it happened?" Theresa asked.

"Not that long. Um… not long at all, actually."

"So you took off without lookin' for anyone?" Cynthia asked.

"Uh…" Her voice lowered and she looked down at her hands. "Yeah."

"It doesn't matter," Gareth broke-in. "Thank you, Kaylee."

* * *

They made their way back to the school which they then reluctantly decided to enter to search for supplies. A swarm of walkers still gathered at the front entrance, so they opted to go through the back instead. Navigating through a few corridors, they searched several classrooms, hoping to come across something of use for Gareth's injury.

One of the backpacks of a dead walker contained two half-full plastic water bottles, and two small boxes of usable ammunition. A few classrooms had things such as scissors and clear tape which they also equipped. Kaylee used the water to clean Gareth's wound. She then cut pieces from a Georgia state flag that hung in the history class—the cleanest thing they could find—to wrap it.

The others attempted to settle down and rest throughout the classroom while Kaylee tended to his wound. For the first time, Gareth noticed that under the over-sized, black men's jacket, was a pale blue nightgown. Certainly not what she had on when Terminus went down. He imagined her legs were freezing.

"Never used this as medical tape before," Kaylee said, sitting on the cold tile floor while Gareth rested his back against the wall. She stretched a long piece of the clear tape from the roll.

"I can still feel them," Gareth said, staring at the bit of cloth he held secure around his hand. He didn't know what was worse; the pain, or now having phantom appendages.

"That's normal. Your brain doesn't know what to make of it. So used to having them there it still feels like they are." She wrapped part of the tape around the fabric, while pressing the rest of it firmly against his skin.
"Yeah, I know. I've read about it," he said as she pulled another long piece of tape from the roll. "You know, I'm sorry about all this."

"I know. And... for the record, I don't blame you for Terminus. There's not much a one guy can do about an exploded tank." She wrapped another strip across the makeshift gauze.

"Yeah, but it's just...I broke my promise." He felt pathetic to admit it. 'Breaking a promise' sounded like something only a first grader would care about. Gareth stared emotionless at her hands as they worked.

She finished her task and withdrew her hands. "You're not Superman."

He looked up and met her eyes in the dark. "I know, that's the problem."

She shook her head before grabbing the tape and standing up. "You should try to sleep. It'll help you heal."

He gave a few long nods as she moved over to a nearby student's desk and stuffed the tape in a backpack they had taken from an undead. She then took a seat at the desk and laid her head on the bag as a pillow.

Sleeping at a desk didn't seem like a bad idea.

Rising up, he then made his way to the teacher's desk, pulled out the chair and sat down, resting his forearms on the surface. He looked across his now still people in the room.

Cynthia lay up against the wall near the door, her head lolled to the side. Albert rested his head in her lap. Martin, of course, was sound asleep on the floor of the far side of the room, lying on his hoodie. Theresa and Alex rested by the window. Alex lay up against the wall, holding Theresa against him, her back against his front.

Soon, Gareth found himself drifting off along with them.

* * *

"Oh yeah, I forgot he was drooler," Martin's blunt voice tore through his sleepy haze.

"Gareth, come on," Alex's urged from beside him, shaking his shoulder.

_Oh no_, he thought. _I overslept? Why didn't the alarm go off? God, I hate my Android._

Even worse, he then realized his head was on a desk, which meant he had fallen asleep in class. And Alex was there. Great. His younger brother was usually the one who fell asleep in school. Alex wouldn't let him live this down.

The sharp sound of a shotgun being reloaded from across the room yanked him from his delusion and he recalled his true circumstances.

"Look alive, sunshine," Martin teased.

Something small then hit the side of his face and he jerked his head up to see Martin holding an opened box of pencil erasers in the now sun-lit room.

"Thanks," Gareth barked, rising to his feet.

_Martin, the guy who was right. Maybe that's why he's so chipper._
Everyone else had woken up, performing various tasks around the room. He found it strange that everyone was up before him. It was usually he who had to yell at others' sluggishness.

"Hey," Alex began from beside him, "Kaylee said you should sleep in, so we let you."

He nodded. "Okay." For losing two fingers, he supposed he could allow himself a little extra rest.

"Oh, um, the drinkin' fountain out there still puts out a little bit of water. No guts or anything."

"Really?" he asked, attempting to smooth down his hair.

"Yeah. Makes me wonder if someone wasn't takin' care of this place for a while."

Gareth nodded again before heading out the door into the dim corridor, eyes stinging and queasiness plaguing his gut. The sleep deprivation symptoms matched the ones he had when he pulled all-nighters studying. Ironic he had the feeling yet again in a school. He had thrived on it, no matter how unhealthy people told him it was. It was a habit he hadn't entirely broken at Terminus either. Taking records, and writing up duty rosters required the utmost attention. The kind that he could easily take hours doing with the aid of any scrounged-up source of caffeine.

He figured it all worked out in the end, as he usually slept-in on weekends. To the late, late hour of 9:00am.

The drinking fountain resided on the opposite wall. Slogging over to it, he pushed against its grey switch with his good hand, and a trickle of water flowed from the nozzle. He collected it in his right palm and splashed it on his face. The cold meeting his skin sent a shiver through him, helping to further wake him.

A creak of the classroom then echoed down the halls, and Theresa's voice called, "Gareth?"

Oh, joy. Here it comes.

He splashed another helping of water on his face. "What is it?"

"You know I want to go after them, but… I don't think that we should."

Her words shocked his system far more than the chilly water had. He turned around to face her. "Who are you, and what have you done with Theresa?"

She crossed her arms. "I was an inch away from dying. I felt the bullet speed by the top of my head when I ducked down. So close I think it took off a few hairs. That's why."

"But we have the advantage now. They think we're dead."

"You said we had the 'advantage' before, remember? So, you do want to follow them to Washington?"

He wiped his hands dry on his pants. "If that's where they're even headed. I don't know the mechanics of Eugene's scam." He took several steps forward. "You do realize something, don't you?"

She gave a lazy shrug.

"If they were just a regular group, we'd blow it off at this point."

She nodded. "That is true." She took a few strides forward. "Listen, we can all talk about it soon."
That's not all I came to talk to you about."

*I swear, if she's pregnant...* Gareth thought before he could stop himself.

Theresa took a deep breath before beginning, "I know I've been... difficult sometimes. And I've fought you, and bitched at you, and disagreed with you, and it makes me worry. Worry that you think I don't respect you. And if I ever disrespected you—"

"You have disrespected me," he interrupted.

The remark made her lose her place for a moment. "Well, um... I'm sorry. I never wanted to. I know threatening to kill Martin was a big one, and for your sake, I feel really shitty about it. I made a promise, I took an oath, and I'm sorry that I've been so bad at keeping it." Her voice was soft.

"You haven't been... 'bad' per se, just—"

"Not up to standards?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay uh, well I'm not done yet. I had this whole speech prepared."

"Go on then."

She swallowed hard. "You're my brother, Gareth. And not because you're my brother-in-law, because you saved my life. I love you for that."

The proclamation took him aback. Not knowing what to reply with, he chose the easiest route. "I... love you too," he replied. It wasn't disingenuous, but it was still awkward to say.

She smiled and heaved a long breath. "Now that that's over with..." She turned and began back to the classroom door. "Have a nice shower," she said before pulling open the door and slipping inside.

His broken promise aside, Theresa was right. After all, he had told Bob it was nothing personal, that they would do it to anyone. Yet he then recalled Alex and his bloodlust for Sasha, and how much he wanted him to fulfill his desire.

After he drank a bit more from the tap, he marched back into the classroom, seeking out his brother. He found him sitting on the teacher's desk with his legs hanging off, chewing on his fingernails.

Approaching him from beside, he tapped him on his shoulder. "You can probably sense what's going on here." Alex set his hands down on his thighs and turned his head to him. "And I just wanted to say I'm sorry about Sasha."

Alex narrowed his eyes. "Sorry about her?"

Gareth removed his hand. "You wanted to kill her, and I wanted to let you."

"Oh. Yeah, well, I'm sure she's sufferin' plenty right now so..."

"You have to still be mad."

He looked back to the room full of people. "I am. I wished they'd all burned."
A few moments of silence passed before Gareth took a dive and changed the subject, "Your wife said she loved me."

Alex turned back to him, eyes widened. "What?"

"Loved me like a brother," he clarified.

Alex's face relaxed and he breathed out a weary laugh. "Ha-ha."

"Sorry you had to find out this way."

"Nah, I'll be fine." His smile then faded before he rubbed his face up and down with both hands. "Man, there's somethin' that's been killin' me ever since Terminus. Somethin' I never told mom. Somethin' I never told anyone, not even Tess."

Gareth's eyebrows twitched upwards. "What?"

Alex scanned the room. "Can we go somewhere else?"

He looked across the room as well and no one—not even Theresa—seemed to be paying attention to them. "What will we say we're doing?"

"I don't… I don't know." He waved him off. "It's fine, I'll tell you later."

"Come on, you can't leave me hanging like that. Whisper it to me."

Alex sighed and lowered his voice. "Fine. Okay… about a year before all this I… I tracked my down my dad. My real dad. And I met him."

"Oh… wow," he said before looking to see if anyone took notice. No one had.

"His name was Stephen Goretti. Heh, turns out I'm Italian. Anyway, he worked in real estate. I went in and faked bein' interested in buyin'. And you know what else? He had kids. Two other kids, both girls, with his wife he said he'd been with thirty-one years. One was older than me. So you know what that means.

"And you know how mom said she tried to find him, but couldn't? Pretty sure she lied 'cause it wasn't hard for me to track him down. I guess she didn't want me in some big family mess, or she found out I had sisters and didn't want me to know. But you know what? I didn't like him at all, man. He gave me the creeps. Ugh, he looked just like me, too."

Gareth took a moment to take in the plethora of information. It was virtually useless now, of course. His biological father and sisters were long dead. And so was Mary. "Why didn't you tell her?"

"I meant to. But as time went on it got harder and harder and I knew it'd be more awkward to do it. I mean, it seems like I would've spilled it after all this 'cause it's old news. I just never knew how to bring it up."

"I take it you didn't tell him who you were?"

"At first, I thought I might. He had this vibe though. The kind we would pick up on at Terminus and keep a damn good eye on him. You know what I mean."

Gareth nodded. "Yeah, I do. Hey, if she were here, you know she'd forgive you in a heartbeat."
"I hope so."

"I know so."
Not long from the school, the group took to tracking anything they might find in the plagued and hostile wilderness. It was a step-down—several in fact—from the large amount of meat that they begrudgingly decided to let slip through their fingers. At this point, however, beggars couldn't be choosers.

While Cynthia attempted to lift Kaylee high enough into a tree to collect its pecans, Theresa made her way to one of the backpacks they'd equipped. If she weren't so beaten down, she might have laughed at the sight of Cynthia lifting up a girl almost a foot shorter than herself.

Averting her gaze from their attempt, she reached the bag and rummaged through it, searching for bits of the cloth intended for use on Gareth's wound. Of all the times to get her monthly gift, now could not have been worse. Unfortunately, she found none of the material inside.

Sighing, she scanned the place for the other backpack. Albert and Gareth, who 'coached' Kaylee and Cynthia by the tree, didn't have it. Alex, who had stepped away a few trees back, she knew didn't have it. That only left one person. Turning to a tree stump a few yards away, she found it in the worst possible place—next to Martin.

At some point, she knew she would have to address their issues since he wasn't going anywhere. And without the large buffering area of Terminus, they would have to continue sharing cramped quarters. Unless they found another large, suitable habitat.

Slogging over to where he perched, she grabbed up the bag and unzipped it. Inside, she found several pieces of the cloth and snatched two out of the bag.

"What do you need that for?" Martin asked from beside her.

She glanced at his skeptical face and attempted the most unhostile answer she could, "Nothing that concerns you."

"We ain't got a lot of that, you know. And you're takin' a lot." His accusatory tone grated on her.

She clenched the fabric in her hand. "Then tattle on me."

Martin bolted up. "I got a better idea." He yanked the cloth out of her hand.

"Give it back!"

He slipped the hand that held it behind him. "Sorry, your majesty."

"I swear to fucking god, if you don't—"

He quirked his eyebrows. "Then what do you need it for?"

"Well, now that you touched it, I don't want it anymore."

His playful expression faded. "You know, on second thought," he brought his hand forth, "have it!" He threw the bits of cloth at her. They hit her chest and fluttered to the ground.
An urge to pound the living shit out of him was then interrupted by Alex's voice. "Hey, what's goin' on?" he asked, strolling out from the trees.

Martin spun to face him. "You know what? You bein' Gareth's brother is the only reason he lets her get away with shit!"

"Get away with what shit?"

"Oh, I don't know. Holdin' a gun to my head for one!"

"Listen, I'm sorry, okay?" Theresa broke in. "I overreacted."

Martin shook his head and turned away, muttering, "Diva bitch."

_Diva? Really!?_

"Hey!" Alex barked back before she could retort.

"What?" Martin griped, turning back around.

_Are they going to...?

It wasn't like Alex to start a physical fight. Yet she had to admit the idea of him clocking Martin pleased her. She might even assist him. Although, the possibility that Martin might even put one scratch on Alex discouraged her a bit.

The upturned corner of her mouth then straightened when she recalled her earlier conversation with Gareth. For his and the group's sake, she had to stop it.

She then marched over and stood firm in front of her spouse, looking into the hostile eyes he fixed on the other man. "Alex, he's not worth it."

He met her stare, his face softening, but didn't reply.

"Hey," Gareth's voice sounded, "cool down, guys."

She looked to see Gareth approaching, while Cynthia, Kaylee, and Albert stood by the tree, holding handfuls of pecans and watching intently.

"He called her a bitch, man!" Alex asserted.

"She was takin' your gauze from the bag!" Martin exclaimed.

Gareth stopped in front of them and looked the three over. "Alex, Theresa, why don't you guys go take a walk and clear your head? We'll talk this over later once we've all calmed down, alright? Martin, why don't you help crack our nuts?"

Theresa could practically hear Gareth's internal laughter at the last part. She then nodded and looked back to Alex. "Maybe we can find a tree and pretend it's him?" She gestured her head back toward Martin.

Alex nodded back. "Yeah," he murmured, glancing over her shoulder at Martin. "Yeah. Yeah, okay."

Taking his hand, she led him back in the direction he came, hearing Gareth giving Martin the same lecture he did every Terminant who had issues with another. One she knew she and Alex would
After they cleared just enough trees to not be overheard in detail, they stopped in front of one another. Theresa attempted to exhale out as much anger as she could.

"I sure do get why you pulled a gun on him," Alex said.

"He's pissed with what we're doing. Or not doing. And I said we should let them go, which he didn't want to do so..." She shrugged. "You know, you really could stab a tree and picture his face. Or Sasha's, or Rick's, or—"

"Nah, that's alright." He waved her off. "Hey um, why were you takin' the cloth from the bag?"

"I just started spotting. Lucky, lucky me." She crossed her arms.

"Oh, god that sucks. I think um... I think there's an old supermarket around here not too far. I was really hopin' there'd be razors in the school locker room, but nope."

"Hey, you think we can sneak away a little further? I still feel like they can hear us."

"Yeah, I think we can."

They trekked several yards further, surely out of ear-range of the group, and halted in front of a rather rotund oak tree.

"Nice to be alone-ish," Theresa said, examining the surrounding woodlands. "You know, I—"

Alex stopped her sentence with his lips on hers and his arms around her waist. The action stilled her in surprise at first before wrapping her arms around him and reciprocating. She didn't think he was anywhere near in the mood for such a thing. Yet, it sure was a constructive way to burn off negative energy.

His mouth was dry, and he tasted a faint bit of morning, but she didn't care at that point. Shutting her eyes, she smiled a bit as his tongue licked at the inside of her cheek. Finally, the kind of "thank god you're alive kiss" she didn't know they needed.

Or a "thank god you're alive ass grab," she thought as Alex slid his hands down and gripped her backside, pulling her closer.

Just as his lips met her neck, the leaves behind them let out a rough crunch, forcing them back into the real world. They pulled apart and Theresa gripped the knife on her belt, setting her eyes on the figure which crept forth from the dense trees.

The figure revealed itself as a woman—a living woman—with long, tangled dark hair and a red bandana tied around the bottom of her face.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt," she began, somewhat muffled through the fabric, "I—I mean you no harm. D—do you have anything to eat? I haven't eaten in days."

The rehearsed greeting, "Of course! We'll fix you a plate," came close to slipping out of Theresa's mouth on instinct.

"No, sorry," she replied instead.

"There's a pecan tree not too far away," Alex said with a polite smile. "We can show you."
Theresa noted Alex's arms hung by his side, not gripping the revolver in his holster. It was a good idea. Putting on a non-hostile front would make it easy to lead her back to the group where she wouldn't stand a chance.

She let her arm fall to her side. "It's not too far away."

The loner's eyes grew relieved. "You're so nice! Thank you!" She jogged forward to meet them.

*What the hell is up with the bandana?*

"Just one question before we go?" the girl chirped.

"Sure," Alex said.

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

*What?*

"Uh…" Alex stammered. "A lot better-lookin' than me."

Theresa nodded in agreement. "Y—yeah, your eyes are gorgeous."

The woman then brought her hands back behind her head and untied the bandana, then held it at her side.

Theresa restrained a wince at what she saw. Jagged cuts claimed either side of her mouth, both ending just several inches away from her ears. It looked to be an old wound, as she could see where the skin had long since tried to heal itself.

"Even like this?" the stranger asked, the separated skin by her lips parting a little.

"Of course," Theresa attempted to lighten her expression with a reassuring smile.

"Hope you let whatever or whoever did that to you have it," Alex remarked.

She scowled and hurled the bandana to the ground. "What does that mean!?"

_Dammit, Alex._

"It—it don't mean nothin', okay? I just meant— you're real pretty, alright?"

"Liar! They always lie!" Her proclamation expanded the cut enough to reveal her set of teeth.

Theresa took a step forward, unsure if she could subdue the girl or not. "Listen, do you want your pecans or not?"

The woman shoved Theresa down and her back hit the ground with force. Alex spun around to his wife when the stranger grabbed the gun from his belt and tossed it aside.

The girl then lifted up her baggy, grey shirt and pulled a long blade from a sheath. "You'd look much better if you just smiled!"

Alex turned around just in time to dodge a swipe she took at his face. Theresa was halfway up the ground, ready to stab the bitch into mush, when a sudden gunshot ceased the attacker's actions. The bullet blew threw her head and she slumped to the ground.
Now on her feet, Theresa looked over to the direction the shot came from to see Albert holding up his rifle.

Albert lowered the weapon. "You guys okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, thanks man," Alex said, then turned to Theresa. "You alright?"

Theresa attempted to brush the dirt and leaves off of her back, still feeling the strain from the impact. "Yeah, I'm fine," she assured as Albert made his way over to inspect the body for himself. "Well hey, now we have something to eat," she said before noticing a few dots of blood had been sprayed on one side of Alex's face. "Hey, you have um..." She lifted up her arm and wiped it off with her sleeve.

His face warmed. "Thanks."

Albert's brow twitched upwards. "Whoa, what happened to her—"

Hasty footsteps from the direction he came diverted his attention. Gareth, Cynthia, Kaylee, and Martin then appeared, weapons drawn and ready to attack.

Their faces all relaxed when they discovered the scene, and Gareth said, "We heard the shot. What the hell happened?"

"What happened to her mouth?" Albert finished his initial question.

"She came that way," Alex replied while the other four strode over to take a look for themselves. "She asked us for somethin' to eat, so we said we had pecans to lure her back. Then she asked us if we thought she was pretty, even though she had this bandana on her face. But of course we said yes. Then she pulled it off and asked again. I kinda said the wrong thing, so she went psycho."

Gareth narrowed his eyes at the body. "Huh."

"Shouldn't we should check nearby? See if she has some loot?" Kaylee asked.

"Yes," Gareth responded. "Martin, Kaylee, Alex, you stay here with smiley. She might have a campsite nearby. If so, we can just cook her up there and not worry about a new one. I'm sick of building fires already." He rubbed his temple. "Come on, sooner the better. Before she gets all rigor-y."

* * *

After around ten minutes of tracking the woman's footsteps, they came across a small campfire along with two plastic shopping bags, and several blankets.

Theresa crouched down and dug through one of the plastic sacks while the other three continued to inspect the site. "Ugh, I knew she was lying," she said as she discovered two cans of mixed vegetables and one of applesauce.

"Hey," Gareth began from the other side of the site, "think these could work as new fingers?"

Theresa stood up and turned to see Gareth holding two somethings with a yellow and white packaging in place of his missing fingers. Cynthia giggled from a few feet behind him.

Are those?

"You are kidding me," Theresa beamed, hurrying over to him. "How many more of those are in
there?"

He shrugged, still holding the tampons in place. "Maybe a dozen or so?"

She plucked them from his hand. "You know, you are *not* as mature as you think you are."

He let out a chuckle.

"Whoa… guys?" Albert alerted from the periphery of the camp.

The other three moved over to his side. On the ground before them, lay two slightly decomposed bodies on their backs; one male and one female. Both donned a Glasgow smile like the woman Albert slayed. Yet these gashes were straight and intentional, unlike the sloppy one on the woman's face. The incisions on their faces were accompanied by a clear knife wound through their foreheads.

"That's what she was going to do to us," Theresa said.

Cynthia looked to Theresa. "Why was she doin' this?"

Theresa puckered her bottom lip. "Self-esteem issues, I guess."

"Okay, I think we're done here," Gareth declared. "Let's get everyone else. We'll have lunch."

* * *

This time, Theresa did none of the dirty work. Instead, Gareth, Martin, and Kaylee performed the deed. The last time she and Martin butchered together, it didn't go so well. She presumed that was Gareth's reasoning behind having her sit this one out.

"She probably *was* kinda pretty," Martin mused as his bloodied hands tugged at the woman's exposed rib.

Theresa watched for some of what they did, and noticed Martin was right. Her now paled face could have been magazine beautiful. Shapely brows, big round eyes, a perky nose, and most likely pouty lips. She could imagine her being quite vain in her day.

In the end, she produced a rack of ribs, thigh, leg, and chest meat—a generous banquet which they cooked over the fire.

Dishes and silverware were retrieved from the worthwhile walk back to the school and they used them to dine as they sat on the hard ground.

"Not often they come with their own sides," Gareth said, shoveling a spoonful of the canned vegetables into his mouth.

She sure did taste good. Much better than Bob. A bit blackened around the edges from the uneven fire and topped with a dollop of applesauce. Theresa loved pork chops and applesauce back in the day. Her mother would always complain how fattening they were, but would down her plate anyway and spend an hour on her exercise bike.

Nibbling on the last and rarest part of the meat, she wondered if she ought to have had her mother with applesauce when she was eaten, as a token. Her mother's death after she miraculously turned up at Terminus but refused their diet hadn't crossed her mind in some time, she didn't allow it to.

Thoughts of her mother's demise at the hands of their butchers gave way to Mary's death, then
Terminus’ destruction. Reality set on her again and she felt like sinking to the ground. She wished Mary were there, that she had been the one to cook up the meat up and enjoy a full stomach along with them. And yet, they had let her killers go. It was necessary, but it would never not trouble her.

The desolate feeling made her seek out Alex's comfort beside her. Of course, he had opted to eat the meat with his hands. Again.

Why does he have to do that when there’s a fork and knife right there?

Regardless, she pushed her now empty plate aside and rest her head on his shoulder, he was almost done eating anyway. Mary would be happy to see her and Alex there, sharing a meal. To see Gareth with them, keeping them breathing even if it meant letting their destroyers go.

Alex was alive. Shutting her eyes, she focused on that, on who was there.

Gareth was alive. Gareth whom she had full-on admitted she considered to be her brother. It felt as awkward as it did affirming to have told him.

Kaylee was alive. Theresa opened her eyes and set them on the girl she had thought dead, her empty plate now resting in front of her crossed legs. Whose body she thought she saw torched. She hoped they could be friends, real friends. Like how she felt they could be before Terminus fell.

By then, the meal was over. Her stomach was full, very full. She felt she weighed several hundred pounds, but welcomed the feeling of nourishment. Cynthia stood from her place beside Albert and collected the dishes, stacking and setting them by the dwindling fire.

"Thanks mom," Albert said to her once she rejoined him. A look of regret then crossed his face, eyes darting around the group. Cynthia gave an awkward smile.

That wasn't the first time Theresa overheard him calling her "mom." Or her calling him "baby."

Whatever floats their boat, she figured. Just hope he's not nursing on her.

"Yeah, thanks mama," Martin teased with a tone of flirtation.

Theresa grit her teeth. Martin had been sniffing around Cynthia for at least a month. She either couldn't tell, or wasn't interested.

The redhead forced out a laugh and Martin gave a grin back.

Ugh.

"Your fingers feel okay?" Kaylee asked Gareth, breaking the discomfort.

"Not great, but not bad," Gareth replied, looking them over. "Just a shame I can't play piano."

"Since when did you play piano?" Albert asked.

"Since never. I just always liked having the option."

Albert cracked-up, and Theresa found herself doing the same along with everyone else, much to her surprise. A full stomach made Gareth's 'cleverness' actually amusing.

A full stomach even had the power to make the skinned hellscape of a world a little less nightmarish. A full stomach was a powerful thing.
Chapter End Notes

In case you were unaware, the woman with the cut mouth is based on the Japanese urban legend Kuchisake-onna. I thought it would make for an interesting first victim (or second) now that they're out and about.
Black Sheep

The biggest insult of Martin’s day was not being told that two scraps of cloth were unworthy because he had touched them. No, it was not that; what made him seethe was Gareth’s commanding voice forcing him to "talk it out" with Theresa and Alex. As if he were a petulant child, and Gareth was the irritating therapist his sister Marion had when she was a child.

However, the day had improved since it began. His stomach was satisfyingly stuffed, the type of full that made him want to curl up and sleep for twelve hours. Instead, he had to force a reconciliation with whom he deemed the velociraptor and her pet chinchilla. Though Alex—the first one in line to talk with—wouldn't be hard to at least partly come to terms with. Theresa would be the problem, as usual.

Gareth, Cynthia, Albert, Theresa, and Kaylee proceeded to give them space at the campsite while disposing of their meal’s remains. Yet Martin knew Gareth, and likely Theresa, would hang around close enough to overhear at least part of their conversation. While Gareth always said he would give the parties privacy, as soon as another fight broke out or the exchange ended, there he appeared.

Alex and Martin stood a few feet across from one another at the campsite, the fire now reduced to smoldering coals. Martin couldn't believe Alex had survived to see that day. He was the kind of guy who draws sunsets and hugs his girl when she has a bad day. The kind of guy who needs his hand held to do any kind of dirty work. He chalked up his long life purely from the protection of his big brother.

Yet, he had to admit he was somewhat surprised to see him so ready to kill someone like he had been in the church. Or start a fight with him for that matter. Credit had to be given for such displays of aggression; it was a refreshing color to see him wear.

"So…" Martin began, a hand in his pants pocket.

"All I gotta say to you man, is never talk to her like that again," Alex demanded.

"I won't. I promise. I know it ain't good for what's left of our morale."

Still can’t stop me from thinking it.

"And you know, uh, there's somethin' else. Somethin' I've always wanted to say to you. And that's... don't ever forget that I'm the reason you're here."

Martin’s eyebrows twitched up at such a strong statement from the chinchilla. "I know that. And I'm grateful. Really, I am."

He scoffed. "Yeah, 'course you are."

"No, you know what? When I got there and found out the reality of that place, I actually thought I might get to know you. Christ, lettin' me in after the shit that happened there was probably the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me. But that was just when you and Theresa started shackin' up, and she'd already declared me an outsider by default. Then after a little while, I got it. I got it that me and everyone else who joined-up was just extra muscle."

Alex glanced down to his feet. "I never wanted it to be like that, man." His voice was soft. "It shouldn't have been like that." He looked back up to the other man.
"So, then you get it just a little bit. Why I might have an issue with her 'cause she treats me like shit for havin' done nothin' but gettin' there a little late."

"You haven't exactly tried to mend any fences either."

"Yeah, yeah I know I haven't. That's my bad. But how was I, or Hayley or Cora or Chuck, supposed to react when she thinks of us like that?"

He scratched the back of his neck. "Yeah, I—I know. To be honest, I never… I never…"

"Yeah?"

"...thought the way she treated new people was entirely fair. I mean, I get it... god, do I get it, especially when the new people were men. But a lot of 'em really proved 'emselves. You did."

If Martin didn't know better, he would have thought all this time Alex liked him. He recalled the occasions Alex passed him a joint when he was smoking out by the garden at night. It seemed like he enjoyed his company, talking about the previous day and the one to come. As expected though, he never offered him a hit when Theresa was present.

The crunching of leaves then pierced his ears, and he turned to see the woman in question striding forward from the trees. "Gareth told me to listen in," she said almost apologetically as she stopped at the edge of the campsite.

"Yeah, I thought he would," Alex said before strolling over and joining her side.

"You can leave us alone, I'll be fine," she assured her spouse. Alex rubbed her shoulder, then walked back off into the woods. Martin knew he would be eavesdropping as well.

"Gare and his quote-unquote 'privacy,' huh?" Martin attempted a joke.

Theresa crossed her arms and forced a smile. "Yeah."

"Well? Verdict?"

She heaved a sigh. "Alex is right, I don't like outsiders. I would've gladly pushed every single newcomer into a hoard of walkers if it saved even one of the people who was there during the Siege. Even the ones I didn't get along with."

He shook his head. "'Outsiders.' Nah, you know what? You and me, honey, we're the same."

She frowned.

"Come on, in the grand scheme of things, how much different are we really? What did we both eat earlier?"

She didn't reply.

"It's not a competition, you know."

She squared her shoulders. "What competition?"

"Worst apocalypse," he replied. "Alright, I know, I know. I can't hold a candle to what you and all them went through before I got there. But you and me, and everyone there, we all at some time or another had to realize what had to be done because of something that told us that."
Her tightened features relaxed a bit. "What was yours then?"

"You remember about my sister, right?"

She nodded. Of course she did. All known history of every new recruit to Terminus was broadcast to every resident to ensure "total honesty," as Gareth put it.

"Marion was the only person that ever loved me. Believe me, I'm not just sayin' that. She'd always had the voices and delusions and whatnot, but she'd never gotten violent before that day. It sent her over the edge. And havin' to kill her, just doin' it without one thought was when I knew who I was, really was. I know you know what that's like."

"Well, that's true. I do know." She dropped her arms to her sides. "Wait, really? The only person? My parents sucked, but I still think they loved me. In a way."

He scoffed. "My mom loved Vicodin. And my dad? Heh, when he found out I was into dudes too, he told me that I'd go to hell and be raped by the devil himself. Fun fifteenth birthday."

"I'm sorry."

"Please don't be. I hate that."

"Fair enough."

He slid a few steps forward. "Well go on, ask me. I know you wanna."

"Ask you what?"

"You know." He smirked.

She squinted. "No, I don't."

He sighed. "How I got away with goin' both ways with the kinda people I had to have around."

"Oh, right. Okay, how did you?"

"I lied to my dad for one. And the church I was in wasn't my parents'. It was a little more lax on the whole devil-rape thing. That and I had some real guilt."

"You?" She let out a breath of surprise. "Guilty?"

"I know. Long-ass time ago."

"Well, if we're going to declare some sort of truce, we need to establish some ground rules."

"Which are?"

"I won't be a bitch if you won't be a dick. Pretty simple."

"So no more cute nicknames like 'white trash piece of shit?' And holdin' a gun to my head?"

"No. Promise."

"Man, you know that wasn't even an insult. I know I'm a white trash piece of shit."

Theresa cracked a slight smile. "And I know I can be a bitch."
"Then are we in agreement here?"

"Yeah, we are. For the good of group, like Gareth always says."

For the group. Always for the damn group.

* * *

"For now, this is the best place. Clean water is a rarity, and I think we should stick with it," Gareth declared from the front of the school. A pile of dead walkers lay en masse before him, which they had finally let out of the school and taken care of. The rest stood around the dead creatures and their leader, listening to him go on about their options and prospects.

Martin didn't pay attention to much of what Gareth said beyond that they were remaining at the school. He wandered away from the others and over to where they had cooked Bob's leg. They had since tossed out it of sight. Only a grate and dead campfire remained.

On the ground beside it, lay what appeared to be a black book. Upon closer inspection, he saw it was a bible, then crouched down and picked it up. He recognized it as the one he'd come across in the bag they'd left at the church. It was Mary's. Alex had mentioned they had taken it while they escaped Terminus.

"Hey," Martin called, standing back up, "isn't this Mary's?"

Gareth ceased speaking, looking perturbed at having been interrupted. The others turned away to face him and Alex's eyes grew wide. "Aw dude, I thought we lost this!" he proclaimed, jogging over to him.

"We did."

Alex ignored his remark and snatched it from his hand. "Thanks for findin' it. Last thing we got of hers." He flipped open the cover, running his fingers across the written name Mary B.

"Why's it say Mary B.?"

"Her maiden name's Billingsley," he answered as he shut the book and glided back over to Gareth.

Alex gazed at the bible with such love, it gave Martin a twinge of envy. He had nothing left of his family except his shared DNA.

"I think I was the one who left it," Cynthia mewed, her face contorting. "I saw it as we were leavin', but didn't say anything."

"Hey, it don't matter," Martin reassured. "We got it back and now we're all happy campers."

Cynthia's expression eased a bit and she flashed him a small smile. What Martin wouldn't give for a trip into Cynthia's pants. Slowly but surely, he felt he was making progress in getting there.

Albert shot him a dirty look at his comment and Martin shifted his eyes to Gareth.

"Yeah," Gareth began, "what he said. Thanks Cynth'." He then made his past the rest of the group and the undead to Martin, something skeptical on his face. "You're still trying something with her, huh?" His voice was low.

"Yeah, duh," he replied at the same level.
"Hm. She doesn't look quite ready to tear her clothes off."

"Yet," he asserted. "Heh, you know, she's always sorta reminded me of my sister."

"That's alarming."

"No, not 'cause—" he sighed, "you know what I mean."

"Hope so." He turned his head to the other five—none of whom appeared to be listening—then turned back. "You know, Cynthia came onto me a while back."

Martin felt a pang of jealousy. "Aw, you lucky dog."

"I didn't accept."

Martin's eyes widened. "You... what? You have seen Cynthia, right?"

He shrugged. "I'm just not into her."

"What isn't there to be into? The long legs, the fair skin, the perky tits, the red hair? C'mon, what's the matter with you?"

Gareth laughed. "You really want to go down that road? Because it probably won't ever end."

Martin laughed back. "True, true. So you really don't think I have a shot with her?"

He exhaled a deep breath, his face falling serious. "You might. But Martin, you know how she is, how she cries over clean sheets. When you inevitably get bored, there's a high, high chance she'll freak-out. And you just laid the first bandaid on yours and Theresa's problems. So, how much worse you think it'll be for us when you and Cynthia have a falling out? Really, I would prefer it for the group if you wouldn't. Actually, no I'd not just prefer it if you didn't, I'm telling you not to, please."

_Awfully big talk for someone who used to get me to suck on his big toe_, Martin felt tempted to say.

He dug his nails into his palms and instead replied, "Alright, if it means that much to you, then I can... not."

"Good."

"Then, if Cynthia's off-limits, how about you and me have another go? You're right-handed, so you still have your most important fingers."

"Nope."

"Why not?" Martin pouted.

"Because I said so. Please, just channel your energy into things like staying alive and eating everyday."

The condescending tone he placed on the word 'please' had him gritting his teeth.

"Alright, boss." Martin edged himself forward, attempting to brush off the third large insult of the day.

_No wonder he don't have any friends either_, Martin thought of Gareth.
With the pleasant idea of being alone his goal, he walked past the rest of the group and toward the door. Again, he got a hostile look from Albert which he ignored. Martin thought Albert had the uncanny resemblance to a baby kangaroo that the mother carried in her pouch. The mother kangaroo in question being Cynthia.

He then looked to Theresa, interested to see if she would still give him the same old ugly stare. Instead, she focused on chatting with Kaylee. She held the younger girl's hands in hers, staring at the ends of her fingers. Whatever that was about. Alex and Cynthia paid him no mind, looking over the dead walkers as Gareth joined them and began speaking of where to haul them off to.

Pulling open the front door of the building, he stepped into its dark and chilly corridors. At this point, he had no attachments to his remaining party. Despite what Alex and Theresa said, he couldn't envision himself becoming best friends with any of them in the future. Not that he even wanted their friendship.

As he traipsed down the halls, for the first time in a while, he missed his sister. Sticking in his head, was the way she used to teasingly reply to things he said with a childlike, "No, dummy!"

His friend Larry was next in line. They had worked alongside at Martin's family's O'Connell Auto Salvage. Larry had one day decided to draw a shamrock on its sign for "added flavor," as he put it. It came out so shoddy that Larry's terrible art skills became an inside joke between the two. Those were the only people felt he might want to be with.

For a few moments, he thought about walking off from his group. Just disappearing and going about life on his own alone again. The thought was quickly watered down by the fact that numbers meant everything. More people meant a higher chance of staying alive.

* * *

As the dawn hit, another mediocre night's sleep behind him, Martin stood staring through the classroom window. Gareth, Cynthia, Albert, and Kaylee slept in the same spots they had the night before. Alex and Theresa, however, had taken to the classroom next door.

Tiptoeing through the room, he made his way outside as quietly as he could, a rifle strapped to his back. His feet stopped on the concrete's burgundy stain where the assortment of dead walkers had lain.

"Martin, you fucking moron, get back inside," he thought after a few moments of contemplation.

"You going somewhere?" Gareth's voice sounded from behind him. He held back a flinch, resenting the man's uncanny ability to sneak up on people.

"I was just fixin' to come back in," he replied. The approaching footsteps from behind had a particular air steadiness to them. He gulped.

"I hope so," Gareth said as he met his side. "Don't get any ideas about running off."

"Nah, I'm dead meat on my own," he said without bothering to look at him.

"Yes, you are. The second you step out there alone, you change from a hunter to the hunted. We both wouldn't want that to happen."
Just like that, the possibility of departing was quashed. "Join us or feed us" was a life-long contract, Terminus or no Terminus. Of course it was, Martin knew that. Like Gareth would actually wake up and see that he had abandoned them and not deem him another meal. Of course. He'd already made his choice. The thought of being hunted by Gareth was certainly a terrifying one, not one he would soon risk.

Martin gave a shake of his head. "It won't happen."

"Good."

He then heard the door behind them opening, making him wonder how Gareth was able to slip through it without a peep.

"Hey, guys?" Theresa alerted. The two turned to see her in the doorway, holding it ajar. "Alex and I found something that might be interesting in the cafeteria kitchen."

"What were you doing in there?" Gareth asked.

Martin began to form his left index finger and thumb into a circle to make an obscene gesture, when he realized Theresa wouldn't appreciate it.

"Looking for a clean enough lunch lady's shirt in the back. Something for an extra pillow."

Yeah, sure.

"What did you find?"

"Come look. It's probably more interesting to me and Kaylee than anyone else. I thought I'd let her sleep though."

They both followed her inside and to the back of the building where the cafeteria resided. When they made it through the unkempt room, they entered the kitchen and stopped by an industrial-sized refrigerator where a weary-looking Alex stood.

In the corner beside it, was an adult man's body lying up against the wall with a piece of paper tacked to his chest. It read:

\[\text{ate the lunchlady}\]
\[\text{saved my ass}\]
\[\text{and ate the kids too}\]

"So?" Gareth asked.

"At Shady's bar in Atlanta, in the kitchen, there were three bodies hanging with a note on the one in the middle with the same kind of message."

"Yeah, she told me about it when we got back," Alex said.

"And?" Gareth pressed.

"And, these look no more than two weeks old. You mentioned you once wondered if we'd ever come across other people who did what we did."

"Well, did you happen to find other any eaten bodies around here?"
"Not yet." She shrugged.

"Huh, that is interestin'" Martin said. "Seems he would've eaten this one too though. Eh, who knows."

"See? **He** thinks it's interesting," Theresa said.

Gareth looked the body up and down a few more times. "I didn't say I didn't think it wasn't interesting, just that it's not applicable."
Alex stood in one of the school's vacant halls, attempting to pry open a rusted combination-sealed locker with a screwdriver. Gareth had done the unthinkable; he had been careless while searching the corridor the previous day.

After a minute or so of the effort, Alex gave up and let the tool fall to the ground. Its sharper than anticipated clank as it hit the tile made him flinch.

Accompanying the harsh sound was the door of the music room opening from behind him, followed by Cynthia's high voice greeting, "Hey."

He turned to see her stepping out of the room. "Hey yourself. I didn't know you were in there."

"And I didn't know you were out here," she said as the heavy door fell shut behind her with a click. "I was just havin' a look 'round these halls. Been a long time since I've been in a school."

"Oh yeah, you were a teacher, right?"

She nodded and gave a curious glance to the locker. "Whatcha you doin' there?"

"I was feelin' restless, so I took a walk and noticed this locker's still locked. So I was trying to pry it open." His eyes flitted to the screwdriver on the floor tile.

"Shoot it?"

"Waste a bullet."

"We used to waste bullets all the time at Terminus. Herdin' the meat."

He turned back to the locker and looked it up and down. "Yeah well, it worked. For a while."

"Listen, uh," Cynthia began, shifting to his side, "I've been meanin' to get you alone. Um, there's somethin' I wanted to talk to you about."

He faced her. "Yeah?"

"Well, I've always thought we saw things the same way. That we—"

Oh no. He knew where she was going.

"I know what you're thinkin', and we can't—"

"Just listen!" she demanded, her voice echoing down the halls. "Listen to what I have to say before you shut me down."
Alex gave a compliant nod.

"I've always felt we were on the same wavelength, especially since after we got out together. And you know what? Things are different now, Alex. We can stop." A wide smile lit up her face.

He let out a breath. "Cynthia…"

"You can't stand there and tell me you don't wanna, 'cause I know you hate it as much as I do. And look around, there's seven of us. Groups bigger than we are are able to eat and stay alive out here. It ain't like Terminus where there's so many and there's no other way. Remember, Gareth said 'until we don't have to anymore,' and I think that time's finally come."

He gulped, trying to prevent her words from sinking in. "That was a long time ago."

"Not that long."

"You know what else he said? 'Can't go back.'"

"I know that's not you talkin'. Don't just repeat your brother's words, 'cause I know that's not what you want. You didn't wanna kill all of Rick's people neither, like Noah and that couple."

"Cynthia, it's never been about what we wanted. It's been about what we needed."

Her face lit up again. "I think Albert will agree with me, and Kaylee. We can—"

"No! Okay?" he snapped, Cynthia's expression turning on its heels. "We don't need to be divided right now and that's all you'll be doin' by bringin' this up! Don't say anything. Don't."

"What are you, afraid of him?"

Alex took a deep breath. "I just know he won't budge. It's too late. We missed our chance a long time ago."

She crossed her arms. "So what? It's just like Terminus, then?"

"Yeah, yeah it is. We have to pretend to be okay with it, like we always have. Always will."

He could feel her reading his face, detecting the pain it took to say what he did. Yet Cynthia's idea would have no good outcome. There was no way Gareth, Theresa, or Martin would agree. So as always, Alex made himself think of what he loved more than what he hated; his wife and a new possibility of closeness with Gareth.

"You're a liar, Alex."

"Yeah, I know, but I gotta be. So do you."

* * *

Alex eventually had to resort to beating open the locker with the end of his rifle. And since he found something valuable inside, he was obliged to tell Gareth that he had missed a spot.

"Thanks," Gareth said, accepting the six packets of cheese crackers his brother found. "Can't believe I missed that one." He frowned.

"Don't beat yourself up," Alex said. "We got it now."
He then turned his head to scan the classroom for Cynthia through the rest of the group, and found her standing by the back corner, staring at the wall. She didn't appear on the verge of spilling her request, but he still felt he should watch her like a hawk.

"We have to divide this up so... oh no," Gareth said, setting the packages down on the teacher's desk.

Alex diverted his attention back to his brother. "What?"

"We'll have to do it by metabolism. Remember that? Like when we first started going hungry."

"Oh yeah, that was a fun conversation."

"Okay guys," he raised his voice. The five turned to him. "Alex found something to tide us over until we hunt later today. Problem is, there's only five."

"Oh no, that again?" Kaylee groaned.

Gareth nodded. "The girl we caught was enough for all of us, but this we have to ration. Me, Cynthia, and Albert lose weight the fastest. Theresa, Martin, you're about mid-range. Alex, Kaylee, you lose it slowest, so..."

"We get half of one," Kaylee finished for him.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. We'll find more later, this is just for now. And you're pretty small, Kaylee, you can make do. Besides, you and Alex were going to stay guard while we hunt anyway."

Gareth wasn't wrong. Just before, and during the Siege, Gareth, Cynthia, and Albert had grown to be some of the thinnest. Kaylee and Alex had been among the few who hung on to their body weight the longest.

"That really better than dumpin' 'em out on the table and dividin' it seven ways?" Martin asked.

"Yes." Gareth narrowed his eyes. "Why do you care? You get a whole one."

"Just curious." He shrugged.

In honesty, Alex didn't think it mattered. Assuming they would find meat later, whether it be human or animal, the extra or fewer fifty calories wouldn't make a difference. Although Gareth was set on the idea, and he didn't feel like arguing it.

While the others had a whole bag to themselves, Kaylee and Alex poured half of one into each other's hands. Theresa sat among the two at the student's desks while they ate. Occasionally, she snuck them an extra cracker when no one else was looking. Alex started to object, but knew it wouldn't do any good.

"How you doin', Kay?" Alex asked after he had finished the last bit of his snack.

Kaylee dusted her crumb-covered fingertips on her sides. "Super, super full. I am small, after all."

"We'll get meat later," Theresa assured, popping the last cracker into her mouth.

Alex leaned in and whispered, "If it makes you feel any better, Gareth was fat when he was a kid."

Kaylee stifled a sharp laugh before covering her mouth with her hand, her eyes still sparkling with mirth. "Really?" she whispered back.
"Oh yeah, he was the Pillsbury Dough Boy until a year after puberty."

Kaylee pursed her lips, trying to hide an emerging grin. "I can't imagine."

Theresa shook her head and gave a playful half-smile. "I know. Neither could I when he told me."

"You guys done?" Gareth asked, strolling over to the three.

"I am," Theresa said, standing up and straightening her features.

"Alright, well have fun you happy housewives," he said to the two who were skipping the hunt, then gathered their empty bags.

Alex and Kaylee then assisted the other five in preparing for their hunt. Cynthia gave Alex a longer than usual stare as they did so. Albert, equally inquisitive, caught on.

_Great, they're both in on it now._

After all guns were cleaned, bullets counted, and knives sharpened, they departed. Theresa flashed Alex a reassuring smile as she left. A smile that didn't come close to alleviating the pit he got in his stomach when she had to put herself in danger when he couldn't be there.

Alex and Kaylee stood idly by in the classroom after their leave. All was quiet except for the sound of their breathing.

"No weird medical questions?" Kaylee finally broke the silence.

"Huh?"

"You always managed to ask me the weirdest medical questions. I thought after the world ended, I'd stop getting them all the time."

"Heh, yeah. I'm still sorry about all those blackheads I had you exfoliate."

She waved him off. "Nah, I liked having something to do."

An assortment of footsteps then thundered from the outside halls, alarming Alex. The door flew open and Albert and Theresa stepped in.

"There's a problem. Someone knows we're here," Theresa stated.

"What?" Alex asked.

"Someone left us a note out front. Wasn't here this morning," Albert informed. "Come on."

_Someone?_ Alex's palms dampened—had Rick's group learned of their escape?

The four of them then hastened down the halls toward the front exit, finding the rest of their group standing by. As they approached, Gareth waved a small piece of paper in his hand.

"What's it say?" Kaylee asked as the three halted.

"Says, 'when I saw it, I nearly couldn't believe my eyes,'" Gareth answered. "It was very neatly placed on the grate we used for the campfire. Theresa thinks it's whoever wrote the note on the stiff in the kitchen."
"It's the same handwriting," Theresa insisted. "Kaylee, you look." She stepped forward, snatched the paper from Gareth's hand, and held it out to Kaylee.

Kaylee's eyebrows quirked up. "It is the same."

Alex edged over to peer at the note. From what he could tell, it did appear similar.

"I told you," Theresa said, pointing her finger to Gareth. "I told you he wasn't far. This is probably his place and we invaded it."

"Then when he comes back to leave another cute little post-it, we'll take care of him." Gareth grabbed the note back from Theresa's hand.

"If it's even just one," Martin chimed-in.

"Then we'll take care of them," Gareth clarified. "We have to assume we're being watched now. If Theresa's right and he's like us, then he either wants to eat us, or join us. Regardless, it's obvious he likes to play games." He crumpled the note in his fist.

"Couldn't we track him? He's bound to have left a trail," Albert asked.

"We could, but that might be what he wants. Like I said, games."

"You're just makin' assumptions, you don't know anything about this guy," Martin said.

"Well, we gotta start somewhere," Alex defended.

Gareth offered him a fleeting glance of what he thought looked like gratitude. The corners of Alex's mouth twitched up at the gesture.

"Why don't we take a vote?" Cynthia asked, looking to her leader. "This still ain't a dictatorship, right?"

Alex grit his teeth.

"Of course not," Gareth replied. "Okay then, three options: track him, wait for him to come back, or half of us track while the other half wait. Who wants to do option number one?"

Martin, and Martin alone, raised his hand. He then glanced around the group and let out a sigh.

"Option number two?" Gareth polled.

Cynthia and Albert raised their hands. Alex noted a certain smugness on Cynthia's face.

Gareth looked to the remaining voters. "I assume you like option number three?"

"Seems like the most thorough way," Theresa confirmed. The other two nodded.

"I think so too," Gareth said. "Well, Martin, since you're so eager to leave, me, you, and Cynthia will track. The rest of you will stay here by the exits, keep watch, guns in hand."

* * *

"Did Cynthia talk to you?" Albert asked Alex from where they stood in the classroom, grabbing up the remaining weapons on the desk.
"Yeah, she did. I told her not to say anything," Alex replied.

Albert let out a breath. "Good."

"You're not with her?"

"No, no way. Nothing good could can come out of it. But she'll get over it. She gets on tears about things, then the next day, she forgets them. Just gotta hope she stays quiet until then." He sheathed his pistol.

"Hope so," Alex said, punctuated with a sharp reload of his rifle.

"Do you agree with her though?"

Alex paused. "Don't matter if I do or not." Albert was silent before Alex continued, "Hey um, the girl who attacked me and Tess, was that... was that your first?"

"My first what?"

"Person you killed. I mean, directly."

He shook his head. "No, remember the girl with the rat poison last Spring?"

"Oh, right. The rat poison..." he trailed off.

The guy who mentally undressed his wife when he thought he wasn't looking or not, Albert was still just a kid to Alex. A kid who shouldn't have to kill people. Of course, Alex knew it wasn't true. That Albert was forced to grow up a long time ago.

Before Albert could reply, Theresa pushed open the door from outside, equipped with a sharp blade in her holster. "I'm good to go, come on, I've been waiting." She fixed her gaze on her spouse.

"There are four exits," Alex said.

She shook her head. "No, me and Kaylee sealed up the other two last night in case, well, something like this happened."

"Oh, right. Forgot about that."

"Yeah," Kaylee said, appearing by Theresa's side, "two for each."

The women then turned and headed down the hallway, Alex and Albert trailing behind their partners. Alex and Theresa took to the back exit in the kitchen, while Albert and Kaylee took to the front.

Reaching the kitchen, where they had since moved the body away, they settled by the grimy door that led outside.

"What do you think?" Theresa asked, leaning up against the wall adjacent to the exit. "You think he or she or they or it will show up here again?"

"I think… I think I hope they bag the he-she-they-it and bring 'em back here as quick as they can," Alex responded.

"Yeah, let's hope this will go down as easily as possible. We're low on bullets. You know…"
Atlanta's come back and bit us in the ass twice now."

"At least there we got uninterrupted quality time."

She smiled. "I know, who'd have thought a corpse could be such a cockblock."

Kissing in the woods before the woman appeared had felt fantastic, a sliver of normalcy. Having the classroom alone would have even better if the night sky hadn't been overcast, leaving the place pitch black. Not being able to see Alex's face when intimate was impossible for Theresa. If she couldn't see him, she felt herself forgetting who it was touching her, and as importantly, who it wasn't.

"Man, missin' Terminus feels… it actually feels weird. I mean, just Terminus itself. I forgot how much of a luxury your own room and soft bed and change of clothes are. Seems like a paradise now."

"You mean the rinse in the water fountain didn't leave your clothes feeling brand new?" she jested.

"Surprisingly, no," he teased back, again feeling the grunge from having worn the same clothes for days.

"Well, in all honesty, this shirt from smiley girl feels incredible. Like, maxed-out-my-credit-card-on-it incredible."

Alex's eyes reflected inward. "You know, we will never argue about money."

She puckered out her bottom lip. "Huh, wow. You're right. We could, though."

"What?"

"We could because I just spent my bonus on a new pair of strappy sandals instead of the down payment we were going to put down on that Mazda."

"Yeah, and I don't care that they were half-off, how could you do this? We've been savin' for that car for months." He smiled wide before a weight hit his chest.

The game they would sometimes play of some humdrum, pre-turn life was a dangerous one. Yet they usually managed to keep its longing affects at bay. This time, however, the sharp recollection that that reality was dead and buried seemed much more eager to remind him.

Theresa's smiled faded. "Did I go too far?"

"Maybe a little."

"I'm sorry, I didn't abide by the rule we set for when we did that."

"Yeah you did, it's just easier to break now." He broke her gaze and shifted his eyes to the filthy floor.

Theresa didn't reply, and instead peered at the front door. Time then went by slowly, and without any words.

The fun we had, Alex thought of his and Theresa's inside jokes.

There had always been a wall between the two Terminuses. One was where the stuff of nightmares happened, raw and unmistakable. The other was a simple community. One with boring daily tasks
and laughter-filled games of poker late at night. That was the community Alex felt at ease enough
to fall in love with Theresa, to stay up late sketching, and enjoy the balmy evening air with Mary.

The one of nightmares existed entwined around the one of ease, the former providing the existence
of the latter. Alex had thought the barrier separating the twisted boundary was made of solid stone.
Instead, he learned it was of flimsy glass all along. He felt so naïve. There had never been a stone
wall, not when Terminus was founded, and not after the Siege.

He then wondered about the person who left the note. If his assumed shared eating habits was the
only life he lived, or if he'd held onto something else that made it worth living. If he too carried a
thin glass wall.

Feeling his legs begin to ache with the need to sit down, Alex shifted on his feet, attempting to get
comfortable. As he did so, he thought he heard a muffled sound from the front of the building.

"You hear that?" he murmured to Theresa. She nodded, eyes alert.

Something sounded like it hit the floor from the same location.

"Should we…?" Alex inquired.

She shook her head. "No, not yet. We can't leave this door unmanned. Not if there's more than
one."

Alex licked over his lips and curled his index finger around the gun's trigger in preparation,
attempting to focus on possible sound waves.

The clear bite of a gunshot went off.
Of the many rules Gareth lived by, one was to never walk into a battle thinking you might lose. Not a mere hope or wish win, but an unquestionable belief that there was no alternative than to succeed.

I'm a failure. The thought seared into his head before he could banish it.

The initial faith in victory over his home's destroyers had been squandered by an anger he had let consume him. This time, he proclaimed he was going in with cool jets, just as he did with the typical meat that arrived at Terminus. Whoever this person, or these people were, he, she, or they were yet another task to be completed, a task he had to have no doubts that he would finish.

Beginning from where the possible cannibal placed the note, a clumsy line of prints led into the wilderness. Cynthia and Martin trailed beside their leader, scouring the ground for the tracks.

It's an amateur move to leave such an obvious trail, everyone knows that, Gareth thought. Perhaps the scattered trail was intended to deceive, or at least test tracking skills. One boot print appeared to tread to the west, then many steps east, then back again, but not in the way the dead drag their feet. This type of misalignment reeked of human. Gareth pictured the man or woman hopping around and giggling at the mixed path they left.

"I bet this guy's leadin' us on a wild goose chase," Martin declared.

"You can still shoot a wild goose," Gareth retorted with an upturn of his lip.

Under other circumstances, he would have expected Martin to find that comment amusing. This time, he continued staring blankly at the ground. Gareth likened his attitude to a child who had been denied a lollipop.

"I wonder if he would've joined us back home," Cynthia—the lollipop in question—remarked.

Gareth shook his head. "Nah, I think he's a lone wolf."

"I thought he was a goose," Martin said.

Gareth smirked slightly. "Your face is healing nicely."

"Your fingers are growin' back nicely."

"Uh," Cynthia broke in, "hey, I have to pee real bad."

"Go then," Gareth said in a matter-of-fact tone, stopping alongside Martin and gesturing behind them.
"Well, I have to go kinda far to get where you can't see—"

"I know. Just keep your gun where you can use it."

"Right. Okay." Cynthia shuffled off.

Deafening silence struck the remaining two after her steps faded. Gareth aimed to break it.

"I have to make myself clear," he declared.

"You always do," Martin replied, not looking at him.

Gareth stepped over to Martin, meeting him dead in the eyes and causing him to edge back. "It's not my intention to make you feel... belittled, or unhappy, or want to leave. I knew about you wanting to get Cynthia into bed at Terminus, and I didn't tell you to stop because we were stronger then. I think if you and her had gotten involved there, she might have been able to handle it. That's why I let you and Theresa be at odds at Terminus.

"But now, we're fragile. The smallest bit of conflict has the potential to cause a lot of harm. I don't want to control how you feel, just how you act about it. Our actions have even greater consequences now."

Martin burst out laughing, raising his hand over his face.

Gareth's expression fell. "What?"

He took a breath. "You are just... that last bit. You sounded so much like my old man. Oh, wow."

He continued to chuckle.

"You do understand though?" Gareth pressed, trying to hide the sting of ridicule from his face.

Martin nodded. "Oh yeah, yeah, man. I do. I made my choice a long time ago, no takin' it back. Ay, ay, captain." He gave a condescending salute.

At least he was smiling again instead of pouting like a child, Gareth figured. Still, a hotness touched his cheeks that accompanied an urge to undo the progress Martin's face had made at healing.

Cynthia's returning footsteps in the leaves prevented Gareth from nearing the loss of his temper. "What's so funny?" she asked.

"Nothing," Gareth replied, looking over Martin's shoulder at her. "Nothing at all. Come on." He turned around and gestured forward.

The three then continued their pursuit.

Just beyond several trees, they discovered yet another message. This time in the form of a very rotten—and still living—walker. Its hands and feet were nailed to a tree with screwdrivers, along with a withered sheet of paper tacked to its chest.

The three halted to gaze at the pitiful, moaning creature. Gareth thought the token underwhelming, as walkers were dull to him anymore. In fact, he often found himself forgetting they were the reason the world turned on its head. How such a boring and simple-minded thing could wreak such havoc told him that modern society had been made of fine china.

Martin heaved a sigh. "Great, what's that one say?"
Gareth reached up with his ring and pinky finger and plucked the note from the stick that secured it. "It says, 'show team spirit, Martin.'"

Martin visibly grit his teeth.

"No, it really says, 'slice the ginger.'" He narrowed his eyes at the paper.

Cynthia blanched. "What? That's—is that talkin' 'bout me?"

"It might be..." He looked up at the undead before him, noticing what little hair it had left was red. "Or he found a redhead walker and thought this would be funny." He took the note in his right hand and crumpled it before tossing it to the ground.

"Or it means he wants me!" Cynthia shouted.

"Shhh!" Martin attempted to quiet her. "You wanna draw every biter within a mile here?"

She took a step toward him. "That's funny, I remember you talkin' so loud to me on the walkie-talkie about that damn kid's hat, you tipped off those two about us havin' their people!"

"Guys, now is not the time, or the place," Gareth warned.

"You know what else?" she continued.

Gareth slid forward in an attempt to catch her attention. "Cynthia, shut up."

She ignored and continued to glare at Martin. "I don't wanna fuck you!"

Martin scoffed. "You know, I've suddenly forgot why I wanted to in the first place!"

Gareth took a deep breath and brought forth the sternest voice he could, "Shut the fuck up. Please, damnit."

The two quieted and Cynthia crossed her arms.

He looked back and forth between their cross faces. "New rule: don't say anything unless it's absolutely necessary, alright? Let's find whoever did this and let's eat. Remember that? What we all have in common? Meat."

Cynthia uncrossed her arms. "Gareth, about that, there's somethin' I—"

"Later, okay? We are wasting time."

"How the hell have y'all stayed together so long?" A man's long drawl tore through their conversation.

They whipped around to see who Gareth only assumed was their note writer. A balding, grey-haired man of middle age stood several yards away with a revolver casually raised at them.

Gareth drew his handgun while Martin drew his rifle from his back holster, and Cynthia her blade. "You know you're a dead man, right?" he threatened.

What in the hell is he doing? He led us right here to him.

The man looked the three over. "If I'm a dead man, why am I still standin' here, huh?"
"You should know, right?" Gareth probed.

He nodded. "Keep the meat alive. But what about the girlie you caught yesterday? She deader than a doornail."

"We had to kill her. Imminent threat and all."

"The women always taste better, don't they?" His eyes flitted to Cynthia. "The rest of you at my place?"

Gareth chose not to reply. "You have a name?"

"I'm assumin' that's a yes. You like how I got the water to run from that fountain? Lucky the place has its own well. And the name's Jay. And you're Gareth, she's Cynthia, and he's Martin. The others... I haven't gotten their names yet."

"So what's your game?" Gareth asked. "You lead us here with cryptic notes, then come out and wave hello? Do you have a death wish?"

Jay shrugged, his face falling serious. "I just wanted to meet you."

"And?"

"I've been out here a while, on my own. No one's been anything but a meal in a long time. No one's ever found out how I stay alive without runnin' and screamin'. But you..." He let out a breath. "When I saw you hangin' around the school, I thought y'all were just some trespassers I'd have to pick off. Then I saw what you were doin' to that girl and I thought my god, I ain't it."

Gareth squinted. "Where have you been then? You've been a very bad land lord."

"Hunting. Been havin' to travel a days away to find a person lately."

"Sucks to be you," Martin interjected.

"Not anymore. Come on." He dropped his revolver to the ground and raised his hands. "How stupid is this guy?"

"I wanna meet the rest of you."

"This guy's flat nuts."

Gareth shook his head. "So you do have a death wish."

"I'm tired of livin' in the world just me and my demons. Now lookie here, I found someone with the same ones."

"Then why do you want to slice our ginger?"

"She ain't cut out for our kinda life. I can tell you know it. There's always ones in the group that weigh it down."

"Hey!" Cynthia snapped, brandishing her knife. "Why don't we slice the dumb fucker in the fishin' vest!?"

"Calm down, Cynthia," Gareth urged. "We can't just kill him in a fit of passion because the
dumbass decides to exhibit every fault of his in thirty seconds. And listen, Jay, I don't cut up my own just because they're imperfect."

"Oh yeah? What about him?" Jay gestured to Martin. "From what little I've seen, he looks like he'd kill all you in your sleep if he could get away with it."

"Why the hell are we standin' here talkin' to this guy for?" Martin piped-up. "Can we just knock him out or kill him already?"

"We have to do him like we did Bob," Gareth replied.

"Right, so I whack him on the back of the head."

"You ain't gotta knock me out, I wanna go. You can take my gun. I swear."

"Yeah, sorry bud," Gareth said. "Everyone's a liar to me until proven otherwise." He motioned his hand to Martin.

"Finally," Martin muttered, marching over and raising the end of his rifle. Jay grimaced, but didn't fight back as Martin struck him over the head, causing him to slump to the ground.

* * *

"Yes, I absolutely had to fire to kill it," Albert assured Gareth and the others of the walker that lay dead outside the school entrance.

"You scared the shit outta me, man," Alex commented.

"Cynthia knows how to be vigilant when taking a leak, you can too, Albert," Gareth drilled. He then noticed Theresa wore their previous catch's red bandana around her head to push her hair back. "You washed the cut-mouth off of that, right?"

"Definitely. In the smoke bath yesterday," she responded.

"Oh yeah hey," Alex began, "did you wanna boil the hickory bark now or after we eat?"

"Hey," an awakened Jay bellowed. The group of seven turned to face him where he rested, tied at his waist against a bike rack with its chains.

"Look who's up." Gareth proclaimed, strolling over to their captive. "I have to ask you a few things, out of curiosity." He crouched down.

"I said I promise I won't hurt you. You got me here without a scratch on you. Now, just let me—"

"Why did you leave those notes?" Gareth interrupted.

Jay grimaced, raising his hand to the back of his head. When he removed it, damp, dark red colored his fingers. He gaped at it.

Gareth pressed on. "I just can't imagine advertising what we do to the world in cute little notes."

He brought his hand down. "I got no one to talk to. No one to explain what I do. I—I have to. To someone."

"Who was the wife?" Kaylee interjected. "In Atlanta?"
"What?" Jay breathed out.

"In Shady's bar," Theresa added. "We were there and found one of your explanations."

"You're shittin' me?" Jay looked behind Gareth. "You were there?"

"Me and her," Theresa confirmed, pointing her thumb at Kaylee.

"Well damn, this world's smaller than I thought. Yeah, yeah, I remember that. The little wifie and her kiddies. She came after me with a damn hammer. I clocked her with it, then ate her. I'd never eat the little, little ones like those. Remind too much of my own. But I'd never leave 'em alone out there neither."

"That's how you 'saved your ass,' huh?" Theresa concluded.

"What about that guy in the kitchen?" Gareth asked. "Why, why did you waste meat like that?"

Jay shook his head. "After I got the broad wearin' one of the lunchlady's aprons and those two teenagers, her husband or brother or whatever got bit. Easy to leave a message."

Gareth laughed.

"What? What's so funny?" he asked, indignant.

"It turns out you can eat them when they've been bitten. We did it. Didn't know it at the time, but it gets cooked out."

"Well, what do you know. Thank you." Sarcasm touched his voice. "Oh, come on. We're the same kinda people. I can see it in your eyes, you ain't thinkin' what a sick fuck I am. I forgot what that looked like."

"Jay, my dear friend, you have no idea how late you are."

"Late for what?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. I wanted to talk to you more before the inevitable, but my stomach's growling and I can't ignore it."

Jay's eyes grew panicked. "No, no, no, no, guys I promise. Please, let me get to know you. Look at me, we're the same, I promise."

"You told me you were ready to hunt us before you saw who we were. So you'd do it to anyone. So would we, we'd eat each other if one of us died. It's a shame you didn't show up at our home before it burned. We'd have welcomed you with open arms."

"What? What home, what—"

"Guys?" Gareth stood up and signaled to Theresa and Martin.

The two made then made their way over, a rifle in Martin's hands and a lunchlady's apron and blade in either of Theresa's. Gareth stepped back to allow them room.

"You know what? Kill me, you fuckers! You're a shitty excuse for a group anyway!"

"Shut up, Jay," Martin said as he moved behind him and Theresa knelt down.
"You two. I saw you fightin' it out yesterday and look at you now. Who's the best at slicin' 'em up all raw and bloody? You, 'cause you both got a lot in common!"

Something smoldering appeared in Theresa's eyes and she brought the knife down on Jay's right knee, causing him to shriek in pain.

"Knock him out first!" Gareth yelled.

Martin sighed and promptly did so while Theresa muttered an apology.

As usual, the bone was the tricky part, especially with a knife not made for it. Yet this time it was a tad easier than normal.

"Dude ain't drinkin' his milk," Martin commented as the calcium cracked.

"Bleeding, bleeding, Kaylee," Gareth alerted.

"Sorry." Kaylee hurried and pulled many strings of scotch tape from the roll, nearly emptying it. She then proceeded to wrap the rest around the apron that covered the crimson stub.

Gareth assisted Martin and Theresa in preparing the leg, while the rest prepared a fire and cleaned the grate as best they could.

He wasn't done talking to Jay. After all, he didn't yet know how he started. Other cannibals existed, Gareth had always assumed they did. Though he didn't think he would get to meet one, let alone have them want his companionship.

After the meat was cooked and most of it eaten, Gareth repeated his action as he did with Bob; resting in front of the unconscious man and awaiting his awakening.

"That your thing now?" Theresa commented, licking juice from her pinkie finger.

Gareth smiled a bit. "Not every time. I just have to figure this guy out."

"I want to talk to him too," Kaylee said, standing up and making her way over. She crouched down beside her leader, then slapped Jay flat across the face.

"Then can we kill him and get it over with?" Cynthia asked. "I don't like 'em lookin' at me," she mumbled.

"After the other leg," Gareth replied, still gazing at Jay's unconscious face. "Cynthia... you have to look back. No more solid walls keeping you away from the killing floor. Actually," he turned to her, "come here." He gave a come-hither motion.

"Oh, I—I uh... okay." She then climbed to her feet, shuffled over and perched on the other side of Gareth.

He patted her on the shoulder in reassurance, causing her to flinch to the side. "Don't!" she exclaimed.

He jerked his hand back. "I'm sorry, I forgot."

She crossed her arms. "It's fine, just... I don't... not without askin' me."

Cynthia's reaction solidified his hope that her attraction to him was gone. Although, due to the fact that her pass at him was before the Siege, he assumed it was anyway.
Her noise appeared to have roused Jay, as his eyes began to flutter open.

"Hey, oh great fan of mine," Gareth taunted.

"The hell..." he slurred.

"I want to know, how did you start? 'You show me yours, and I'll show you mine,' kinda deal? You wanted someone to understand, right? To know you?"

"You know how it started," he replied.

"Hunger."

"Ain't that what it always boils down to? Yeah, you find a nice flowin' creek or a can of expired corn or shoot a squirrel through the eyes to get by, but..." He shut his eyes.

"But?"

"Nah, nah I ain't tellin' my life story. Not to you, not anymore."

"We'll understand," Cynthia said. "You didn't wake up one day and wanna do this, right?"

"You kiddin' me? First time I took a bite of my dead wife, I gagged."

"Someone you loved, huh?" Gareth said.

"No, no I said I ain't tellin' you."

"We're the last people who might get it," Kaylee said.

Jay looked across the three, then back at the other four who observed. "She... my wife, she died of a damn flu one night when it hit freezin'. She was so... I was so... I didn't know what I was doin'. I —I just thought... why not? Why not do just what the dead do? I'm a dead man walkin' anyway." Tears welled in his eyes.

"You started all by yourself." Gareth's voice was soft. "That's your problem. No one's better alone out here. You're right, you do become one of them. Back at the place we used to call home, people who'd show up by themselves, they were alive, but they were dead. We were all the same there, you probably would've liked it. Shame things couldn't have been different."
Not The Same

Perched by himself on a cinderblock, Gareth watched the water and pine bark begin to simmer brown in its pot. The earthy smell had him anticipating its superb cleansing abilities for his mouth and body.

Meanwhile, Jay lay in the same place, occasionally becoming able to spit the sock from his mouth, only to then be re-inserted. A few of the others meandered around the front of the school, keeping watch and awaiting the solution's readiness as well as suppertime.

Gareth's ears alerted him to slow, approaching footsteps scraping the concrete behind him—the gait he knew belonged to Alex. There was then a tap on his shoulder, followed by his brother's voice, "Did Martin or Cynthia give you any grief?"

Gareth looked to Alex as he took a seat beside him and rested his hands on the stone. "You bet."

"What'd they say?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Just curious."

"It was all some blur of him repeatedly being a smartass, and her declaring that she did not in fact, want to fuck him."

"Heh, then why'd you take 'em along?"

"To maybe get them talking, but there wasn't quite enough time." He rubbed his face up and down.

"Hm."

"So, did you ever tell Theresa about what you never told mom?"

He brought his hands up to his thighs. "Yeah, yesterday night. She said the same thing you did."

"That means it's two against one; she'd understand."

Alex broke his gaze and glanced at his lap for a moment. "So um, should we move on soon? Water pipe comin' apart and all?"

Gareth nodded. "Yeah. I hate this place anyway."

"I still cannot believe that dude." He pointed his thumb behind him.

"He's at the end of his rope. I think we were his last chance. Last chance at anything worth eating for."

Alex nudged himself closer, the scent of the smoke from his bath wafting from his clothes. It filled Gareth with a pleasant, homey feeling.

The younger man was quiet for a few seconds before asking in a low tone, "What do you think they're doin' now? I mean, them?"

Gareth brought his left hand up to eye-level. "Trying to stay alive, just like all of us."
Alex fixed his sight on the space where Gareth's digits once were before he brought his hand back down. "Yeah, that's what I thought. I don't know why I asked that."

"Well, as long as we're asking each other questions; do you trust Martin?"

"No," Alex answered without hesitation. "Back at Terminus, I did... enough. Now, he's obviously not happy. I should've never wanted to give him a chance when he showed up at the gates."

Gareth sighed. "Alex, come on. You have way too much guilt."

His posture straightened a bit. "You don't think I know that? I can't always just turn it off like you."

"I know, but you can concentrate on what we have going for us now. You're alive, Theresa's alive, you're full, you're—"

"And mom's dead."

He paused. "Yeah, she is. And so is dad, and Chelsea, and... the vast majority of everyone we've ever known. Our home that we fought like holy hell to keep is gone too, but we have to deal with it. There's no choice but to deal with it and to fight like holy hell again to stay alive."

Alex gave a solemn nod. "Yeah, I know, I know. I'm sorry. You're right." He rose to his feet. "Hey um, who's gonna be the one to kill him?"

"You volunteering?"

"No. I mean, I will if I have to."

He turned himself to Alex. "Who's able to do it the easiest?"

His eyes reflected inwards. "You, Martin, and... Tess."

"Then one of us will do what we do best."

"You know, if I had to, I could. I would."

"You have had to."

"And I'd do it again if I had to—when I have to."

"That's good to know."

"Yeah, I'll see you later," he said before turning and heading inside the school with his weighty stride.

A loud sneeze then diverted Gareth's attention. He found it belonged to Albert, who stood halfway to the building's entrance wiping his nose with his sleeve.

_Do not be getting sick._

Gareth stood up and began making his way over to the young man now caught in a sneezing fit. A very perturbed Jay glared at him from where he rest beside Cynthia as he walked. He ignored it and halted dead in front of Albert. "You feeling okay?"

Albert gave one last rub to his face before letting his arm fall to his side. "Yeah, just allergies." He sniffled.
"That you didn't have yesterday." His voice came out unintentionally accusatory.

"Then I guess there's more pollen in the air today."

"The weather hasn't changed. There shouldn't be any new allergens in the air."

"Well, I don't think we can check with the channel five weather."

"Albert, I—"

"I'm not getting sick, don't worry. You know I'm allergic to half of everything."

Gareth rested a hand on his hip and scratched the back of his neck with the other. "Yeah, alright. Just pay close attention."

"Of course."

"I'll get Kaylee to look at you, just in case."

Albert let out an amused breath. "I don't remember the last time I had to assure you of something."

He smiled. "First time for everything."

* * *

The sun was beginning to recede behind the trees, and Jay was ready to be devoid of both legs.

"D-don't kill me, not just yet. I wanna taste a piece of me," the doomed man said, having spit the gag from his mouth yet again.

Gareth leaned down a tad from where he stood in front of the others. "Excuse me?"

"Why not? I'm hungry as hell. Don't tell me you never wondered what your own meat might taste like, c'mon."

"For real, man?" Alex chimed-in.

"Totally, dude," Jay mocked.

Alex pursed his lips together.

Theresa met Gareth's side. "Hey, you're not some sympathetic, lonely girl we found crying in the woods. You don't get any damn requests."

Gareth raised his three-fingered hand to her. "No, no, I'd like to see this."

"So Gare-bear, how'd you lose those two fingers? You get a late-night craving?"

"Would you believe it was a sex act gone horribly wrong?" He smirked.

"Such a damn good comedian you are."

Gareth sighed. "The people who destroyed my home? Their head asshole shot them off. He also got my shoulder, it's healing pretty quickly though. Eating quality meat will do that."

Jay's eyes fixed on the ground for a moment. "That home of yours... sounds nice."
"It was."

"Happened to the folks who took it down?"

He considered lying and telling him they had killed them all. Yet, bluffing to someone as insignificant as Jay and in front of his people would feel worse than admitting the truth. "We had to walk away. Not without making one of them calories, but they were too big of a group. There were twice as many of them."

He chuckled. "I could've told you that. You stick to the small groups, loners are even better."

"So we learned."

"I wanna be awake for this," Jay declared.

"No, you don't. Trust me," Gareth said. "Losing fingers hurt like a bitch, I imagine a whole leg would be just a little a bit worse."

"I don't care. Pain lets you know you're alive. If I'm gonna die, I wanna be as alive as I can be before I meet my end."

Gareth smiled and shook his head. "If you absolutely insist." He leaned down and grabbed the damp sock. "You'll be loud."

"Gareth, he'll squirm everywhere," Theresa protested.

"We'll have to hold him, then."

"I'll help," Alex volunteered.

Gareth turned around. "Really?"

Alex nodded.

"Aw, you're the best, bro," Jay imitated Alex again.

Theresa bolted forward "I swear to god, you—"

Alex slid to her side and grabbed her wrist. "He's just attackin' me to piss you off. He's about to be dead anyway."

"Boy, there's nothin' sadder than a woman who fights her man's battles for him."

Theresa's shoe met Jay's face, striking him across the jaw with such force that blood spurted from his mouth.

"Yeah, that's it, bitch! Show me I'm alive!" he yelled, spitting blood.

"Theresa, don't," Gareth warned.

Alex tugged on her wrist. "Tess—"

Theresa ripped her arm from his grasp, leaned down, and pummeled Jay's jaw again, this time with her fist. His head jerked to the side from the impact, his smug look faltering for a moment before she stepped back a tad, her breathing heavy. Gareth almost began to physically try to move her, but stopped when he worried it might provoke her further.
"Okay, now you're done," Gareth ordered. She met his stare for a moment with an expression that looked ready to concede.

"That all you got, you cunt!?" Jay challenged. Theresa lost it again and launched herself on him, baring her foot's weight on his groin while she beat his face in a flurry of fists. Gurgled and agonized insults still spewed from his mouth between strikes.

The four others came forth to intervene, alarm on their faces, except for Martin who appeared intrigued. Gareth held up a hand to halt them. The whole group putting their hands on her would surely not help.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" she screeched as Alex took hold of her waist and attempted to pull her back from the fading and bloodied man.

That's when it dawned on him. He reminds her of someone.

As a matter of fact, Jay's demeanor and language were beginning to remind him of the Occupiers too. In particular, their now deceased leader.

After Alex managed to pull her away, Gareth promptly shoved the sock into Jay's saliva and blood-coated mouth, muffling his pitiful cries.

Alex spun around to block her view of him, setting his eyes on her tear-stained face. "Hey, hey, Tess, look at me! Look at me!" He took her hands in his.

She tore her hands from his grip. "Why are you stopping me!? You don't get to put me down for needing to do this again!"

"That's not what I'm tryin' to do! We have to keep him alive until tomorrow, then you can kill his ass. If you need to, then I want you to, okay? He's proven he deserves it." He lightly placed his hand on her upper arm.

Theresa gave a weak few nods and Alex moved in to embrace her while her arms remained at her sides. "It's alright, princess," he whispered in her ear.

Princess? Gareth's eighth grade self felt the desire to make a jab at him for such a sickly sweet nickname. Instead, he willed it away and pointed at the assortment of cinderblocks by the campfire.

"Theresa, go sit down," Gareth commanded.

Alex released her and she turned to her leader. "No, I can—"

"You're shaking too hard. Go sit down."

Theresa raised her hands and observed their unmistakable tremble, along with bits of blood now drying on her knuckles. "Fine. Okay." She then made her way over to the site. When Alex started to follow her, she held a shaky hand to him. "I'm fine. Go help hold the fucker down."

"Gladly," Alex muttered, and rejoined the other five.

Gareth stepped in front of Jay, peering down at his half-lidded eyes. "You don't get to talk to my people like that. Can't believe you thought we might give you a chance." He was ready to get the show on the road. The man had crossed the line from interesting to nuisance.
Jay let out a low sound from his throat and his eyes flitted up to meet Gareth's.

"Still wanna be awake, Jay?" Gareth asked. "We can play what hurts more: having your nuts stepped on, or your leg cut off."

Jay's lethargic eyes grew wider.

"You can't change your mind now. Well, not since you have Martin's sweaty sock in your mouth." He did a double take. "Huh, I didn't know that how dirty that would sound."

The look he knew too well engulfed Jay's face; one of hunger and rage. A look Gareth had donned himself and seen plastered on his people's faces many times. Theresa had been wearing it just moments before.

As they had earlier that day, they then readied themselves to take his leg. Alex, Cynthia, Albert, and Gareth assisted in holding Jay still. Although, they didn't have to use much of their strength due to Theresa's number on him. With Theresa on the sidelines, Kaylee assisted Martin with the hardest task.

After the first few cuts, Jay went under—to the admitted disappointment of Gareth.

"You really still wanna feed him his own leg?" Martin asked as he hacked.

Gareth shrugged. "He asked for it."

* * *

"Open wide, Jay," Gareth teased, holding a hunk of meat up to the legless man's face.

Jay let out a small groan and bowed his head down.

"If you want, Theresa can stuff it down your throat."

Jay brought his gaze back up, setting it on the burned-around-the-edges bit of his leg, then shut his eyes and parted his lips. Gareth stuck the whole piece in his mouth, taking him aback. Jay brought his teeth down on it with a grimace before his brow twitched up.

"You like it?"

He chewed a bit more before replying, "Tastes like chicken." He gulped it down. "So what was it? What was it that made your brain go from zero to cannibalism, huh? Can't just be hunger. Millions of people have been starved to the bone, never ate no one. What was it? I told you mine, you tell me yours."

Gareth exhaled, clasping his hands together. "You think you're like us, huh? That we're the same?"

"I thought we were."

"The first people we ate, they weren't the same. The ones who were the same joined us. I thought you might be like us, but it turns out you're not. You just have the same diet."

"No need to repeat the obvious," he said with a lick of his lips.

"So you want to know how?" He bit at the inside of cheek, trying find a place to start. "My whole life, I've had the uncanny ability to solve problems. Before all this, I used to work in network security preventing cyber-attacks. You know, malware, spyware, viruses, etcetera. I had to find the
most intricate and difficult solutions to those problems. Even if it kept me up all night, I did it. I fixed it. Because that was my job." He paused, getting the intense feeling the six behind him were listening as intently as Jay.

He continued, "After a few weeks in a traincar where I had to hold my ears to try to block out the sounds of my mom being raped and my friends being killed, it just clicked. I didn't even think about how horrible it was because we were already in hell. So I figured, why not make a little more? Had to get worse before it got better. The realization felt the same as it did sitting hunched over a computer screen at one A.M. with my eyes stinging and back aching. It just came to me. Like all solutions do."

A weak snicker escaped Jay's mouth. "You're even more fucked-up than me. You're right, we ain't the same."

"I'm glad we agree." He turned to face the others around the fire, their plates empty and eyes focused on the two.

"He looks like he's ready for my big, sweaty, sock again," Martin remarked.

Gareth smiled and turned back around to see Jay nodding off. "Nah, I think he's not long for this world. Just hope he makes it in time for breakfast."

Standing up, he made his way back over to his people and sat on the ground between Kaylee and Martin. The warmth the fire offered him caused a pleased hum to leave his chest.

It was then Gareth noticed how Alex cradled Theresa from behind, his cheek resting on the side of her head. The act looked almost identical to the way he held their mother during the Occupation. In fact, it was too similar for comfort. The dark, the brute in the background, and the meat shot a rough déjà vu through his system.

Forcing himself to look back to the fire, he concentrated on its light and heat. Each time he blinked, its brightness stained the back of his eyelids. He used it as a way to stay focused on the now. On the fact he was alive and fed.

"Your dad," Theresa's voice broke the silence. Gareth looked over to see her still nestled against Alex's chest, her eyes on Martin. "What he said about you getting raped by satan himself, he had no fucking idea what he saying would happen to you. He deserved whatever is was he got."

Martin nodded. "Yes, he did."
Abandoned

After Gareth had allowed Theresa to be the one to kill Jay, he had a few words with her—words that kept replaying in her head:

"Well, Alex has always been good at helping you stay grounded. So, I figured letting him calm you down would be best."

'Helps me stay grounded.' You mean, 'is a good babysitter for crazy, problem-child Theresa.'

Sticking by Alex's side as they departed the school, Theresa admitted she did feel less snappy in his presence. His tranquilizing effect was one he seemed to have on many people. Mary had had the influence also, and Theresa could easily see why she chose the field of social work before the turn. Alex would have been good at it too, she thought. It made her wonder if he had ever thought of following in his mother's footsteps. However, she worried such a question of pre-turn life would overwhelm him.

It struck her as funny that Mary possessed both Alex's calming effect as well as Gareth's red-hot zeal. Gareth, whose fervor had led him to leave a similar note on what was left of their dearly departed Jay:

Ate the guy

Fed our asses

And killed the guy too

Theresa found a bit of solace in the action. Mary would have too, she imagined. Of course, Martin found it amusing as well. Jay's comparison stung, despite her knowing it wasn't true. After all, Martin didn't care a lick about anyone except himself. Theresa cared a great deal about those she loved.

"Keep your eyes peeled for a sycamore," Gareth advised as their fourteen feet trode through a thin section of woodlands.

"Yeah, I sure am craving sap," Kaylee said with a laugh.

"Hey, don't knock it. You'll be begging for more soon."

Kaylee giggled.

Kaylee appeared the worst out of any of them by far. Dark circles marred the skin under her eyes, her unexplained nightgown was torn at the bottom, and her unsmoothed cropped hair stuck up at odd angles.

Nothing of promise came about until they stumbled upon a clearing with a house. Along with it was a bush containing a moderate amount of barberries. Not many, but suitable for a slight relief. Luckily, they still had water collected from the school before the tap ran out. Enough to where they wouldn't have to search for more until the next day.

A certain calm blanketed the property, one of a silent past that felt like it could reach out and touch you. Theresa tried not to pay much attention to such things anymore, yet this time she couldn't help but imagine the pleasant days once spent there.
That's when it appeared: the top half of a horribly decomposed walker crawling across the golden, winter-touched grass. A blade met its skull, courtesy of Cynthia, leaving it a motionless blemish on the landscape.

Indoors was free of the dead and the living, but the dressers in two of the four bedrooms contained an abundance of clothing.

"Kind of big, but they'll work," Theresa said, holding up a medium-sized black t-shirt to the other two women.

"You can get out of that night gown," Cynthia said to Kaylee, pulling a green sweater over her head. "Uh, why do you have that on anyway?"

Kaylee twiddled the fabric of a pair of jeans in her hands. "Oh… um… after the shootout started, I was running along with Chuck, and a walker came out of nowhere and bit his neck. Somehow, I got the river of blood that came out. I found the gown on the ground at a campsite a little bit away from Terminus."

"Oh, sorry," Cynthia replied.

"It's fine," she assured. "Well, I'm going to change in the bathroom." Passing the other two, she headed out for the hall.

Cynthia took a step toward Theresa and whispered, "She's never changed in front of me or the other girls that I know of. Has she with you?"

Theresa tossed the black shirt on the bed, and shook her head. "Nope." She knew the reason why Kaylee never did—to hide her self-inflicted wounds, but she wasn't about to tell Cynthia. "She's just not comfortable with it. Like… like how you're not comfortable with being touched."

"Ugh." Cynthia buried her head in her hands. "That was so stupid yesterday. Stupid, stupid, stupid." She brought her arms back down and folded them. "It was just Gareth for cryin' out loud."

"It wasn't stupid."

"Yeah-huh. You and all the other girls are so—were so—together. And I'm just all flinchy and weird." Her voice cracked.

Theresa scratched her head. "Cynthia, I just about killed a guy we needed alive because he reminded me of one of those pricks. You saw me."

"Yeah, yeah, I guess so. It's just… I'm… the weak link."

"Is this because of what Jay was saying?"

"A little. Not totally. I know I've always been the weak link. I mean, can you believe Alex thinks he is? I kinda thought so too, but he ain't. Not like me."

Theresa sighed internally. The task of comforting Cynthia had always been quite the effort, one she wished Albert were there for. Why she was spilling her guts to her and not to him she didn't know. Maybe it was an estrogen-producers-must-band-together sort of thing.

"You're not either. If you were, you'd have been dead in your room from a bullet like Priscilla a long time ago."
Before Cynthia could reply, Kaylee emerged from the hall and stepped back into the room. "These pants fit pretty good. Sort of feels like I'm wearing my aunt big Bertha's maternity clothes, but oh well."

Two shots then sounded from outside, only a tad unexpected being that Martin and Albert had been watching several birds chirping about the trees.

Without hesitation, the three left the bedroom and headed toward the front exit. Before they could make it out of the house, Martin and Albert came through the door. In each of their hands, they held what filled Theresa's gut with both relief and dread: two dead turkey vultures.

When hunger first gripped Terminus before the Siege, they had to eat a few of the birds. Their meat tasted atrocious due to their diet of carrion. In the wake of the turn, the animals had been everywhere. The world was their all-you-can-eat-buffet. They weren't as abundant anymore since months and years-old corpses were out of their interest.

Martin beamed and raised his bird up high. "That was the best damn shot I ever made from that far —right between the eyes. If its head didn't get blown off, I'd show you."

"Hey, I got mine between the eyes too," Albert said.

"Good for you, Albert," Cynthia congratulated with a wide smile. "Now Gareth will have to admit you're competent with a rifle."

"He did... sort of. He gave me a thumbs-up through the window."

As Martin brought the bird back down, a feather fluttered off its body.

Theresa grimaced. "At least it's something."

"You know you gotta help me with this, right?" Martin asked her, cautious, yet firm.

She nodded. "Of course I do."

* * *

After dark, a few of the house's numerous half-burned candles were lit from the outside fire the vultures were cooked over. And since Theresa and Alex were a couple, Gareth had allotted them the master bedroom.

"How's that buzzard sittin' with you?" Alex asked Theresa, sprawled across the bed on his side.

"Ugh, I'm trying to not to think about it," she replied from her standing position by the dresser, gazing at a framed picture of a couple on their wedding day. The woman resembled the dead half of a walker that still lay outside. Theresa turned the photo face-down.

Alex pushed himself off the bed. "I gotta go take a leak."

"Okay," she said as she turned to see him exiting the room.

Orienting back to the dresser, she pulled the top drawer open and looked for the burgundy teddy she had come across earlier. It would be a bit big on her, but it was skimpily enough to do the trick. After rushing out of her day clothes and into it, she attempted to make herself presentable by sitting on the edge of the bed and putting on her most sexy effect.

When Alex returned, he immediately shut the door behind him, eyes wide. "Wow, look at you."
Theresa stood from the bed and slunk over to him. "Mmm no, look at you." She traced his cheek with her hand, admiring the stubble left behind from a light shave with the hunting knife and Jay's fatty grease.

Her hands then trailed down his chest and stopped at his hands. While meeting his eyes with a sensual playfulness, she gripped them and placed them over her breasts.

"Oh boy," Alex breathed out, giving a gentle squeeze. "Aren't you—"

"I took the thing out. It's in a lull phase, we're good." She smiled, then pulled his hands back and led him to the bed.

Warmth flushed her skin as he settled ontop of her, the trials of the previous day melting away. The urge to strip them both down so they could have each other in a passionate haste almost overwhelmed her. Instead, she held back, wanting to take time to enjoy this special vacation.

Their lips took turns enveloping one another's as Alex moved down the thin strap of her teddy. A smile broke out on her face as he helped her further push down the garment and began kissing her neck and chest. Letting out thin breaths, excitement built in her chest as he made it to her hip and pulled the teddy clean off. A squeak escaped her lips when he began, so brilliantly ravishing her like he had so many times before. The sensation was as familiar as it was foreign since it had been so long.

Theresa had to hold a hand to her mouth as not to become too loud. Her other hand rested in his hair, trailing her nails across his scalp as he told her the things he always did. How beautiful and sexy she was and how incredible she tasted—likening her to peaches and cream. At the end, she couldn't help bucking against his face as he finished her off, leaving her in a daze. Alex then moved back up and gave her to taste what he'd received from her.

Attempting to regroup, she rolled her hips up against his. Letting out a moan, Alex turned over on his back and pulled her with him. After they'd removed his clothes, she took her time on him, savoring the heat from his skin and the sound of his heavy breathing. Eventually, she ended up sitting in his lap while he lay against the bedframe. It felt like home, he felt like home. So much so that as she moved up and down, she forgot Gareth was next door couldn't help crying out—neither could Alex.

Wrapping her arms tightly around him, she nestled her face on his shoulder, clinging to him as if she might lose him again.

"Hey, hey, look at me," Alex urged.

Theresa pulled her head away and stared him dead in the eyes as she then reached her climax, pressing herself closer against him. Alex reached his soon after, attempting to push further inside her. They let out long, satisfied breaths that ended with laughter, resting their foreheads together.

"Oh… wow," Alex said with a large exhale.

"I know," she agreed, giving him a series of soft kisses. "I missed this." She stalled for a moment, enjoying the peaceful silence, then removed herself from his lap. The dampness from where her skin had touched his met the chill of the air, almost making her shudder.

Alex's face fell. "Oh no. Who's—who's in that room?" He pointed his thumb behind him.

Theresa pushed the covers down and slid underneath them. "Just your brother."
“Oh… god…” He reached for his underwear above the pillow.

She laid her head on the fluffy assortment of pillows. "You know, I am so far away from feeling like caring."

Alex still frowned and hastily put his underwear back on, as well as his shirt.

"What are you doing? He can't see us." She laughed.

"He'll be the one to wake us up," he reminded, slipping his legs underneath the sheets.

"Oh, yeah, he will." Theresa sighed and moved over to the edge of the bed. Leaning down, she grabbed the teddy from the floor and slipped it on. "Now," she began, snuggling against him, "let's pretend no one else exists, okay?" She brushed her thumb across his cheek.

"Yeah, okay, I think I can do that," he agreed. She felt him begin to relax as he kissed the top of her head and exhaled a deep breath.

* * *

"Hey, hey, get up. Martin's gone." Gareth's words ripped Theresa from her sleepy haze.

*Did he just say…?*

"What?" Alex's groggy voice asked from beside her.

"He's not here. Him and Kaylee stayed up on watch, and she apparently fell asleep."

Theresa rubbed her eyes and sat up, attempting to make out the very unhappy Gareth standing beside their bed. "He just took off?"

"Yeah, but funny thing is, he didn't take any of our guns."

"Did Kaylee just wake up?" Alex asked, sitting up as well.

"Yep." His eyes hung on Theresa for a moment—she figured he must have noticed her attire.

"Can I get dressed before we figure this out?" Theresa requested, pulling the quilt up to her collarbone.

"Right, of course." Gareth backed away and let himself out, closing the door behind him.

"See, it was good we didn't sleep naked," Theresa said, hopping out of bed and heading toward the clothes she left on the dresser.

Alex gave a drowsy smile and climbed out of bed as well. Theresa found it impressive since getting him out of bed in the morning was usually quite the chore. Of course, this wasn't the typical day at Terminus.

After they made themselves decent, they made their way down the hall to the living room where the others had gathered. It wasn't until then that the reality of what had happened sunk in.

If Martin bailed, that would mean he was now another target. Yet, as much as Theresa hoped he had abandoned them, she had the nagging feeling that even Martin wasn't that stupid. Especially since he hadn't taken any guns.
"Did he take any weapons?" Theresa asked.

Gareth shook his head. "Nope. Not one. They're all accounted for."

"Maybe he wants us to think he got eaten so we won't look," Kaylee said, avoiding eye contact and folding her arms.

"What about the knife drawer in the kitchen?" Theresa asked.

"They're flimsy. Not ideal," Gareth replied. "But it'd be better than nothing."

"You really think he's that smart?" Albert asked.

Gareth paused for a few seconds. "A few days ago, I told him what would happen if he left because he was acting like he might take off. Honestly, since we're the surest bet that he'll survive, I didn't think he would. I thought he was at least that smart."

"Then let's track him," Theresa suggested.

"Oh, we will. The whole thing is just fishy." He stared off into space for a moment. "Alright, get your stuff and we'll meet out front in five."

They complied and began to shuffle off to their respective rooms.

Theresa instead followed Kaylee rather than Alex, leaving him to give her a confused look. She mouthed him the words, "just a minute," and he resumed his course.

Trailing Kaylee into what she assumed was a garage turned bedroom, she noticed it looked like a hurricane had torn through it. Clothes and other items lay scattered on the floor and ground-level bed, and the nightstand lamps rested broken on their tables. She tried to remember if it had been so messy the previous day, but hadn't paid much attention since the entire home wasn't pristine either.

"So, you fell asleep?" Theresa probed from the doorway as Kaylee gathered several articles of clothing.

"Yeah, and Martin was beside me. I just meant to close my eyes for a little bit, then…" She stuffed a shirt under her arm.

"Well, if he was going to take off, he would've done it no matter what."

Kaylee nodded and finished gathering the clothes, not meeting Theresa's eyes as she hastened past her and out the doorway.

"Hey, wait," Theresa pressed. Kaylee turned around, the same exhaustion claiming her face. "He's probably been waiting for any opportunity to get away for days now. If it weren't you, it would've been any of us."

Kaylee nodded again and shifted the clothes under her arm, causing a small red pill to fall out and click across the kitchen tile.

"What's that?" Theresa asked as Kaylee scrambled down to get it.

She stuffed the pill in her pants pocket. "It's um, Sudafed for Albert and his allergies."

"Then why do you have it?"
"Because I was feeling sick."

"You haven't seemed sick."

"Well, I felt sick, okay?"

"Okay," Theresa agreed, knowing then and there wasn't the best time for such a discussion.

Kaylee then made her way to the living room and out the front door without looking back. Theresa took a detour, heading to the room she and Alex had shared and met him in the hallway where he carried a backpack.

"Hey, something's up with Kaylee," she whispered.

"Hang on," he whispered back before giving her a quick peck on the lips. "Didn't get to do that earlier." He smiled, and she couldn't help smiling either. "So, what's up with Kaylee?"

She turned her expression serious again. "I think she's lying."

"About Martin?"

"About something. A red pill fell out of the clothes she was carrying. She said it was for Albert, but took one for herself because she was feeling sick."

"What, you think she fell asleep because she was on somethin'?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. Let's not tell Gareth though. I don't want him giving her the third degree until we know something."

"Yeah, me neither."

"Alright." She reached for his hand and he accepted it, the feeling of being home hitting her once again.

Releasing their shared grip, they then trekked to the front porch where the rest of the team had assembled.

"If we see him," Gareth began, looking around the group, "we ask first, then shoot, unless he attacks first. I do think he bailed, but we have to be fair, okay?" His eyes rested on Theresa. She fought to keep her poker face. "Be extra diligent, guys. Martin's the best tracker out of any of us, so he'd know how to cover them."

"You really think he thought this through?" Cynthia asked.

"Might have."
A mash-up of the group's shoes from the previous day made the tracking process difficult. Alex felt he wasn't great at the skill anyway, often losing focus on the path. As they proceeded, he pretended to help while instead letting his mind wander.

Though Alex was the one who insisted Martin get a chance to live in the first place, he didn't yet know how he felt about his apparent departure. He had never been too attached to the man. Especially since Theresa's intense dislike of him put a damper on his initial interest in befriending him. Alex hadn't asked, but he assumed Theresa hoped Martin had fled. Finally, she could be rid of the guy.

After about an hour of combing the woodlands, Gareth then held up his hand, signaling that the group halt. "Let's stop for a minute. I need to think." They complied, coming to a standstill behind him.

"He's done a good job of covering his tracks," Theresa griped. "We've been going in circles."

"He thinks he's done a good job," Gareth refuted as he stared straight ahead.

Alex realized something for certain: he didn't want to kill Martin. Sasha? Carol? Yes, he had wanted to kill them. Yet it wasn't a feeling he enjoyed. It was one he wanted to rid himself of as soon as possible. Even when he tried, he couldn't muster that same white-hot feeling toward Martin.

Apart from Gareth and Theresa, he was unsure how the rest felt. Although, he couldn't see Cynthia, Albert, and Kaylee being thrilled with the idea of cannibalizing Martin either. The three hadn't said much of anything on the topic since they set out.

The group was silent while Gareth looked on with a severe gaze Alex knew all too well. The one he wore when he was envisioning each different scenario and outcome. However, Alex didn't think there was a time when Gareth wasn't doing so.

"Alex?" Theresa asked from beside him.

Alex turned his head from his brother to his spouse. "What?"

She raised a plastic bottle with one sip of water left. "Do you want the last swig of this?"

He shook his head. "No, no, you take it."

"Actually, that wasn't a question," she said with a small smile.

"Drink it," Gareth chimed-in.

Alex sighed and accepted the bottle, then downed the last of it in one gulp. "Now, we're broke."

"We'll be fine," Gareth assured him, still unmoving.

Kaylee stepped to her leader's side. "Your uh, stubs need to be changed."

Gareth turned to her. "We have no water to wash it with now. Why didn't you change it this morning?"
"Well, it hadn't been twelve hours since, and you said every *twelve hours*.

"See, I knew I shouldn't have drunk it," Alex said.

"No, Alex, you needed it," Gareth argued, rubbing his temple. "Just... do the best you can."

Kaylee nodded. "Right."

"Hey," Theresa said, grabbing Alex's hand. "Can I talk to you for a sec?"

"Yeah, sure," he agreed. She then led him past the group and to a fine assortment of trees, keeping a firm grip on his hand.

Locking her eyes to his, she edged closer to where she was mere inches from him. "So, what do you think?"

"About what?"

She gave a gentle roll of her eyes. "About Martin."

He shrugged, brushing his hands on his pants. "Oh, I don't—I don't know."

She tugged at his hand. "I know you have an opinion, come on."

"What's yours, then?" He knew he couldn't skirt the question for long, but instinct had him dodging each one.

"I won't lie and say I'm distraught by the idea of filleting him. But I'm asking you. Come on, I won't be mad if you say you don't want to." Her voice was soft, yet stern. The same tone she used to pull from him whatever information he happened to be withholding. It never failed.

"I don't want to," he admitted. "But... we might have to. And I can deal with it. I gotta."

She nodded. "Okay. See? That wasn't so bad." She let out a breath, her chest falling. "I don't want to be secretly wishing you felt more like I do. Or vice versa. Like... you remember when I found out you were sneaking extra blankets to the meat in the traincars?"

He forced a laugh. "Yep."

"The reason I used for getting you to stop was because Gareth would get bent out of shape, and because those were our covers. But..."

"Wasn't about the blankets for a second, huh?"

"Nope."

A wave of bravery came over him and he found his mouth moving before his brain could catch up. "I never meant to mean it as makin' light of everything you felt about... everything. Or disrespectin' you. It's just that..." He took a deep breath. "We used to be the ones trapped in there and I know what it was like. I couldn't always just pretend they were disposable sheep, you know?"

Her brows fell. "I know you couldn't—and can't. And I hate that of all the things, *that's* a problem nowadays. It's not fair, and I wish it weren't like that for you. It shouldn't have to be."

"You can sum up the whole world with 'shouldn't have to.'" He smiled a bit.
Theresa pursed her lips and gave a nod.

Alex's eyes honed in on the freckles that dotted her hairline. He hadn't noticed them in a while, at least not since Terminus. A sense of home came over him as he remembered how much he loved them—and loved her. Saying aloud to her that he didn't want to kill Martin—the epitome of everything Theresa hated about letting in new people—and being okay with it, empowered him beyond words. He didn't know what had prompted her to take such initiative, but was grateful she had.

Gareth's whistle broke through his thoughts. "Let's go!"

Night had fallen, and Martin's trail had gone stone-cold.

On the bright side, they had been fortunate enough to come across a supply of food and water suitable for the day and rest of the night. After the collected cans of green beans and packet of dried hash browns were cooked and eaten, only the crackle of the fire sounded in the dark.

Alex rarely got to be in his brother's company without hearing an earful of his words. Yet this time, Gareth said nothing, just looked into the fire with that same severe gaze as before. Paired with his silence, Gareth's presence was more unnerving than anything.

In time, Alex moved over to a laid-out sheet by the other side of the fire and lay down. Theresa then joined him, wrapping her arm around his waist as she spooned him. Despite how much he welcomed her touch, he wished they could be in their own bed again, preferably undressed.

The reality of their lack of privacy grew harsher when Kaylee rested beside Theresa. To top it off, Gareth then lay on the remaining bit of sheet next to Alex.

If it weren't so awkward, Alex would have laughed at the humor of the situation. Yet the way Gareth rested flat on his back, staring up at the night sky killed his amusement before it materialized. He figured at least Cynthia and Albert had to stay up on watch and wouldn't join the litter.

Unable to sleep with his brother's concentrated energy beside him, he decided he might as well break the hush. "You gonna sleep or just stare at the sky?" he whispered.

"Not sure," Gareth answered without averting his attention.

"Maybe Martin's home planet finally took him back," Alex jested.

He cracked a smile. "Remember when we were kids and I'd chase you around yelling 'I'm an alien,' and you'd run shrieking?"

"Man, I hadn't thought of that in years."

"Neither did I until you said that."

"Martin's always been a wild card, ain't he?"

"Yes, he has. I just didn't think he would actually do it and take off."

"Maybe he didn't. Maybe he stepped outside and got ate and we went the wrong way."

"Maybe."
"So, is this it now? Is our new mission trackin' him down?"

"None of them get away, Alex. He made his choice. And that choice was final."

Alex felt a shake of his earlier courage rush through his system. "Gareth, can I um, can I..."

Damnit, Alex, just say it.

Gareth turned his head. "Can you what?"

"Say somethin'? And... will you promise you won't get mad?"

Gareth's expression lightened and he turned his vision back to the sky. "Oh, now I have to hear it. Yeah, go for it."

"I think... I think you're still really upset we let Rick and them go, and now you're..."

Say it.

"...you're takin' it out on Martin 'cause you feel like a failure after Terminus, and mom, and Rick, and now him." His heart pounded hard enough that he felt the pulse in his neck.

Gareth was silent for a few seconds, seconds that felt like minutes to Alex, before replying. "You're right." His voice was flat. "I want to kill him."

Alex inhaled, realizing he had been holding his breath. "And if we find him and he has a valid explanation?"

"Then I'll be disappointed."

His heart still racing, he once again continued speaking before his brain could catch up. "I think your feelin's are hurt too."

Damnit, Alex, shut up!

Gareth scoffed. "Really?"

"Yeah, 'cause you and him were... close for a little while. And now he's just treatin' you like you're disposable."

Gareth was again quiet for what felt like minutes. "I have something I never told you either."

Alex thought he must have misheard. "What?"

"In highschool, I—"

"Why are—did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, I heard it. And I'm not going to deny it, but I'm done talking about it."

He had to admit he was grateful for that. "Alright."

Gareth rolled onto his side, finally meeting his brother's gaze. "You remember junior prom?"

"Never forget it." He smiled a tad.

"You'd had such a sucky year with not getting a grade above a C, and Jimmy moving away, so I
thought you needed a pick-me-up. Since I was on the king and queen's election committee, I rigged the votes so you'd win."

"You—you did that?" His voice came out louder than he intended before lowering it back to a whisper. "You... really?"

"Yeah, really. And no one suspected me because I never ever broke the rules."

Alex couldn't help the smile that claimed his face. "And I got to stand on stage with Cyndi Schreiber. Cyndi Schreiber..." He recalled her bleached hair, voluptuous thighs, and tight shirts that left nothing to the imagination. "Hey, you know she gave me my first—" He paused, remembering Kaylee might not be asleep and Cynthia was in earshot—he wanted to have some tact. "—intellectual conversation."

Gareth chuckled. "Oh, I know. She was the school's best conversationalist with that big mouth of hers. One of the reasons I rigged it was because I knew she'd win and would put out no matter who the prom king was."

He began to ask how he knew so well of her 'conversation skills,' when he realized the obvious answer. "I can't believe you did that for me, man."

"And that I didn't take credit so I could be praised endlessly?"

"Yeah, that most of all."

On the other side of the fire, Cynthia and Albert jumped to their feet and whirled around. Alex sat up from his place beside Theresa while Gareth sprang to a standing position.

Of course, what else would emerge from the dark but a walker, thoroughly pulling Alex from his pleasant trip down memory lane. Cynthia hopped out of the way as the creature tripped over the backpack she sat on and fell face first into the fire. Theresa and Kaylee jerked awake at the sound and climbed to their feet as well.

Gareth let out a long sigh as the flames engulfed the groaning creature. "Naturally."

In the morning light, Gareth looked like he hadn't slept a wink. Unless he slept with his eyes open—which Alex had seen him do in the past.

Walkers had been stumbling upon the campsite off and on ever since the one that plummeted into the fire. Each time, Alex's first thought was that it might be Martin.

"You still think the ten-to-twenty-year theory could be right?" Alex asked Gareth, wiping his brain mattered-coated knife on a dead walker's tattered jacket sleeve.

"I think so," Gareth replied, sliding a water bottle into a backpack. "Their brains have to decay eventually."

The ten-to-twenty-year-theory was one Gareth and others had theorized in the beginning. In pre-Siege Terminus, Gareth and who later became their resident butchers dissected walkers to find out what made them tick. Sights of the dissections made Alex ill at the time, but he supported the idea.

Alex recalled Gareth opening up one's brain while it was still alive, poking and prodding to find out just what part had to be destroyed to kill it. He felt he should've known then what Gareth was
capable of and how fast he could adapt to doing things so grotesque.

While the group prepared to take their leave, yet another walker appeared from the trees. This time, it looked to be newly-turned and moved a bit faster than expected.

*Wait.* Alex did a double-take. *Martin?*

"Oh, god, guys!" Martin exclaimed, a smile spreading across his face. "Thank god I found you!"

Gareth's eyes went ablaze. "So that's your story?" he exclaimed, marching forward.

Martin's smile fell and he took a small step back. "Man, I promise I didn't take off! Okay, I—"

"Right, you just happened to step outside and be pulled into some incredible adventure."

"You left when I was asleep," Kaylee interjected. "Hard to believe that was a coincidence."

Martin looked to Kaylee and narrowed his eyes. "You were asleep?" She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, just... I went outside to take a leak, and there was a chick by—"

"Oh for crying out loud, Martin, don't lie to me!" Gareth shouted.

"*I am not lying!* You'll let me explain myself, right?"

Gareth threw his hands up. "Of course. I have to."

"I went outside and there was this chick by the dead fire. She bolted, so I ran after her thinkin' I could, I don't know, knock her out or whatever. It was stupid, I know 'cause I was unarmed. Anyway, after chasin' her for little bit, I tackled her, then she kicks at me and starts scratchin' my face and my neck, see?" He pulled the collar of his shirt down to reveal long, pink marks.

Gareth sneered. "Right."

Although, Alex wondered if Martin would actually scratch up his own neck to further a fake story.

"She was a big bitch, okay? Like six-feet tall and real heavy. So she flipped me over and choked me until I passed out."

The size of the woman was probably a lie, Alex assumed. Most likely, she was Theresa's size and Martin wouldn't admit he was overcome by an average-sized female.

"And she conveniently didn't kill you," Gareth said, slow-nodding.

"Well, no, obviously. Just... look." He took a few steps forward and again pulled down the collar of his shirt. Sure enough, upon closer inspection, the scratches crossed paths with finger imprints that had begun to bruise.

Gareth fixed his eyes on the marks for a moment, then looked back to Martin's desperate face. "How do I know you didn't make a meal of her yourself? Then decided it was all too hard and used this to get us to believe your sob story?"

"I hadn't eaten nothin' since the buzzards, man. And it's brutal out here, I'd never go it alone. I fuckin' promised you I wouldn't."

Gareth squinted, silent for a bit, then spoke, "Alright then. Make yourself throw-up."
"I—what?"

"If you really have eaten nothing since the birds, then your stomach should be empty. So, throw-up."

Cynthia stepped forward. "Gareth—"

"Shh," he quieted, raising his hand in front of her. "If you're serious, then you'll do it. Or we can hold you down and do it for you. I mean, I know you have a gag reflex."

*Tact sure ain't important to him.*

Martin's eyes grew to saucers. "Right here?" He gestured downward.

"Seems like if you were telling the truth, you'd do anything to prove it to us."

Martin raked his eyes over the group.

Alex began to say something, but the bravery from the previous day had run clean-out.

"Alright, we'll hold you down then," Gareth proclaimed, moving forward.

Martin lurched back, raising his hands in defense. "No! I'll do it, okay? I'll do it."

Alex dug his nails into his palms, attempting to negate the growing pit in his stomach. This was the Gareth who scared him. Not the guy who rigged the votes at prom so his little brother could win. Or the guy who held him close while they shed tears over their departed mother. This Gareth terrified him.

Planting his eyes on the ground, Martin brought two fingers up to his parted lips. Alex fought the impulse to look away, knowing his brother would be peeved if he didn't watch. As Martin's fingers passed his lips, Alex took a quick glance at Theresa by his side. Her arms were crossed and her expression focused, but she didn't look as pleased as he thought she would.

When the second knuckle disappeared into his mouth, Martin hunched over and gagged forth a hazy liquid onto the grass.

As he began to pull his hand out, Gareth interrupted with a sharp, "Keep going."

Grinding his fingers back further, Martin grimaced and continued until he dry heaved, face reddened and tears spilling down his cheeks.

"Okay, stop," Gareth ordered.

Martin promptly pulled his slick hand from his mouth and wiped it on his bloodied shirt.

"My god, you might actually be telling the truth," he said, placing a hand to his hip.

Alex truly hated his brother in that moment.

Martin gulped, straightening his spine. "I swear to god, I am," he pleaded. "I'm not so stupid to take off with no weapons, then come back and make up shit. Come on."

"I think he is telling the truth," Albert said, looking to his leader.

"You're right. I want to kill him."
"And if we find him and he has a valid explanation?"

"Then I'll be disappointed."

Disappointed he may have been, but it was clear to Alex that he had made the best of it.
The apparent Amazon warrior who attacked Martin was their best bet for a good meal. Though Gareth had a feeling he may have exaggerated her size. Regardless, they took to traveling back the way they came in search for her.

During their voyage, Martin was the quietest he had ever been. In fact, a full hour went by where no one at all spoke a single word. Gareth knew what he had done would put a strain on their group, but he hadn't anticipated such a prolonged silence.

Eventually spotting a few squirrels in a row of trees, Gareth told his people to halt. Again, without a peep, Martin lifted the rifle from his back holster. The knuckles of the fingers that slid down to grip the trigger were reddened from the earlier rough contact with his teeth.

"No, no, no," Gareth interrupted his action. "There's only one round left in that thing. Don't waste it on a squirrel. Kaylee, you hop up there and see if you can toss a knife into one."

"I'm not a monkey," Kaylee replied. "And I don't know how to toss knives."

"Yeah, but you're the smallest and lightest."

"And I have the shortest limbs. Shouldn't someone with long limbs do it?" Her eyes darted between Gareth and Cynthia.

"Me?" Cynthia questioned. "I'm klutzy as hell."

"Well, uh," Albert began, raising his hand, "I used to climb trees for fun. I was pretty good."

Gareth nodded. "Yeah, alright. Go for it."

Kaylee unsheathed her knife and handed it to Albert. Accepting it, he then placed its handle between his teeth. After reaching the tree, he latched onto a thick bottom branch with his hands, pulling himself up and scaling its trunk and adjoining branches.

Gareth had to admit he was impressed. Kaylee may not have been a monkey, but Albert sure was.

While the remainder watched Albert's stunt, Gareth strolled over to Alex, earning him a watchful glance from Theresa a few feet from her spouse's side. "I haven't seen you drink since last night," he commented.

Alex turned his gaze to his brother, then edged back and crossed his arms. "I'm fine."

"Once again, no, you're not. If you don't drink, then you'll be exhausted within an hour. What we found earlier is plenty for you to have without depleting us to death."

"And what'll you do if—" he began, then sighed and let his arms drop to his side. "Fine." He turned and stepped behind Theresa, unzipping the backpack she wore.

A crackling echoed from a nearby tree—one other than the one Albert climbed—followed by a slim branch falling through its limbs and lightly hitting the ground below. Gareth looked to Cynthia and Martin since they were the only other two equipped with firearms, and gestured his thumb over to the tree in question.

Skulking over to the base where the stick lay, the three stopped by its trunk with weapons ready to
be discharged. Gazing up, Gareth spotted the edges of two sneakers and jean-covered legs perched on a thick branch by the trunk. The rest of the person was obscured by just enough brush below to hide them.

"I know you're up there," Gareth announced. "Are you going to come down, or should I come up there myself?"

"I don't got nothin' you want!" a woman's high-pitched voice returned.

Gareth wondered if she was Martin's monster-truck assailant. For that reason, he decided against shooting her dead from the ground unless he had to.

"Who says I want something?" he asked.

"Everyone wants somethin'."

"We can wait here all day. And if Albert knives some squirrels, we might let you have some if you come down." She gave no reply. "What's your name?" he tried again, only to still be met with silence. "Alright, I'm Gareth. And you must have seen the rest of us. The guy next to me is Martin, the redhead's Cynthia, shortest girl is Kaylee, next shortest girl is Theresa, the guy next to her is Alex, and I already told you your fellow climber is Albert. Your turn. It's only fair."

The girl shifted on the branch, briefly exposing her left hand, and replied, "Beth."

Wait... wasn't that the name... Beth—Maggie's sister who Rick and company were so eager to rescue from Atlanta.

Can't be...

If somehow, the ill-fated woman had gotten away and sat before them in a large tree, Gareth would have to play the next few hands of cards carefully.

"Okay, Beth," he began, "now that we know each other, why don't you come down?"

"Why?"

"We'll let you have some squirrel. We wouldn't let you stay up there without offering you anything. We're not animals."

"We ain't gonna hurt you!" Cynthia added from his left. "Promise."

After a few moments, Beth stirred and began a slow and steady descent downward.

Gareth glimpsed at his people, their bodies tensed and ready to take action. As uneasy as they clearly were over the events of earlier that day, no note of it was present in that moment.

Beth reached the bottom of the tree, hopping off the last branch and hitting the ground with a thud. Accompanying her, was a rope slung around her shoulder with a black trash sack tied to it.

Gareth analyzed her face as she turned to face him, searching for a family resemblance between her and Maggie. Her upturned chin and delicate lips reminded him of Maggie's, that was for sure. Though the rest of her, fair skin and a head full of platinum blonde hair, did not. However, he considered the similarities too great for a coincidence.

"See? Nothing to worry about," Gareth reassured her, then gave a come-hither gesture to Theresa, Alex, Kaylee, and the now ground-level Albert.
The four strode over behind him as Beth watched them with tight lips. Her eyes settled on Martin and a flash of fear crossed her face.

"I remember you," she accused, taking a small step back.

"What are you talkin' about?" Martin began. "You—"

"Is that the one?" Gareth interrupted. "The six-foot tall Wonder Woman?"

Martin sighed and mumbled, "Yes."

Gareth narrowed his eyes, looking back and forth between the two. "You know, I think you were off by a few inches." Beth's lips parted and she backed up toward the tree. "Wait, wait, he told us he chased someone outside the house because he thought he could rob them. I'm sorry about that, he's kind of the impulsive little kid in our little family."

She looked Martin up and down. "You were just tryin' to steal from me?"

"Yeah," he confirmed, his voice flat. "Sorry. I saw you and acted on an impulse. Like Gare said, that's what I do."

She looked back to Gareth. "I thought he might... that he was gonna..."

Gareth let out a knowing breath. "Of course you did. What woman wouldn't? But I promise he was just seeing if you had anything to steal. I know that's not much in the way of comfort, but you know how it is out here."

She gave a nod. "Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"And we aren't robbing you now, even though we obviously could. Besides, you must have super strength. You did a number on him. So, you see any squirrels up there?"

Beth moved her hands to the garbage sack and untied its knot, then dumped out two dead squirrels and a rattlesnake.

"Damn, you're stronger and a better hunter than Martin," he joked. Martin cracked a smile at the remark, one Gareth could tell was devoid of sincerity. "How long have you been alone?"

"Um... a few days. Got separated from my group."

The hospital. Noah. If they said they knew Noah—if Alex said he knew Noah—then her distrust may diminish, Gareth figured. The problem was figuring out a way to get her to mention the place.

"So, I assume you're looking for them?"

She nodded.

"How'd you get separated?" Cynthia asked.

"I... was in this place a long way from 'em, trapped with someone else from my group. I busted us out and she knew where everyone else was. So, we fixed-up a truck and she told me where our people were. She was hurt, so she couldn't drive and I had to, even though I'd never driven before... so it was a bumpy ride.

"When we got to where she said they were stayin'—in this church—we saw it'd burned down and was smolderin' and smokin'. We looked all in the rubble, but didn't find no bodies in there, so we
hoped they got out. Then, a whole horde of walkers showed up and I..." Her jaw quivered. "It all happened so fast. One minute I was with her, then she was gone. I didn't see any get her, but after I got away, she was just gone and I never found her."

So, she hasn't even laid eyes on Rick since getting out of Grady.

Her face lit up. "Have you seen 'em? A big group, um—"

"No, sorry," Gareth replied. "We haven't seen anyone but loners in weeks."

The hope on her features vanished.

He turned to Albert. "Albert, why don't you get back up in that tree and get us some more squirrels. Beth can help you, she has the hunting skills and strength of an Amazon warrior."

Beth's lips almost formed a smile before she asked, "Why don't you just kill me and take my haul?"

"Because we want to help you find your group."

* * *

"Alright, what's the deal?" Theresa asked Gareth in a whisper just far away enough from the campfire to have a bit of privacy. "We've been going along with it, but what are you doing?"

"She's one of them and she doesn't know who we are. In fact, queen bitch might not have even told her about Terminus."

She gave a sharp shrug. "So? She's meat."

"Opportunities like these don't fall into your lap every day."

She shifted her weight onto one foot. "Okay, we follow her group and then what?"

"I'm not..." He glanced over to where Beth sat among the others, chewing on a piece of cooked squirrel. "...sure if... give me a little bit of time to think."

"And we'll all talk it out this time?"

"This time?"

"You didn't give us a chance to speak up when you decided to strip Martin of his dignity."

"Because you're so upset to see him lose it?"

"No, because Kaylee tried to say something and you shushed her. You said you weren't going to be our dictator. And..."

"And?"

"And that you would never hurt us just to hurt us."

Gareth scoffed. "Okay, if we had voted for making him throw-up or not, what would you have voted for?"

"In a rational mindset? Yeah, I would have voted that way. But you just wanted to punish him and were thrilled you got a chance to."
"Are you trying to tell me you didn't enjoy it all?"

"You told me that I could hate him, but to be civil and to make it so we can all live together. And now, you've acted on hating him and it's pretty obvious you've driven a wedge between us." Her voice had risen to a near shout, making the others turn their vision to them, including a wide-eyed Beth.

"We'll take a vote when I decide on whatever this is, okay?" Gareth whispered. "Then we'll all be happy-go-lucky again." He stepped away from her before she could reply and made his way back over to the group. Settling beside Beth, he offered her a reassuring smile.

Theresa marched over to her former place by Alex and sat herself down. Grabbing her half-finished piece of rattlesnake, she bit into it roughly. Gareth didn't have to ask to know she was fantasizing it was Beth's rib.

"Thanks again for sharing with us, Beth," Gareth said, attempting to avert Beth's attention from the woman across from them.

"Didn't seem like I had a choice," she replied, turning her gaze to him.

"There's always a choice."

"So, you really wanna help me find 'em?"

"We've been wandering aimlessly for a long time now, and a mission would be great for all of us. You said they're going to Washington?"

"That's what Carol, um, the woman who got me out of Atlanta, told me while I was drivin' back."

"Atlanta?" Alex asked, leaning forward a tad.

"I got taken by these people to a hospital. They—"

"Grady Memorial?" Kaylee interrupted, her brow furrowing.

Good girl. Pride flushed through Gareth. Time after time of non-verbal communication between him and the others had paid off.

Beth's posture straightened. "Yeah. How do you know?"

"Me and Martin got taken by them a while back."

"No kiddin'?" Martin said. "Small world."

"Wow," Gareth said. "Really small world."

"How'd y'all get away?" Beth asked.

"We traded for them," Gareth explained. "We had a little settlement back then where there were plenty of deer and we brought them fresh meat."

"I just barely got out. Still can't believe I did."

"Did you know Noah?" Alex asked.

"Yeah!" she beamed. "He got out, I helped him. I got caught, the first time I tried to get out I was
tryin' with him. But he's out for sure."

Alex smiled wide. "Really? Man, that's awesome."

"How'd you meet him? I thought just Kaylee and Martin got taken?"

"Oh um, well, they wanted a token of good faith that they'd come back with the meat, so I offered to stay and I met him then. Did he ever... did he ever show you a drawin'?"

"Drawin'?"

"Yeah, I had my sketchbook with me and showed him my stuff. I gave him one 'cause he liked it so much."

"Oh, no. Sorry. Dawn and them might have taken it. But he's real good at hidin' stuff."

Just as Gareth had hoped upon Alex revealing he and Beth shared a friend, she relaxed her shoulders and continued conversing with him.

Her presence was a game-changer. The obvious course of action would be to reveal who they were, taunt her, and dine on her. Except she wasn't at all involved in destroying their home. In fact, she probably had no idea her group ever visited a place called Terminus. She may not have even seen any of the signs.

Yes, Theresa was right: Beth was meat. And Gareth decided they would give up their pursuit of Rick and company because it wasn't a fair fight.

Despite that fact, Gareth pictured his group meeting up with hers in Washington with their sweet Beth at their side. The thought of them seeing their beloved Beth having become one of them through and through was sweeter and richer than Bob's leg had ever been.
Trust

Just hours before, Beth had been alone, knowing she had herself alone to rely on if she were to find her group. Now, she sat surrounded by seven strangers, one of whom had attacked her the previous day.

What am I thinking?

Was it because Gareth's explanation as to why Martin had chased her made sense? Was it because one of them knew Noah? Knew of Grady Memorial and what they did? Was it strength in numbers? Or was it a desperation for human contact that made her want to trust total strangers?

With the many questions swimming in her head, every moment she sat among them, she thought of turning her heels and running. Yet these people offered to assist her with no request of anything in return. It felt too good to be true, but Beth knew the last good people on earth couldn't just be her or her group. There had to be others.

"Well," Gareth began after the eight had packed-up, "from what I remember, there's a corner store near here that might be useful. So, we should definitely try there."

Gareth stirred unease in her gut. There was something off about him she couldn't put her finger on. He was almost too charming, too nice, in a way that came off phony like a car salesman or a politician. Nevertheless, she didn't dislike him. Coming right out and saying that Martin was trying to rob her when he could have made up a lie that rendered him blameless was an impressive act of honesty.

"You don't have a compass or GPS in your pocket, right?" Gareth asked Beth. A smile unintentionally crossed her face and she shook her head. "Oh well," he breathed out. "Come on, I think we can make it there by sundown. I just have to..." He looked up at the sun. "Okay, so..." He trailed his eyes back down, then pointed to his left. "If we head that way, we ought to come across Old Mill Road."

"How do you know your way around here so well?" Beth asked.

"Maps. I lost them a while back, but I kept them handy for a bit. That and I know this place from before all this."

"Hm."

"Okay then, the day's not getting any longer." He gestured to his left and the group began to move.

Spotting Alex on the other side of the party, Beth headed for him as he was the only one she connected with. As she was half-way to meeting him, Theresa stepped beside him and said something into his ear while rubbing his arm. Beth stopped in her tracks and turned to face the front, then trailed behind everyone else. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Theresa didn't like her. She assumed she and Alex were a couple as they both wore wedding bands. What other relationships the others bore to each other she didn't know and didn't ask, unsure if it would be prying or not.

Disliking her spot in the back, she made a bold move and caught up with Albert who walked beside Gareth. Since Albert seemed to be about her age, she figured they might find some common ground. The position was also furthest away from Martin. Just trying to rob her or not, she wanted to stay as far away from the guy as she could.
"Hi," Beth greeted with a polite smile.

Albert smiled back. "Oh, hey."

"Um, I don't think we've officially said anything to each other, so—"

"Hey," Cynthia interrupted from behind them. "Beth, you need a drink of water?"

She turned her head to see Cynthia handing her a half-full water bottle. "Sure."

Cynthia seemed nice enough, as did Albert. It gave her the hope that she didn't jump into a tank of piranhas after all.

* * *

They reached the corner store about an hour before sundown, just as Gareth had predicted. Inside was occupied by four walkers that they took out with their blades, glad to have not needed to fire any bullets. Combing through the shop, Beth imagined how full of life it must have been before the turn. It reminded her of the store near the farm where she grew up. Of when her mama or daddy would stop in for feed and supplies, and sometimes let her pick out a candy, usually sour straws—but just one package because too much sugar made her hyper.

"Whoa, lookie here!" Alex exclaimed from a room in the back.

Beth looked up from behind the cash register to see Theresa and Gareth rushing to the room.

"Oh my god!" Theresa beamed after the two had entered.

Beth's curiosity got the best of her and she streamed out from behind the counters and to the back room. As she stepped into the small space, she saw a man's body lying face-up on the floor, a handgun in his hand and dried gore on the other side of his head. Suicide. The three paid no mind to it, instead looking at something on a table at the far end of the room.

"What is it?" Beth asked as she heard footsteps behind her.

Theresa turned around to reveal she held a large glass jar full of dried rice. "Look at all of this! And chickpeas." She gestured to Alex.

Alex turned and held up an identical jar filled with dried chickpeas. "Better thank this guy for goin' lights out. This can last us for a long time."

"And I thought this place had been emptied out," Gareth said, leaning down and snatching the gun from the dead man's hand. "Pretty obvious this guy was living here. Pretty dumb, right out in the open."

"There any bullets in that?" Albert asked from behind Beth.

"Four," Gareth declared, inspecting its chamber.

Beth feigned a smile, trying not to look at the man on the floor. It just reminded her how little most people thought of death in that day and age. How they cheered someone's suicide because the tormented person had left them something to eat and a few rounds. Thoughts of the farm then invaded her mind. Was the horde still there? If not, did people find the place and rejoice because whoever had lived there was dead and gone? Did they see what was left of Patricia and Jimmy and say, "thanks for dying?"
However, she couldn't blame nor judge the people in front of her for acting in such a way. Who knows, maybe deep down they felt the same, but showing it was a weakness. A weakness she definitely couldn't afford to show to strangers.

A blanket lying in a messy pile at the edge of the room gave Beth the urge to cover the man up. Yet knowing the group wouldn't likely understand, she instead turned around and left him there.

While making her way back to the cashier's counter, she saw Kaylee in the aisle by the door. She hadn't given her an official hello yet, so she changed course and strolled over to the lone girl.

"Hi," Beth said with a wave.

Kaylee turned to her. "Hey," she returned, her voice hollow.

"Well, we haven't talked yet other than about Grady. So... uh, 'Kaylee', how do spell that?"


"Oh, different. I like it."

"Is Beth short for something?"

"Bethany."

"Pretty." Kaylee turned back to the empty shelf, tracing her finger around the worn edge of a price tag sticker.

"Guess you heard we got dinner."

She nodded.

Beth could detect an unhappiness radiating off the woman. The ability to pick up what other people felt was overwhelming at times, making her wish it had a switch.

"What do you think about goin' to Washington? I've never been."

"New places."

"You'll like my group. They're good people."

Kaylee's mouth twitched up into a solemn smile, still not tearing her vision away from the price tag. "I'm sure they are."

"I think you're good people too. Helpin' me find 'em. I can't thank you enough."

"You're welcome, Beth."

* * *

The chickpeas took a while to prepare and cook, but the end result was worth it. Paired with the rice and salted from a shaker, it rivaled Thanksgiving dinner. Beth filled herself to a point where she felt her hours of sleep might near normal that night.

After the satisfying meal was over, several of them began to wind down for the evening. Theresa and Alex nestled up to one another on the blanket from the back room. Cynthia and Martin took to opposite sides of the store to rest, making Beth wonder if there was bad blood between them.
Albert had just stepped outside on watch while Kaylee yawned and prepared the gun that belonged to the dead man in the storage room—who had since been removed.

Upon Kaylee’s second yawn, Gareth chimed-in, "Kaylee, you look tired. Beth will take over while you get some sleep."

Beth’s ears pricked up from where she sat up against the check-out counter.

"Yeah," Kaylee agreed. "Okay, thanks." She nodded and slogged over to Beth and extended the pistol to her. Beth accepted and Kaylee gave a weary smile, then departed back to where Cynthia rested.

Standing up, Beth took a quick look at the weapon as Gareth sauntered over.

"Can’t have her half-asleep out there," he said, scratching his stubbled jaw with two of the three fingers on his left hand. The lack of the fourth and fifth was something Beth hadn’t gotten the nerve to ask about yet.

When she realized she was staring at the hand in question, she flitted her gaze to his eyes. "Of course."

"I’ll probably be awake while you’re on your shift, so if you need me for anything..."

"Okay."

Gareth gave her his politician’s good-faith look and lowered himself to Beth’s former position sitting against the counter.

Slipping the pistol into her holster, she made her way to the clear glass door that led outside and pulled it open. She found Albert a few feet to her left.

He gave her a wave. "Hey again."

"Hey yourself," she said, stepping to his side.

"It’s a nice night. Little warmer."

"Mm-hm," she agreed, then spat out a question she didn’t feel like waiting to ask, "So, I guess Theresa and Alex are married?"

Albert nodded. "Yep. You saw their rings?"

"Yeah, I assumed, but I had to ask."

"You’re probably thinking, ‘he’s so nice and she’s such a bitch, how does that work?’"

*Kind of.*

She raised her hand in defense. "What? No, no, no—"

"She just doesn't like strangers. She'll get over it."

"Well, that's good, but I wasn't thinkin' that."

"I think you were," he said with a boyish smile. "Don't worry, she's actually really nice once you get to know her."
Albert seemed to be at ease with discussing group politics, so she figured she might as well dig a bit deeper. "What about Martin?" she asked.

"Uh… he's… he's an asshole, but a harmless one. I still cannot believe you overpowered him."

"Well, when you think someone's gonna do somethin' to you, the adrenaline goes wild. I'm not like that though, violent. Not unless I gotta be."

"Hey, you don't have to defend yourself."

"Thanks." She gave him a slight smile. "Wait, how's Martin an asshole? He's barely said a word since I've been here."

"I think he's just tired. That and utterly emasculated." He laughed. "Honestly, he needed to be knocked down a peg."

"Oh." She giggled a bit. "And I guess havin' the destroyer of his manhood walkin' around isn't makin' him wanna say much?"

"He'll get over it too. Just don't worry about any of us."

"Even Gareth?" she spoke before she could think, worrying she had crossed a line.

"Yeah, even Gareth. I know he can be intense and chatty, but that's just how he is." Beth hoped he was right. "So, are Theresa and Alex the only couple?"

"Yeah."

"So all y'all are just by yourselves? I mean, no family left? Well, blood-related family?"

Albert narrowed his eyes. "I guess no one told you Alex is Gareth's brother." She shook her head. "Huh, thought Gareth would have told you. But yeah, they're the only ones with family left. Cynthia's like my family now though."

"You're pretty close?"

"Yeah. She helped put me back together after I lost everyone." His voice grew soft. "And I helped her do the same."

"I'm happy for you. You're lucky."

"I guess I am. You have any blood relatives left?"

She nodded. "A sister—Maggie. Lost everyone else."

"Sorry, should I not have asked?"

"No, it's okay. You should know a little of where I've been and who I'm lookin' for. And who you'll meet."

"Well, we have half the night, so tell me about them." Albert gulped, his face tightening into something that looked almost reluctant. She shrugged it off and proceeded to tell him a brief bit about everyone in her group.
Beth awoke to a rough shake of her shoulder, yanking her from a dream where Theresa pointed the tip of a sharp blade less than an inch from Beth's eye. Turning over on the sheet, she found the one who roused her was the woman she dreamed of, causing her to flinch back and let out a yelp.

"Jesus, don't scream," Theresa said. "Haven't you ever been woken up before?"

Beth let out a breath. "Sorry, I was in the middle of a drea—"

"Gareth said to let you sleep-in, but we have even more to eat now. We caught a deer and have it cooking outside right now."

"What? Oh, wow…"

"Yep, wow. Come on." Theresa stood up and turned around, reaching the door in what seemed like a millisecond.

"She just doesn't like strangers. She'll get over it."

Beth doubted that would happen anytime soon.

After she smoothed down her hair and wrapped it in the band she wore around her wrist, she rose to her feet and made her way toward the door. Pulling it open, the morning sun burned her eyes, forcing her to squint. As her eyes adjusted, she made out the rest sitting around the fire from the night before. The scent of cooking meat filled her airways.

"Wow, who caught it?" she asked, strolling over to an empty spot between Albert and Kaylee.

"I did," Martin replied, holding with both hands a fleshy piece what looked like part of a leg bone.

"Must have been a big deer," she said, noticing the abundance of meat which still resided on the grate.

"Yep," Gareth agreed as he chewed on a smaller piece.

Beth sat herself down and Albert passed her an already prepared plate of meat with a plastic fork resting on it. Accepting it, she stared at it, thinking it looked unusually pink for venison.

"You okay?" Gareth asked.

"Oh, yeah" She looked back up. "Just don't look like any deer I ever ate."

"No two are alike."

Beth stuck her fork into a small piece that collected flavor in a few drops of liquid and grease. Bringing it up to her lips, she realized the smell was different too—almost like pork. After she placed it in her mouth and began chewing, she noted it tasted like pork too, just a bit more bitter, but not bad. Not bad at all. In fact, she finished her entire plate and was disappointed when it was gone.
"Why did you agree to accept her in?" Cynthia asked Theresa while they packed up supplies in the corner store's back room.

"Because Gareth needs a new project," Theresa replied, pulling her backpack over her shoulders. "I'd rather have him focusing on her than on making Martin bulimic."

"I don't even know what he thinks is gonna happen." She stuffed a few half-sharpened pencils in her pockets, making Theresa wonder what she wanted them for.

"We'll head towards Washington, she'll get close to us, find out about us, then her plastic Barbie head will pop off in horror." She rolled her eyes.

"Hey, I thought I was the Barbie," Cynthia said, puckering her bottom lip.

Theresa let out a short sigh. "Yeah, I'm sorry I called you Barbie before."

"It's okay. It was before everything happened and besides, I'm still sorry I cut up Alex."

"I told you, I don't care about that anymore."

"I know, but I still feel bad. I mean, he has a scar 'cause of me."

"A fading scar. Besides, I just married him for his money. And our arrangement is I only have to see him naked three times a year."

Cynthia broke out into laughter, covering her mouth with her hand. Theresa forced a smile back—she didn't think her joke was that funny.

"Okay," Theresa began while Cynthia continued giggling, "I think we have everything."

Cynthia cleared her throat. "Yeah, yeah, we do."

Theresa gripped the straps of her backpack and led Cynthia through the doorway to the main room. As they proceeded, Martin pushed through the front door from outside, and then met them in the center of the shop.

"Hey uh, Theresa, can I talk to you alone?" Martin requested.

"I—What?" Theresa asked, furrowing her brow. She assumed he wanted to speak of the new girl, yet seeking her out to do so was the last thing she expected.

"Really?" Cynthia added.

"Yeah, just… Cynthia, could you go somewhere else for a minute? Nothin' personal, I just wanna talk to her."

Cynthia scrunched her face. "Okay… what do I tell 'em you're doin'?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, make somethin' up."

"Alright," she agreed. Her eyes darted between the two before striding past them and exiting out the door.
As Theresa opened her mouth to ask what he wanted, he spoke, "You know what? We should've burned the church down like I said. Then Gareth wouldn't have to play corrupt the farmer's daughter to make himself not feel like such a pussy."

"Yeah well, you know him. He has to obsess over something that makes him feel better about Terminus and Rick."

"Come on, you have to hate the little bitch too."

"Oh yeah, I do. But I want him to have a hobby to keep him busy. Instead of tormenting you, he can obsess over fucking with her."

"She'll be dead before we ever get to 'Washington.' He made quotations with his fingers. "No actually, she'll be dead before we get out of state. I don't get his reasonin' for this at all, there's a reason we stopped trackin' 'em."

She released her hands from the backpack straps and let them fall to her sides. "I know. Look, I hate this too, but Gareth needs to focus his negative energy outward, not inward toward us. And I think he knows we'll never get to them, but he's holding onto the idea—the maybe."

Martin bored his eyes into hers for a moment before asking, "Are you afraid of him?"

Theresa shrugged. "Of course," she replied without hesitation. "Every leader has to instill a degree of fear in his people, or else he's not a leader."

He raised his eyebrows. "He tell you that?"

"Not verbally."

"Hm."

She chewed on the inside of her cheek. "I'm going to regret this question, but I have to ask: why did you and him stop messing around? I mean, was it on bad terms, or did he just recently start hating you?"

His face fell. "You really think he hates me?"

"At least right now."

He sighed. "'Cause he said it was gettin' too 'habitual' for his taste."

"So, monogamy was a four-letter word?"

"Yep. I didn't disagree though."

"So hating you is a recent thing."

"Apparently."

She squinted. "Wait, why are you asking me if I feel the same way? What do you get out of it?"

"Just wanted to be at least sorta on the same page as someone. And huzzah, I am." He gave a fake smile and a thumbs-up.

It occurred to her that this meant out of the whole group, she was the one Martin was on the best terms with. She was unsure whether to laugh or groan at the revelation.
Instead of merely scavenging the vehicles that rested on the side of the country road as they trekked, they attempted to get a few running. They found an odd collection of five sitting in close proximity to each other. Two on a short stretch of road, and three on a longer stretch around the corner.

On the section of road with the two cars, Martin worked under the hood of a red sedan, having declared the white truck a ways behind him unusable. Theresa shone a flashlight over what he tinkered with while Albert sat in the front seat, ready to start the car if need be. Beth and Gareth had taken to searching the truck behind them. Theresa attempted to overhear their conversation as they did so, but with no luck.

Around the bend, Alex, Cynthia, and Kaylee inspected the three vehicles there. And with a newly discovered pair of working walkie-talkies, Theresa set one on the edge of the sedan's hood, awaiting any messages from the three.

A light sheen of sweat covered Martin's forehead as he fiddled with the engine. Theresa considered it odd being as the temperature couldn't have been more than 65 degrees. As he instructed Albert to start-up the car, she began to catch a bit of Gareth and Beth's conversation as they started back.

"—of knowledge you didn't use to—" Gareth's voice sounded before being drowned out by the car engine catching then dying.

"Hey," Martin alerted.

She jerked her head to him. "What?"

"I said, point it here." He motioned to the battery.

She complied, shining the light on the battery, then continued to eavesdrop.

"—hunting?" Gareth continued, his voice becoming louder as his and Beth's footsteps scraped the concrete.

"Not really," Beth replied. "My daddy was a vet. So, we kinda went more toward savin' 'em than huntin' 'em. At least before things went bad."

"I never even fired a gun before all this," he said as they came to a stop behind Theresa and Martin. "I always thought gun nuts and people who hunted for sport were just guys compensating for small dicks."

Beth let out a tiny giggle.

Theresa knew the line was aimed at Martin. She did agree, but thought it a low-blows, even for Gareth.

"How's that going, Martin?" Gareth asked.

"Some progress," he replied without diverting his attention.

Static from the walkie-talkie erupted along with Alex saying something inaudible.

Theresa grabbed it with her free hand and held it to her mouth. "What? What did you say?"

"I said, how's the car doin'?" Alex asked.
"Coming along."

Gareth slid to Theresa's side and leaned in toward the device. "You find anything?"

"Kay found a garlic press," he replied.

"Oh, hooray," Gareth said. "The world's ended, but honey, don't forget our garlic press."

Theresa held back a grimace. Gareth had turned his store-bought charm to maximum power. The same brand of charisma he laid on newcomers at Terminus. A brand that had most assuming he had nothing but good intentions.

"Yeah, um, and she also had to bash in a walker's head with it," Alex continued. "Just one though. A real skinny one from the woods."

"Why the garlic press?" Theresa asked.

"She had the thing in her hand, and her knife in her holster, so... yeah."

"Good improv," Gareth commented.

"Yeah-huh. Listen man, I gotta have two hands to keep lookin' through the mess of crap in this trunk. Give me a holler if you need somethin' though."

"Okay. Please be careful," Theresa urged, almost adding an "I love you" as things could turn south so fast. Yet Gareth, Martin, and namely Beth's presence made it catch in her throat. The words were too private to grace Beth's ears.

"I'll be fine, it's just a trunk. It don't bite," he assured her. "Okay, I'm stickin' this in my pocket or I might forget it like I did that one time." The speakers emitted a rustling noise from rubbing against the fabric of his pants.

"Albert!" Martin shouted at the driver's seat. "Try it again."

Turning the key, the car roared to a start. Martin smacked the sides of the hood and gave a triumphant smile.

"Great job," Gareth congratulated. "You can drive too." Heading toward the passenger's door, he patted Martin on the back, causing him to stiffen his posture.

Theresa then proceeded to the opposite side of the car just as Albert stepped out of the driver's side to allow Martin his place.

"So um, Alex is your brother?" Beth asked Gareth as she followed him.

"Oh, who told you the secret?" Gareth jested as he opened the passenger's door and climbed inside. Beth opened the door behind him and slid in. "Albert did."

"Oh, yeah. I did," Albert confirmed, opening the door adjacent and sliding into the midsection of the seat.

*Thank you,* Theresa thought as she settled in beside him, grateful she wouldn't be rubbing shoulders with Beth.

"I thought I told you, sorry," Gareth said. "I didn't mean it to be a secret or anything."
As all doors were shut and Martin pressed his foot down on the accelerator, Theresa raised the walkie-talkie to her mouth. "Hey? Alex?" she said into the gadget, tuning out Beth and Gareth's continuing conversation. No reply on Alex's end. She tapped the receiver "Alex! Hello?"

Scratching came from the speaker followed by her spouse's voice asking, "Jesus, what? What is it?"

She let out a breath of relief, shutting her eyes. "Sorry, I just… we got the car running. We'll be around any second now."

"Oh, awesome," he replied, his tone lightening. "Cynthia was askin' me about a steel rod or somethin' when you called, sorry."

"It's alright. I better turn this off to save power."

"'Kay."

Switching it off and setting it to her left, she listened in on Gareth and Beth.

"—when kids resemble a different parent," Gareth said.

"Oh, yeah. I get it," Beth responded.

Theresa assumed they were talking about his and Alex's lack of a family resemblance. It sounded like he skirted the half-brother issue, which she didn't know whether to be offended by or thankful he omitted such personal information the girl didn't need to know. She decided on the latter.

A parent. Mary.

Acid shot through her veins at the idea of Beth simply thinking of Gareth and Alex's mother. As if she deserved to think of Mary as anyone other than the person her pack mate had die so horribly.

An image of beating Beth's head in with the walkie-talkie flashed through Theresa's head. Clutching the gadget tighter, she imagined the rush of cracking the plastic against the blonde's skull and hearing her shriek. That was if the device was strong enough to penetrate bone. Or would it break before doing any real damage?

She took a deep breath and willed the impulse away, releasing her grasp on the walkie-talkie as her pulse vibrated through her palm and fingers. In reality, the act would lack true satisfaction because Beth wouldn't know why she was being attacked. The why was important. In fact, telling her about Mary would make her probable grim fate even better.

Beth was sentimental and eager to sympathize. If she knew what Mary was like, knew she had strawberry blonde hair, knew she made papier-mâché flowers, knew she would smile and stroke her sons' faces when she found them asleep, how would she feel knowing one of her own let her be torn apart by walkers?

Gareth's idea might have some substance after all, she considered. To either make the girl react in terror at what they were, or come to despise her old group and let them know it would be a delectable taste, melting on the tongue and easing its way down her center.

Finding an eagerness replacing her rage, she glanced at Gareth, noting his fixed gaze on the road ahead. She wondered if he felt the same excitement at the prospect. He had to, she thought. Why else would he be so keen on the plan?
After they reached the three cars, they parked and shuffled out of the vehicle. Alex, Kaylee, and Cynthia filed around to meet them in the middle of the road by a green station wagon.

"You check any of these out to see if they might run?" Martin asked Alex.

"Uh, no." Alex pointed to the women beside him. "They did."

"The green wagon's in good shape. The others ain't," Cynthia informed him.

Martin glimpsed at the vehicle behind them. "Right… I'm gonna look at all three again."

"She and I looked," Kaylee added, taking a step forward. "The green one's the best bet."

"Okay, but I'm still gonna take a look myself."

"If Alex told you he looked at 'em and said the wagon, you'd believe him," Cynthia accused.

He sighed. "I just wanna make sure."

"Guys," Gareth warned. "Martin was a mechanic for… how many years?"

"Ten," he replied as moved past Cynthia and toward the wagon. "Fifteen if you count when I didn't get paid for it."

Mechanic or not, Theresa thought he would have believed Alex if he had told him the green wagon was in decent shape. However, her thoughts were so fixed on Gareth and on Beth that she couldn't care less for their squabbles.

* * *

After many miles of travel, the sun long since set, the sedan and station wagon were parked on a road headed north. In the wagon, Theresa and Alex relaxed in the back seat while Albert and Cynthia took to the roomy back hatch.

The air inside the car remained a comfortable warm thanks to the overcast sky that kept temperatures steady. Theresa laid across the moderately comfortable seat with her head resting against her folded-up jacket on the door. Alex had his head on Theresa's chest, his ear over her heart. She had done the same with him the night before—used his heartbeat to kill the deafening silence. That and Theresa knew Alex would never pass up an opportunity to have contact with her breasts.

She laid in silence for a while, dragging her nails up and down Alex's spine, watching his chest rise and fell as she listened to his breathing. Every now and then, he would take an extra fraction of a second to inhale or exhale, striking her with a fear that he had died. It was irrational, she knew. There was nothing wrong with him and no reason to think he would flat stop breathing. Yet it was a fear ingrained in her from seeing people during the Siege ceasing breathing in their sleep and never starting again. Mary told her she had the same fear too.

As her thoughts returned to Mary, and of what Beth's reaction would be when she learned the truth, a muffled sound of distress diverted her attention. The sobbing seemed like it came from right outside the car. She waited a minute for someone on watch to go over and address it, but no one did.

Since Alex was a heavy sleeper, she decided she could sneak away without him waking. Slowly raising herself up, she nudged him off of her, settled him on his side, and placed her jacket under
his head. As she hoped, he didn't stir. She then opened the car door and pushed it open. Stepping out, she shut it behind her only enough to ensure it wouldn't fall back open.

The crying continued from the front of the wagon. She then realized it could be Beth and that she might have just enlisted herself to pretend to care she was upset. Yet the cries sounded familiar, so she pressed on.

Creeping to the front of the car, she saw Kaylee sitting in the dim light with her legs crossed and face buried in her hands.

"Kaylee?" Theresa asked in a low voice. No response. Theresa stepped over and sat down beside her. "Hey, what's wrong?"

_Dumb question_, she thought. What was wrong could fill a book.

Kaylee let out a whine in her hands, then lifted her head and turned her ruddy face to the woman next to her. "I came out here to... I thought I might..."

"Might?"

She picked up an object from her left that was previously hidden from view—the pistol from the man in the store.

Theresa let out a gasp, then snatched the gun from her hand and dropped it to her side. "Kaylee, no!" she exclaimed louder than she intended.

"It's okay." She sniffled. "I decided not to."

Theresa knew Kaylee hadn't been at her best since Terminus fell. Her obvious lies about the cold medicine and her detachment gave it away, but she was surprised to see how bad it had gotten.

She trailed her fingertips over the top of the other woman's hand. "Kaylee..."

"It's been hard not to think about it," she said, looking at the gravel road beneath her feet. "I mean, first Beth, then the guy in the store."

"What does Beth have to do with it?"

Kaylee looked to her, confusion mixing with the pain on her features. "Have you seen her wrist? There's a scar. Clearly, she tried to slit her wrist once."

"I haven't noticed it."

"Well, she has bracelets on that sort of cover it up."

"I can't keep lying by omission for you," Theresa spat out, knowing the words were unsympathetic, but she felt them necessary.

Kaylee wiped her eyes and looked back at the ground. "I know. Like about the medicine that wasn't for allergies?"

"Yeah. That's not fair to me."

"I'm sorry. I know it's unfair. I just can't have Gareth seeing me as weak. And I've been trying, I have. Like what you told me in Atlanta about appreciating the little things. I'd been doing it at Terminus and it helped. It really did. But out here? It's like I can't get a firm hold on any of those
things. It's such a nice night, right? Not too warm, not too cold. But I can't get myself to care."
Theresa brought her hand back to her lap. "Then why... why did you decide not to?"
"Seriously? You have to ask why?"
Theresa stared back at her.
"You know what you would've done when you found me dead out here."

*Oh.*

Theresa drew her lips into a tight line and folded her hands together.

"Not sure how you would hide it from Beth," Kaylee continued, "but you hid that girl from her earlier."
"Kaylee—"

"I'd end up like Priscilla, like Alan, like Jayne, like—"

"So would any of us."

"And you know how it'd be? Poor, *poor*, Kaylee. Such a tortured soul. Martin, start a fire and get out the salt."

Theresa thought of lying and telling her it wouldn't be like that, but that's exactly how it would be. No time to stop and mourn, only time to eat. Many times, she had thought of herself in that position as well. In fact, her mind and body once allowed her to feel it. One morning, she awoke with the affliction she thought she had long since left behind: sleep paralysis.

She awoke to a cold, steel table underneath her, damp air clinging to her naked, motionless body. Why she opened her eyes after that, she never knew. It was still her room before her, but with Wesley and Gavin lumbering over her donned with aprons and electric saws. Wesley kept pressing on her chest in an attempt to crack her sternum. Over and over again, he bared his weight down on her like she was made of something unbreakable.

Paralyzed, she couldn't beg them to stop. No matter how much she screamed in her head that she was Theresa, that they knew her, no sound came out. All she heard was the revving of the electric saw and Gavin casually whistling.

The worst part was knowing the men who dissected her. They were her acquaintances, not the strangers who treated her like a piece of meat. For that reason, it almost made the nightmare feel worse than the reality.

Of course Kaylee wouldn't want that to happen to her. Able to experience it firsthand or not, *of course* she didn't want that.

*Jesus Christ, Theresa.*

"I'm... I don't why I didn't think of that," she mumbled, meeting the other's gaze with remorse.

"I figured I could run into a swarm of walkers, but I'd be eaten in that scenario too. No way to die and not be someone or something's dinner." Her jaw trembled and she broke down into tears again.
Theresa wrapped her arm around her and pulled her close. "Kaylee, Kaylee..."
She buried her face in the crook of Theresa's neck, thoroughly wetting her skin as Theresa tried to stay alert enough in case they had company.

They remained there for a while, Kaylee eventually resting her head on Theresa lap, clutching her thigh. Theresa traced her nails up and down Kaylee's back in an attempt to soothe her to sleep. She wished she could fall asleep too, because the tune Gavin had whistled in her nightmare had become stuck in her head.
In earnest, Gareth thought arriving in D.C. and delivering Beth to her group a changed woman was unlikely. It was also by far the riskiest scenario, but it was one of many, and he took great solace in each of them.

Another way he imagined it playing out was locating the other group, killing Beth, eating her, and letting her people know about it before disappearing. What a shock it would be to have those they thought dead going up a pants size from dining on their sweet Beth. Or perhaps they could track them just closely enough to figure out they were being watched. All the while leaving notes that would read: "Big Brother is always watching."

Typical ways of violent revenge were predictable, obvious, and could be boring. Instead of that brand of vengeance, he could pursue one that might not even require the spillage of blood from someone whose name he knew. Whichever way the cards fell, an air of relief washed over him whenever he laid eyes on the girl.

The morning had been slow to get going. Theresa awoke groggy and appeared to near falling asleep while standing. For that reason, he watched to see if Alex too shared the same affliction. Yet he seemed as adept as ever. Unsurprising, as Gareth thought Alex actively enjoyed being unconscious.

Again, Gareth found Albert chatting with Beth just as he had advised. After all, what girl her age wouldn't be charmed by such a sweet and delightful boy like Albert? He wondered if their acquisition of Beth would finally get the kid laid.

"Hey," Gareth alerted the rest, a steaming pot of rice and chickpeas resting over the campfire's grate. "Soup's on."

Assuming they could scrounge up enough in the meantime, the supply of grain and beans could last them at least three more days. Knowing where his next meal would come from was a luxury Gareth had been without since Terminus's fall.

The group proceeded to gather around the fire and sit on the ground while Gareth doled out predetermined portions for each. Giving Kaylee one less spoonful earned him a sideways glance from her, but portion control was necessary. Alex was given one less spoonful as well, but gave no ill reaction. Although Gareth had the suspicion he and Theresa were swapping their plates when he wasn't looking.

"I should've been a nutritionist," Gareth said, scraping with a spoon at the remains of his breakfast on a plastic plate. "I'm good at monitoring portions."

"So, what did you do before all this?" Beth asked, placing her empty plate down before her.

He set his plate down as well. "Would you believe me if I said I was Batman?"

Theresa scoffed. "If you were anyone, you were from the Marvel universe and you were Doctor Strange."

Gareth squinted and scratched the back of his head. "What were you again? Wonder Woman?"

She sighed and gave a half smile. "Ha-ha, you know I'm Harley Quinn."
"Really?" Beth asked. "You'd wanna be The Joker's girlfriend?"

Theresa threw Beth a piercing glare. "She's more than just 'The Joker's girlfriend.'"

*Oh Beth, you really stepped in it.*

As a few of the others tried to hold back smiles, Alex cracked-up from beside Theresa. She whipped her head to him.

He straightened his features. "What? What I do?"

She exhaled and climbed to her feet. "I'm ready to get back on the road. I can give you her history if you want, Beth."

"Um, sure," Beth replied, nodding.

"She's right," Gareth declared, standing up as well. "Let's hurry it up."

* * *

After the group had readied themselves, Gareth stood in front of the driver's side door of the red wagon and stared at the gauze over his missing fingers. The immense pain from each touch and change of the material had subsided, but occasional stabs of pain and phantom sensations lingered. Earlier that morning, he felt the tickle of an insect on his index finger and swatted at it only to whack his own thigh.

"Hey, Gareth?" Alex's voice sounded, accompanied by his advancing footsteps.

Gareth let his arm fall to his side and turned to his brother. "Yes?"

Alex slid his hands in his pockets. "I um, you think Kaylee's okay?" he whispered.

"No, but I think she's managing."

"See, 'cause I don't think—" His sentence was cut off by shuffling from the wooded area by the side of the road followed by a booming male voice.

"Well damn," the dark-haired man said, approaching with a drawn handgun. "This was easier than I thought." He pressed the weapon to Alex's neck.

Alex pulled his hands from his pockets and raised them, his eyes wide and face tense. As Gareth's heart pounded, he moved his hand to the gun in his holster, the stranger pushed the weapon further against Alex's neck. "Ah, ah, ah!" he warned.

Gareth gave in and raised his hands as well.

"Jesse, that ain't the guy!" another man shouted as he and two more armed men materialized from the woodlands. "It's that one!" He gestured his weapon to Gareth.

At that time, Theresa, Beth, Kaylee, Cynthia, Martin, and Albert emerged from the other side of the vehicles on the road. Theresa, Martin, and Cynthia held guns while the others stood in a ready position, creating a stand-off between the two parties. Jesse then pushed Alex aside, making him stumble and hit his shoulder on the side of the car. Retaining his standing, he met his brother's gaze with desperation.

"You!" the newly arrived man yelled at Gareth, passing Alex. "You killed my sister!"
"What sister?" Gareth asked, his voice smooth, but mouth dry.

The leader pressed his rifle square against Gareth's jaw. "Yesterday mornin'! I fuckin' saw you put a bullet in her jugular as she was runnin' off!"

*Oh, right. That.*

For Beth's sake, he considered denying it, but knew there was no way she would believe him.

"We've been out there all mornin' watchin' you fuckers and waitin' for the perfect opportunity."

"Okay," he admitted, releasing the breath he didn't know he held. "I did. But she stole rice and chickpeas from us."

That part was true.

"We don't give a fuck!" another man yelled.

"Alright, now, now, Franklin," the leader began, "why don't we reach an agreement, huh?" He locked his aggressive eyes on Gareth.

*This won't be good.*

"What do you want?"

He cocked his head to the side. "Them girls you got with you are somethin' else. How do you get anything done?"

*Oh, great.*

Staring the man dead in the eyes, Gareth replied, "The answer is no."

"You killed our girl, you loan us one of yours. Come on, man."

"No."

"Not the one with the ring on her finger, alright? We'll be nice."

"What part of 'no' do you not understand?"

"You ain't got much of a choice here."

"Hey!" Martin shouted, looking at the red-haired man at the end of their group. "I thought I remembered you!"

"What?" the redhead asked.

Martin smiled wide. "Nineteen-ninety-nine!"

"The fuck you talkin' about?"

"Got real plastered at that bar, then I took your girlfriend out in my truck and she blew me 'til I got dizzy."

"The fuck you did!"

Gareth was unsure if the tale was true, but all four men had averted their attention to Martin.
"Then she pulled out a bottle of massage oil, slicked herself up, bent over the backseat, and I slid my cock right into her tight little a—"

"Shut up!" the leader cried just before a shot rang and a bullet pierced the area below his chin. A wave of blood streamed down his chest as he dropped his weapon and crumpled to the ground.

*Martin, you genius,* Gareth thought, just as surprised to think the words as he was grateful for his actions.

The redhead cursed and aimed at Gareth who ducked behind the car as two more shots sounded. Hurrying his gun out, he slowly crept back up to see Alex hitting the man who had held him at gunpoint in the back of the head with the end of his rifle.

Theresa sped to the blood-soaked leader on the ground, grabbed his fallen weapon, and rushed over to the man Alex incapacitated. Just as he prepared to deliver a second blow, she hopped beside her spouse and began repeatedly striking the man across the face. Each blow emitted a spray of blood and one or two teeth. Bringing his weapon down, Alex edged away from his wife and turned the corner around the car.

Gareth then crouched down to the still wriggling leader, unknowing if the man could still hear him. "$\text{You know what?}"$ he questioned. "$\text{This was easy.}" With no need to waste a bullet, he sheathed his gun and pulled out his knife. He then drove the blade into his counterpart's forehead, ceasing his movements.

*Damage control.*

Resheathing the blade and standing up, he turned to take in the rest of the scene. Theresa had stilled and heaved through breaths, Jesse's face having been reduced to a bloody mush. The other two men laid on their backs, a bullet hole through one's forehead and another through the other's eye. Pools of blood seeped out from beneath their heads as Martin searched one's pocket. Gareth then made his way around the car and found the rest gathered on the road.

He took authority and pushed into the crowd, finding Cynthia sitting on the pavement clutching the crimson-stained side of her ribcage. Kaylee knelt beside her while Albert had his arm over her shoulders. Beth and Alex simply stood by.

"What happened?" Gareth asked.

"It'll be okay," Kaylee replied, looking up and over her shoulder. "$\text{It's just a flesh wound.}" 

"Martin knocked one of the guns from their hand after I shot the boss," Cynthia explained. "$\text{Then the guy lunged at me with a knife before Martin got him.}" 

Gareth noticed Beth hadn't turned to the carnage behind her, her attention focused only on the injured woman in front of her.

"Albert, will you get some tissue from the sedan?" Kaylee asked. Albert scrambled up and to the back door of the sedan and pulled it open, digging through a bag of supplies.

Theresa then came streaming past Gareth holding her gun with one arm. Alex turned to meet her and accepted the one-armed embrace she gave him.

"Theresa? Alex?" Gareth interrupted.

They separated from one another and turned to face him.
"Search the bodies. Kaylee has all she needs."

They nodded and proceeded past Gareth to join Martin in his endeavors. Gareth took one last look at Beth where she now sat on her knees before Cynthia, assisting Kaylee and Albert. He didn't expect her to recoil in horror at a matter of self-defense, but he suspected she was avoiding it.

Turning around, he spotted Martin holding up a semiautomatic with a faint smile on his face. Curious if the racy tale he told was true, he marched over to the other man.

"I used to have one just like this," Martin commented, sliding his hand down the barrel.

"Did you really know that guy?" Gareth asked.

"Nope," he replied, lowering the gun. "Made the whole thing up. Thought it'd distract 'em and it did."

He placed a hand on his hip. "Well, thank you, Martin."

Martin gave a nod and looked back to his new possession. Gareth hoped he appreciated the gratitude being as it was the closest thing to an apology he was going to get.

"Alex?" Theresa called, holding up a pair of brown boots taken from one of the men. "Will these fit you?"

Alex strolled over and examined them. "Yeah, I think so."

Slow scrapes of the concrete sounded from behind Gareth—Beth's pace. He turned his head to see her treading in small steps toward the bodies, her face still as stone and her lips parted.

Gareth slid in front of her, preparing the best big brother voice he could. "Beth?" She looked up at him, her blue eyes vacant. "You know we had to."

She drew her lips in a tight line and nodded.

"The woman they were talking about, that is true. I did kill her. And I..." He sighed, shutting his eyes for a moment. "I wish I'd told you. I should've told you. You'd just met us though, and after what Martin did, I didn't want you to think we were trigger-happy. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have kept that from you. But there was no other way than to kill her, I promise. I'm not proud of what I did. Or of this."

"I wish you'd told me."

"I know, I know... God, I'm sorry."

Beth kept her eyes on his, unwavering, as if they were the only two people there. A lie could be told easily with words, but the challenge he faced was telling them with his eyes.

Hers were sincere. Innocent, yet dark. Hopeful and eager to find something worth living for. If he could convince her his eyes were just as honest, just as regretful about the loss of life as she was, then he could convince her of anything.

"Please don't keep somethin' like that from me again," she said, as much of a demand as a request.

"I won't. I promise you, I won't."

* * *

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"I won't. I promise you, I won't."
Earning Gareth several stern looks, the four men were left there. It pained him to do so, but they had just eaten after all and had enough room to spare it.

Gareth chose to drive the sedan, sitting next to Beth in the front, and ready to live out the lie to the fullest. A bad liar hid, he believed, and a good liar faced their mistruth with a smile.

Kaylee had elected to drive behind them to monitor Cynthia. Albert, of course, wanted to stay beside his injured friend. That left for the interesting combination of Theresa, Alex, and Martin the back. Gareth glanced in the visor, amused to see Martin sitting as far apart from Theresa as he could get, arms crossed and staring out the window.

When they first headed out, Martin had taken to cleaning his new rifle, propping it against the edge of the seat and between his legs. The joke had practically written itself, but Gareth held back, figuring Beth wouldn't appreciate such cruel taunting. That and Martin had just saved the lot of them.

Theresa appeared to be asleep, her head on Alex's shoulder. Alex had already proclaimed his new pair of boots much more comfortable than the previous ones which had left his feet sore and blistered.

Despite Cynthia's injury, Gareth gauged the physical status of his group an eight on a scale of one-to-ten. Theresa catching up on sleep and Alex's relief from aching feet had brought it from a seven to an eight.

Mentally, he thought them a six and half. When he ranked them a three and below, they were nonfunctional. Much of the median range was due to Kaylee and her attempt to hide her unhappiness. Yet she failed to show it in her actions. Her attendance to Cynthia's wound was as impeccable as it always was.

"I can't let you do this," Beth said after a while.

"Do what?" Gareth asked.

"Go through all of this just for me. If you hadn't started comin' this way, you'd have never had that girl steal from you. You'd have never run into those guys. No one would have to have died."

"They were rapists," Theresa interjected, apparently not asleep. "It's good we did run into them."

"I know that," Beth defended. "But what about that girl you had to… I doubt they treated her like a princess. She could've gotten away one day."

Gareth sighed, glancing away from the littered country road and to the conflicted woman beside him. "Beth, if you get hung up over what could've been, you won't be able to see your hand in front of your face."
The group happened upon a large supermarket while passing through a small town. Inside the building, they found only a few walkers and no living people. Alex, Gareth, Beth, and Theresa had just made it to the kitchenwares aisle while the others searched elsewhere. Unfortunately, the good butcher's knives looked to have all been taken.

Stepping beside Theresa retrieve a bottle of water from her backpack, Alex noticed her wedding ring's diamond and band bore stains of blood and a piece of congealed matter.

"Hey, Tess?" he spoke up. She turned her head. "You got um…" He pointed to her left hand.

She looked down at her ring and let out a short sigh before unzipping her backpack. Pulling out a bottle of water and unscrewing the cap, she then dampened her sleeve with it and gently scrubbed at her ring.

It wasn't the first time the jewelry had been stained with gore, nor would it be the last. The first time being during the scuffle when the original owners of the rings were removed from the traincars. Better Alex figured they go to people who would cherish them rather than be tossed away or melted down for scrap metal.

Once Theresa finished with the water, Alex plucked it from her hand and took a long sip.

"Alex," Gareth chimed in from the end of the aisle where he stood alongside Beth. "Why don't you tell Beth the cute story of how she and you met?"

Alex re-screwed the cap and squinted. "Uh, it wasn't a cute story."

Gareth began to stroll down the aisle, Beth trailing beside him. "Really? I swore something cute happened like you dropped your chemistry book."

"Heh, yeah." He handed the bottle back to Theresa. "No, I just told her my name and she told me hers and that was it." Beth nodded as she and Gareth stopped in front of them. "No sparks, no longin' eye contact, no unicorns. Sorry."

"He did say I kept my three-fifty-seven Magnum in good condition," Theresa added, turning around, tossing the bottle in her pack, and zipping it up.

"Oh, did you—did you meet after the turn?" Beth questioned.

"Yep," Alex replied.

Beth smiled. "My sister met her husband after the turn too."

I know.

Alex sought to change the subject when she continued, "They got a ring from walkers and we threw 'em a weddin'. She could only find a yellow dress to wear so no white. And Gle—her husband—wore black jeans." She laughed, turning to the shelf beside her. "It was so… so good, you know? How it's supposed to be." She ran her hands over a red and white washcloth.

"You can't count on 'supposed to's', Beth," Gareth schooled.

Her smile faded and she brought her hands back to her sides.
"Hey," Alex broke the awkward silence. "I'm gonna head over to the automotive section and see if Martin needs help."

Gareth smacked his hands together. "Right. We'll meet up front once we're all done. Capeesh?"

"Capeesh," Alex confirmed, then gave a wave to Theresa before gliding by Gareth and Beth and clearing the aisle.

Heading down the wide lanes, he passed a multitude of merchandise both shelved and strewn about the floor. A $3.99 sale sign for flip-flops lying along his path reminded him the world had ended during summertime. It made him consider looking for a new pair of shoes. Despite the comfort of the ones he took from the men, the soles were worn and the laces frayed.

Before he could make up his mind, he picked up a threatening hiss from around the corner of the next aisle. He pulled out the handgun from his belt holster—grateful Gareth had let him don a lighter weapon—and slowed his pace to a tiptoe. Peeking around the corner, it took him a few seconds to register what he saw.

A live walker, torn in two at the stomach, rested on the floor while something small fumbled around in its guts. Leaning forward a tad, he focused in and recognized it as an undead infant. Skin hanging loose around the adult's sides told him the baby had torn its way from its mother's womb. The little thing made light hisses as it attempted to turn to Alex, revealing its soulless and glazed-over eyes.

Of all the horrid things he had seen, the things that had long since blurred into one large swatch of red, this was the worst. The purest spark of life had been twisted into the most obscene parody of itself. If regular walkers were monsters, then this thing was a demon.

Warmth rolled down his cheek that he hadn't realized had materialized. He promptly wiped the tear away, desperate to avoid someone seeing such a reaction. Perhaps he could leave it, he thought. Find Martin, then lead him past the aisle as if he hadn't seen it before. Martin would, of course, take the first action and kill both walkers; he was the guy who had his hands around a baby's neck after all.

A self-hatred washed over him. Was he really so weak and such a coward as to go out of his way to avoid killing a walker because it upset him? Or to have been relieved when Theresa took over and killed the man in the road so he didn't have to?

Just do it, damnit.

He swallowed to negate the hard ache in his throat, took a deep breath, and tried to force away the new tears that tried to spill forth. Stepping over beside the walkers, the adult reaching up at him, he turned his gun around and gripped it by the barrel. The baby walker continued to wiggle around and hiss along with its mother, then pulled itself forward enough to graze the top of Alex's boot with its tiny hand. Just as he noticed the umbilical cord it dragged beneath it, he grit his teeth, leaned down, and struck it in the head with his weapon's handle.

The soft head crumpled, turning to red, and it ceased moving. As much as he wanted to avoid it, he made himself see the red, letting it blur together with the monolith of crimson-soaked memories he held. Alex then stepped over and repeated the action on the adult, taking several rough strikes before it went down.

Oh god, I can't let Cynthia see this. He knew the sight would upset her if she found it—probably more than it had him.
Unsure what else to do, he wiped off the weapon on an assortment of bath mats from the shelf above, then tossed them over the bodies, somewhat veiling the scene. Relieved the view was covered, he turned away and continued on to the automotive section.

The image of the child played in his mind on repeat, reminding him of what was and what could never be. His aunt Patricia and her husband John's baby Mira and her grisly end flashed by, as well as the abandoned thought of the children he could never have.

* * *

"Here, you don't wear plaid or hoodies enough," Theresa joked, handing Alex a plaid-patterned red hoodie. He laughed and accepted it despite wishing it were another color, running his fingers over the soft fabric. She stared at him. "You need to try it on."

Alex shrugged. "I'm sure it fits."

"It's a medium, but you don't want to bring along something that won't fit because of Gareth's anti-pack rats rule. Actually…” She looked down at the various articles of clothes draped over her forearm. "I probably have too much." She frowned.

"Spread it out between the other girls?" He put his hands underneath the hoodie and pulled it over his head. The garment felt a bit snug against his two other layers, but assumed sans one or both shirts it would fit fine.

"Ugh, they're off looking at stuff together. I'm not joining in on a hen party with Barbie. And—" She glanced down at his feet. "You changed your shoes?"

"Oh, yeah.” He gripped the plastic ring that held the price tag on his sleeve and yanked it free with a snap. "I figured it'd be best to grab new ones since that guy's was all worn. These fit just as good." He crumpled the paper tag and let it fall to the floor.

The truth was each time he looked down at his former boots, he remembered the little hand that had touched them.

Gareth's 'time's up' whistle echoed through the store, signaling they were overdue to meet him.

Theresa flipped through the clothes she held. "Oh… I'll go through them once we're up there."

"With Gareth listin' the ones you picked. Maybe even by brand," Alex commented, pulling his hoodie off, then attempting to smooth down his hair.

They then took off toward the registers, their hurried footsteps resounding as they moved across the tile. Reaching the front, they spotted Gareth, Martin, Cynthia, Albert, Kaylee, and Beth with various supplies. They held a few while the remainder rested on the checkout counter.

And as Alex expected, Gareth stood ready with a notebook and pencil ready to take inventory.

Oh, joy.

He figured Gareth was over the moon with his new acquisition as the only notebooks they'd come across were used. At last, Gareth could continue his diligent note-taking and inventory as he had at Terminus. If it hadn't burned, somewhere in Terminus lay a book with the archive of female residents' tampon, pad, and cup usage.

Gareth jotted down the supplies they gathered, which included a decent amount of edibles—
meaning they could make do without hunting anyone for a while. Theresa also revealed a tape recorder and a pack of batteries. Alex knew just what she intended them for.

"I'll leave this here," Theresa began, brandishing the recorder's package, "but I have to prove to Alex he has an accent because he keeps denying it."

Alex smiled, relieved Theresa had something recreational in mind. Anything to distract him from what was in the back was more than welcome.

"Everyone knows it but you, Alex," Gareth replied, shaking his head as he scribbled away on the notepad.

Afterward, the sun setting, they decided to set up camp in the store for the night. Theresa suggested they take up in the back where the blankets and pillows were. Yet Alex shut down her attempt, arguing that staying closer to the front would be better. Luckily, Gareth agreed. Several of them settled in the clothing section, using garments thrown about the floor for comfort. During Alex and Theresa's preparation of the tape recorder, Cynthia asked if she could join them. They agreed.

"Okay, let's hear it," Theresa said to Alex, sprawled across a pile of maternity wear along with Cynthia.

Sitting across from them on an array winter coats, Alex got the sudden feeling he was the only boy at a girl's sleepover. Almost smiling at the thought, he brought the recorder up to his mouth and then paused. "What do I say?"

"Just say your name," Theresa replied.

He clicked the device on and spoke, "My name is Alexander Terrance Ellwood, and I'm... recordin' my voice so my wife can make fun of me." He shut it off and hit rewind. Theresa breathed out a laugh.

"Terrance?" Cynthia questioned with a grimace.

Alex shook his head. "Yeah, I know."

"Was it a family name?"

"Nope." In fact, Mary and Michael had told him they regretted giving him the name. A jab of sadness hit him at the thought of his departed parents. He attempted to push it away and focus on the task at hand.

"You know, Albert's middle name is Martin," Cynthia added.

"Oh no," Theresa laughed. "Okay, now play it. Please."

He hit the play button on the device and heard his voice repeated back to him. His face fell as he realized Theresa was right. "Oh..."

The other two burst out laughing, wiggling around like it was the funniest thing ever. He laughed along with them. Hell, it was funny, genuinely funny. A sound and sensation that felt as refreshing as climbing into a freezer on a sweltering summer day.

"Man, I'd be mad at y'all right now, but I'm too used to girls laughin' at me."
Theresa made a mock sad face. "Aw."

He could have hugged them both for giving him such a gift.

* * *

Wound-up in a mess of clothing beside Theresa, Alex awoke in the morning to a mumbling from the other side of the clothing department shelf. The voice resembled his brother's, which didn't surprise him as he had taken to the space the night before. His voice continued at a steady pace with no interruption from another.

Alex would be unsurprised if Gareth loved to hear himself talk so much that he spoke to himself, yet the way he kept it up struck him as odd. Pushing a few garments off himself, Alex sat up and edged himself forward on his knees to the side of the shelf. Unfortunately, even with ceased breaths, Gareth's words were inaudible.

Then sounded the familiar click of the tape recorder. Alex looked over his shoulder to see if the gadget was still in its place beside Theresa's feet and found it gone. A shuffling of Gareth's shoes made Alex scramble back to his place beside his spouse, pull a few shirts over himself, and shut his eyes. Sure enough, his brother's footsteps grew louder until they were a few feet away from his ear.

"Hey guys, time to get up," Gareth urged. "Alex, you have a huge algebra test today."

He supposed that was funny too, something he ought to laugh at. But Alex was unsure if relating to him so normally was safe. Last time he had, the next day his brother humiliated Martin under the veil of pulling the truth from him.

Alex pretended to awaken, making a low noise in his throat as Theresa stirred beside him. Opening his eyes, he saw Gareth remove his hands from his knees and head back where he came from, shouting a wake-up call. He thought to whisper to Theresa of Gareth's use of the recorder, but figured he would wait until she was fully roused.

* * *

Leaving their equipment in the vehicles overnight would have left them vulnerable to theft. Therefore, they had moved it inside the market during their stay. And much to Alex's displeasure, they had to reload the cars before they could leave.

It filled him with regret to have to depart the place. If Beth weren't their mission, they might have planned a stay there. However, the building had no fences, and wide open spaces were less than ideal. Still, as they packed-up, Alex caught himself giving a cross look to Beth as she chatted with Albert.

Oh, Albert. Don't get too close.

Alex may not have been an expert on flirting, but he had seen Albert give eyes to enough women—including his wife—to know what he was thinking.

In a partial repeat of the previous day's oddness, the arrangement ended up with Gareth, Beth, Cynthia, Kaylee, and Albert in the wagon, while Alex, Theresa, and Martin took the sedan. Albert wouldn't leave the marginally wounded Cynthia's side, and Kaylee wanted to watch her injury. Beth would never want to share a car with Martin and Theresa, at least not voluntarily. Alex wondered why Gareth didn't tell Cynthia, Kaylee, and Albert to take the sedan, but then recalled Gareth's idea that sticking rivals together might help them 'mend fences.'
He didn't foresee any road trip bonding between he, Theresa, and Martin.

Alex elected to drive despite not having done so in a while and being less than stellar at driving stick. Nonetheless, he was eager for anything to help get his mind off the reddened memories from of the previous day.

Pulling out of the parking lot, the group began making their journey out of the desolate town.

The road led them to a pleasant area at the edge of the former community. A place of rolling hills and plentiful trees mixed with open spaces that were lovely even during the winter. As they came up over a considerable hill, a horrendous blemish made the two vehicles slow their stead to a halt. At the bottom of the hill on the left side existed a sizable horde of walkers. A few speckled the road, and one or two had wandered over to the other side.

A static-distorted voice came through the speaker of the walkie-talkie that rested in the front seat cup holder. Alex grabbed it up and held it to his ear. "What? I can't—I can't hear you, man."

The back left door of the wagon then swung open and Cynthia leaned out. Alex rolled down his window and stuck out his head.

"We're gonna go through!" Cynthia shouted. "Start slow, then when they start to hear us, gun it and try and swerve around 'em if they get too close!" She pulled herself back inside, then shut the door.

"She say to gun it?" Theresa asked. Alex nodded.

The wagon began to move forward at a slow but steady pace down the hill. Alex switched gears and rolled onward behind them. At two-thirds of the way down the hill, a few walkers appeared to be turning toward them. When they made it three-fourths of the way down, the wagon sped up and zoomed ahead. Alex increased his speed a bit in preparation as the wagon curved around the undead that lumbered forward. When the wagon had almost cleared the walkers, Alex bit the inside of his cheek and bared full weight on the accelerator.

The mass of the horde had begun to migrate over the road, but Alex saw enough room to skirt by. He veered away from one undead that stumbled toward them, hitting its outstretched hand on the side of the windshield frame and taking it clean off. Looking ahead, he saw the back of the wagon creeping forward, having cleared the area.

He turned a bit more, hugging the side of the road as one tripped over another and fell in front of the car. The vehicle lurched back at the impact and became stuck, wheels digging into the walker and spewing up blood as they spun.

"Shit!" Alex cursed and gripped the gearstick to pull it back. When it didn't budge, his heart began to race.

"Go back!" Martin yelled, smacking the back of the driver's seat.

"The fuck you think I'm tryin' to do!?" Alex released his foot from the accelerator while furiously shaking the gearstick, a tremble claiming his hand.

Theresa wrapped her hands around the shaft of the stick as well and pulled back, but to no avail. "Why isn't it moving!?" she shrieked as the horde descended around them.

Alex flinched to the side when the hand of a walker slapped his window, peering at him with cold and hungry eyes. Looking around—past Theresa's frantic eyes and Martin's shouting—he saw the
entire car was surrounded by the eager corpses.

No, no, no, no, no, no…
Chapter Notes

Hey so this series is nearing one year old (in early November)! And my love these crazy cannibals has only grown. I'm not sure what to do to celebrate (if anything), but I have been thinking about writing a little epistolary companion series (during Terminus's cannibal heydays) of journal entries from various characters.

And you know at this point, I'm actually glad the Terminus storyline ended so fast because if it hadn't, I would've never written this.

"Get back here on the floor! Now!" Martin cried, grabbing Alex and Theresa by their shoulders.

Pulling the key from the ignition, Alex complied and scrambled after Theresa into the back seat. Due to Gareth's numerous safety drills for possible deadly scenarios—which included a walker-surrounded vehicle—they knew what to do.

All three hunkered down on the floor, squished up next to each other in awkward positions. As cover to hide them from view, they removed their top shirts and attempted to blanket themselves; shielding their faces and staying as still as possible. Alex pushed as much of his legs as he could under the front passenger's seat, then reached his trembling hand for Theresa's and gripped it hard, finding hers also shook.

The car continued to rock and sway, voices of the undead droning on like a chorus. Being still wasn't much of a chore as fear had frozen Alex in place. Yet the way his heart raced and his whole body quivered made him feel like he rattled the car. Shared heat from their close quarters and his adrenaline rush had him sweating and he could smell it on Theresa and Martin too. The sticky substance on his forehead, chest, and back erased every trace of cleanliness from the previous night's wash.

He flinched when he heard the glass crack from the window on Martin's side.

Oh, god. Not like this…

He always hoped that when he died, it would be quick and no one else would go with him.

Please, please, please, please…

The sounds of the dead filling his ears, he began doing what his mother taught him to do many years before to center himself: taking things one minute at a time. Therefore, he began counting the seconds leading up to one minute.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven…

Thoughts of his mother and her grisly end overcame him. The same fate that might bestow him, Theresa, and Martin. Even Martin he didn't wish such a painful end on. He didn't have to be an empath to know the man was terrified too.

As his count reached the hundreds, he noticed the vehicle swaying a bit less.
Theresa shifted beside him. "How much longer do we stay here?"

"Until we don't have to anymore," Martin replied.

Alex hadn't heard that phrase in such a long time that he nearly shuddered at the memory of his brother speaking it on that fateful night.

He gulped and forced himself to form words, "Maybe Gareth and them will create some diversion to lure 'em away."

"I wouldn't count on their help," Martin warned.

"They're not just gonna leave us, man," Alex argued.

"Maybe not. But we can't lie around here and wait to be rescued, Alex."

Alex parted his lips to contend but pressed them back together when he realized Martin was right. Yet he fervently wished they would come running to save them anyway.

Always waiting to be rescued, he thought of himself with contempt.

"There's a lighter in the backpack," Theresa said. "We could do like the first scenario and light our shirts and throw them out of the car. Then tear off one of their arms or something and cover ourselves with it. Have a fire and a disguise."

"I don't think the fire's a good idea," Martin said.

"Yeah, we might not be able to get it far enough," Alex added. "And it'll light the fuckers up and torch us before we even get gutted-up."

"I wish this damn thing had a sunroof," Theresa griped, tracing patterns on the top of Alex's hand with her thumb.

No one spoke after that, the walkers outside and the occasional shake of the car replacing their voices.

Alex told himself that of course Gareth and the rest would wait for them. Gareth came up with the drills for the situation and knew what action they would take. There was no way he and the others would leave them for dead.

When Theresa tried to edge herself a tad to the right, Alex realized she was sharing skin-on-skin contact with Martin. The shirt she discarded left her in only a tank top, leaving her bare arm pressed flat against Martin's. Aside from trying to push closer to Alex, she hadn't expressed any discontent over it. Though it wasn't too surprising—one can't complain about personal space when in a foxhole.

He began counting again, reaching the hundreds once more when his wife spoke, "I think we should—"

"Lemme take a look," Martin interrupted. "Then you, Alex."

"Okay," Alex confirmed, turning his head to watch as Martin brought his hand up and pushed his shirt back just enough to get a look at the window.

He pulled the garment back over his head. "They ain't lookin'."
Alex repeated the action, nudging away the fabric that blocked his view, and peered out the window above him. He saw three sets of dead eyes, none of which looked into the vehicle. "We're good."

"Okay," Theresa declared. "One at a time?"

"One at a time," Martin agreed, before adding, "Alphabetically."

Alex let out a loud sigh and reluctantly separated his hand from Theresa's, realizing it was damp with sweat. He wiped it off on his pants and pulled his legs from under the seat. Lifting off the plaid hoodie, he gave a cautious glimpse to the window and sat up. Relief from the ache of motionlessness flushed through his system as he moved.

"Alphabetically?" Alex reminded Martin.

As Martin crept upwards and looked out his window, Alex met Theresa's wide eyes as she held her shirt over her head. Figuring he might be dead within a few minutes, he mouthed, "I love you."

"I love you," she mouthed back, brought the shirt down, and sat up.

"I still don't think a fire distraction is a good idea," Martin commented as he slid the backpack that rested on the seat to Theresa.

"I think so too," Alex said. "Tess?"

She nodded, doing a stretch with her arms, then pointed to an idle walker by Martin's window. "That one's skin looks about ready to fall off. We should grab it—easier to tear up."

"Okay, get ready," Martin warned as Theresa took the backpack and equipped it over her shoulders. She then pulled out her knife from her holster and handed it to Martin.

She and Alex both moved toward the driver's side door as Martin carefully opened it, causing their target walker to turn to them. Martin drove the blade into its skull just as it began to let out a hiss.

Theresa and Alex both leaned forward and helped pull it inside. Martin then shut the door only enough for it to latch just as a few more undead took notice of their presence.

Walker cries sounding louder from outside, Martin plummeted the knife into the corpse's gut.

"I hope this works," Theresa said as she got back into her shirt and heaved a handful of stomach matter onto it.

Alex put his hoodie back on, took a helping of gore, and smeared it on the fabric. A gag threatened to creep up his throat at the smell of it. "It does."

*R * *

Racing down the slope that he believed would hide them from the herd, Gareth was bombarded by questions and worry from his group.

"They know the drill," he reassured them. "We did it at least three times. We just have to go on a little more so we'll be safe. They know what to do."

"What drill?" Beth asked.

"Back when all this started, my dad and I came up with the idea to have test runs for scenarios we
might get ourselves into. One was where we were trapped in a car with a horde around us." He
slowed the wagon to a halt on the road's center. "We huddled on the floor and covered ourselves
with whatever we could—like our clothes or a blanket. The theory was the once the walkers
couldn't see us anymore, they'd forget we were there. They operate on instinct alone, not memory.
Then if we could, we would light something on fire and toss it out to distract them. Then grab one
and cover themselves with its guts as camouflage. I'm sure you've heard of that last trick before."

"I remember that drill," Kaylee said. "But don't we have to help somehow? Come on, Gareth."

Gareth squeezed his eight fingers around the steering wheel. "How far can you throw something on
fire from here? Or throw your voice? Or do you have a stash of flares you didn't tell me about?"

"Don't talk to me like I'm fucking stupid," she snapped back.

"Kaylee, don't—"

"Guys, come on," Albert interrupted.

The inside of the vehicle was quiet for a moment before Gareth continued, "They're smart. They'll
get out and they'll come this way. They'll travel away from the horde and on the side it's thinnest,
which is on the right. I don't want to leave the wagon in a wide open space, so we'll need to stash it
somewhere."

"You have an invisibility cloak you didn't tell us about?" Kaylee muttered.

Gareth turned around in his seat to meet Kaylee's peevd eyes from where she sat across from him
in the back. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, alright?"

She didn't reply, instead shaking her head and looking out the window beside her. Gareth had no
idea why she was acting so hostile. Not only had she never caused conflict, she had been almost as
quiet as a mouse since Terminus.

He diverted his gaze to assess Cynthia and Albert's morale and unsurprisingly found Cynthia with
tears streaming down her face. "Cynthia, it's going to be okay."

She sniffled and nodded. "I just wanna find 'em," she sobbed.

Albert reached over and gripped her wrist. "We will."

Gareth then turned back around and started the vehicle forward again, orienting to the left. The car
jostled around as it hit the grass. "Hey, Beth?" he began as they rolled toward a suitable clearing,
"we're still going to Washington."

"Oh, I know," Beth replied. "Get your people. I'd never wanna hold you back from anythin' like
that."

Gareth knew Beth's nauseating kindness was too good to be true. After all, she rubbed shoulders
with Rick. Who knew what grisly things the man had done in front of her, or she herself had done.
One of his greatest anticipations was the moment when he could tell her of Rick's bloodthirsty
promise to kill him with the red-handled machete.

Oh, Beth. Am I really that much worse than Rick?

He stopped the car when he reached the clearing and turned it off, stashing the keys in his pocket.
The group climbed out and took as much as they could along with them.
"Pack rats. Gareth still felt they had taken too much despite the limitations he set.

"Beth or Albert, we need to find you a tree to shimmy up so you can get a good look at the horde," he instructed.

"That won't waste time?" Beth asked.

"They'll be trying to be as still as they can right now if they're alive." Dread hit his center at the realization of his last three words.

For the first time, it hit him his brother could be dead—or would be soon. Ripped apart like their mother. He pictured himself standing before Alex's shredded body, having once again been unable to protect his family. Martin he wouldn't miss. And he would certainly be saddened if they lost Theresa, but the thought of losing Alex made his heart sink to a place it hadn't been since his mother died. Since his father died, his girlfriend died, the world ended...

He forced it away and pressed on to locate an appropriate tree for climbing. Whatever happened, he would have to deal with it. There was no other option than to deal with it. Not anymore.

Finding a tall and climbable oak, Beth proceeded to scale it. When she got as high as she could, she shouted, "They look pretty still! I just see the walkers though! No fires or nothin'!"

"I don't think they'll do the fire thing," Gareth yelled back up. "Be hard to get far away enough. Too bad the sedan didn't have a sunroof like the wagon. You see the car?"

"No!"

"Okay, come down now because you're being a little too loud."

Beth said something that sounded like an apology and began to descend.

"You think they got it to drive back out?" Albert questioned from Gareth's side.

"I don't think so," he replied, looking to Albert whose eyes were locked on Beth.

_Those jeans frame her ass perfectly, huh?_ He had always found the kid completely predictable. In fact, Albert reminded him of Alex at that age.

"I don't like the idea of just waitin'," Cynthia said from a few feet behind them.

"I know," Gareth said, turning around to see her standing next a despondent-looking Kaylee. "But we don't have another option."

"What if we wait and they don't show up? Or they go a different way than what we think?" Or—"

"If you have a better idea, I'm all ears."

"No, I don't—I don't have an idea." She crossed her arms and looked at her feet. "I'm sorry."

Beth reached the bottom of the tree and prepared to jump down. "Gareth? I hate to say this, but..." She hit the ground. "I lost my group member through an even smaller bunch of 'em. What if we split up?"

"We're already split up, Beth."

Her face fell a bit before perking back into one of resolution. "Then what else can I do to help?"
"What you've been doing."

"You've already helped us so much." Cynthia said with a smile. "I'm glad we're goin' to Washington. I don't know if that Eugene's cure you heard about is real, but I hope."

When Beth's features contorted into confusion, alarm bells rang in Gareth's head.

"Who's Eugene?" Beth asked.

_God_ damnit, Cynthia!

Cynthia's warm smile morphed into one of nervousness. "The—the scientist. Uh, your friend Carol told you about him?"

Beth shook her head and backed up a few steps. "Not his name. How—how do you know his name?"

Gareth's head raced, trying to think of a saving throw. "She must have dreamed it," he said, stepping forward and putting on his best salesman face. "She gets dreams mixed up with real life all the time."


Beth shook her head again. "No, no, you were…" She backed up another step, stumbling a little as her foot hit the base of the oak.

Gareth forced a smile. "Trust me, she always does that. She once dreamed Theresa's name was Trisha and actually called her that."

"I knew you couldn't be really helpin' me, I knew—"

"Beth," Albert said, stepping over to her, _"we are_ helping you, I promise. Cynthia just dreamed it. Believe me."

* * *

With their clothes, skin, and hair covered in the putrid remains of a walker, they waded out into the sea of undead. The smell of decomposition was so overwhelming that Alex had to breathe through his mouth to keep from gagging. The dead eyed them as they pushed past them, but none attacked. Being among them instead of fighting them was like entering a new world. He could envision how it would be to become one of them, to slip away into an easy nothingness. A deep, red abyss.

The mass of horde still centered from the way it emerged but slunk toward the opposite side. Moving through the herd seemed like it would be endless, that the mass would go on forever, but they eventually reached the edge. The three then clipped the woodlands, hoping to deter possible suspicion from the creatures by venturing out into the open.

"We _need_ to yell for 'em," Martin whispered.

"That'll pull 'em right here," Alex said of the walkers.

"Yeah, I know. Understand the tone."

Alex grit his teeth and ignored him. He expected a retort from Theresa, yet she gave none. Although he could tell by the look on her face she wanted to.
They came upon a downhill slope and strode down to its bottom, out of sight from the creatures. Alex expected to see the wagon somewhere down the road but instead saw nothing. The three stopped dead in their tracks.

"Where are they?" Alex asked, worry claiming his voice.

"I don't know," Martin said, letting the linen bag he carried fall to the ground. "But this is comin' off." He pulled off his soaked overshirt and tossed it behind him.

In their imminent danger, Alex had forgotten the ruined hoodie he wore. He pulled it off and discarded it as well. His shirt underneath was also tarnished, but still wearable for the time being.

"They should be right down there," Theresa said, slipping off her backpack to dispose of her own wretched top. "They wouldn't have…"

"No," Alex stated. "No, they'd have never left us."

"Then where are they?" Martin questioned, snatching up the bag he dropped.

He slid a step toward Martin. "My brother wouldn't leave us."

"Then where are they?"

"I don't know!" Alex yelled, instantly regretting raising his voice.

Martin threw up his arms. "So what do we do now? Huh?"

Theresa stepped in front of him and they exchanged glares. "We head down the road. They must have parked further than we thought, okay?"

"Okie-dokie, queen bee," he sneered.

She rolled her head back. "Oh, don't start that. Please."

"You're right." He raised his hands. "Sorry."

A walker's hiss sounded from the top of the hill.

"Oh, shit," Theresa alerted, scrambling over to retrieve her backpack.

The three then took off down the road. And when another undead groan sounded, they sped up and jogged toward the thin stretch of trees to the left.

"I think they're migratin' down this way," Alex said, making sure to watch his step over a few fallen branches. "We need to put some space in between us."

Beside him, Martin tripped and plummeted to the ground.

Alex and Theresa stopped and spun around. "Get up!" Alex whisper-yelled.

Martin reached for his right ankle. "Holy—oh god, I think I—"

"Are you kidding me!? Come on!" Theresa pressed.

"I'm not doin' this on purpose!" Martin argued as he climbed to his feet only to then whimper and fall back to the ground.
"Don't tell me you twisted your ankle," Alex said as he and Theresa knelt down on either side of him.

"I felt a pop, so yeah, I—"

Theresa took a rough hold of his upper arm. "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

Martin threw her an annoyed look but allowed her and Alex to hoist him up.

Alex had never known anyone as accident-prone as Martin. It was to the point where it was a rarity when he wasn't sporting some kind of injury. If their situation weren't so dire, he might have laughed at the fact.

Martin threw his arms around either of the two's shoulders and they hobbled away as fast as they could.
Easier Game

After hustling through the woods searching for a safe space, Theresa, Alex, and Martin came across a secluded country neighborhood. They were given access to the backyard of a two-story brick home via the fence's unlocked gate. Theresa and Alex then lowered Martin down on the patio beside the sliding glass door that led inside.

Standing back up, Theresa mused, "Okay, there might be some—"

Two walkers began beating on the glass from indoors.
"If there's two biters in there, then no one alive oughta be," Martin commented, heaving through breaths.

Alex and Theresa then went on to slide the door open and take out the undead with their knives. Pushing the bodies out of the way, Theresa noticed one wore a blue and pink flowered housedress. She found it atrocious as it screamed dissatisfied suburban housewife thus reminding her of her mother.

They settled Martin onto a loveseat in the center of the kempt, yet dusty living room. An orange blanket rested neatly folded on a beige armchair, and magazines still lay sprawled out on the coffee table sporting the date of the month before the outbreak. The preservation of the place surprised her as just about everywhere worthwhile had been ransacked.

Martin laid back on the sofa and set his injured leg on the coffee table, pushing one of the magazines off the edge.
"Where's it hurt?" Alex asked, crouching down, pulling up Martin's pants leg, and running his still bloodstained hands across his skin.

Martin gestured toward the bottom of his ankle. "Right th—don't press down on it!" He grimaced.
"You wanna do this yourself!?" Alex barked. "Just shut up and let us play nurse." Martin scowled and laid his head back on the couch.

Theresa's lips twitched up a bit, she liked hearing Alex snap at Martin. In fact, she found him particularly attractive when being assertive.

The couple proceeded to treat Martin's ankle. First by wrapping it in a cut section of the orange blanket, then fastening it with an assortment of safety pins retrieved from the linen bag. Alex did most of the actual handling of Martin's leg which Theresa meant to thank him for later. She had had enough physical contact with Martin that day to last a lifetime.

After the deed was done, Theresa stood up and turned around. Facing the archway that led to what looked like the kitchen, she spotted a round clock above the passage, its hands stopped at exactly 5:15. The imminent danger had pushed away the current reality, but staring at the dead clock, it sunk in; they were in an abandoned home and out of the way from the rest of their group. And due to Martin's injury, he would have to stay put for at least a day.

Her muscles tensed and rage bubbled up from inside her, desperate to find a way out. It erupted and she kicked an end table to her left, causing it to fly halfway across the room. "God damnit!" she shrieked.
"What the hell!!" Alex exclaimed.

"Whoa," Martin said.

She glared at the toppled table. "I cannot believe this!!"

"What—why are you kickin' things!!?" Alex demanded.

She spun around, pointing to Martin and his widened eyes. "Look at this! How long do we have to stay here now because of him!!?"

"You think I did this purpose??" Martin defended.

"I know you didn't, but now we have to… No, we can't wait for your fucking leg to heal."

Alex took a cautious step forward and raised his hands. "Look, it's pretty bad. And we can't go out and look for 'em with him hurt. You know that."

"Alex, we can't just sit here for what—two, three days??"

"We have to! You know we can't…" He looked away from her.

"Leave poor Martin here," Martin finished.

She raised a hand to her hip and shook her head. "Of all the people we'd get stuck with it'd have to be… and we have to stay put!! I just…" She marched over to an identical end table and shoved off its glass-shaded lamp, causing it to shatter on the hardwood floor beyond the rug.

Alex barreled in front of her and stared her down. "Hey? You wanna break things? Okay, let's break things." He turned and upended the lamp's table, making it crash into the scattered mess of shiny glass shards.

She stared at the wreckage, the ruin bringing the untouched room alive. "You think they can track us here? Or that they'll try?"

"'Course they will. They are."

She gulped, silent for a few moments before stomping past him and toward the back door. "No, you stay here and watch the fucking kid. I'm going looking."

"What? No, Tess—"

She slid the door open with a force and began making her way across the yard.

Alex raced after her, catching up and stepping in front of her, bringing her to a sharp halt. "You don't need to be out here your own."

"I just can't sit on my ass when we're separated from our people—your brother."

His eyes narrowed. "Don't pull the 'your brother' card on me to make me bad about wantin' to take a breather here."

She crossed her arms. "I'm not. I'm just saying we've gone way out of the way and—"

"My brother knows what he's doin'."
"And what if they don't find us in what, a day or two? Gareth's still obsessed with getting Beth to wherever the fuck he thinks he's getting her and playing out his fantasy. Looking for us would just prolong that."

Alex frowned. "He would not… he would never give up 'cause of that. And that wouldn't go over well with Beth either."

"You have a lot of faith in the guy." She scoffed.

"No, I just know him. He's not all gone, trust me."

"Then why have you been keeping a hundred-yard distance from him ever since he did that to Martin?"

He glanced to the ground. "Because… 'cause you have to pick your moments. And he ain't anywhere near one of those moments now." He heaved a breath. "Okay, what if we put up a few markers near here? Nothin' to yell out 'here's three saps you can rob' to other folks, but breadcrumbs ours understand?"

Theresa relaxed her shoulders. "Like what?"

He pursed his lips. "Like… 'journey onward, Doctor Strange?""

Through her lingering anger, a tiny laugh found a way past her lips. "That might work."

"It's all we can do for now."

* * *

"Come on, Beth. You can't outrun us," Gareth warned as he, Kaylee, Albert, and Cynthia followed the girl.

She hadn't believed him and took off running away from the horde's location. Either the trust he had seen in her eyes had been false, or was so flimsy that one accidental name drop was able to smash it in an instant. His perfect fantasy of how she would find out had been ruined, but he kept his composure, determined to adapt to the abrupt change in plans.

Gareth scanned the area in front of him as well as above, suspecting she might have taken to a tree. "If I kept lying I know you'd never believe me, so I admit it: we know your group. Let's see…" He sauntered forward a few steps, the others tiptoeing behind him. "Rick, Carl, Judith, Daryl, Michonne, Maggie, Glenn, Noah, Carol, Sasha, Tyreese, Abraham, Rosita, Tara, and Eugene, of course. I've always had a great memory when it comes to names. And guessing how they're spelled too."

He decided to omit Bob. From the information he had gathered, her home was destroyed and she was separated from all but one of her people before she was taken. For all she knew, Bob had died somewhere between then and now.

He received no reply from her. "We didn't kill them if that's what you're thinking."

No, we didn't actually kill Bob…

The crunching of fall leaves sounded from the oak tree in their immediate path, followed by a cautious and visibly shaken Beth emerging while clutching a blade. Gareth almost brought his hand to grip the gun in his holster, but left it by his side. He then held up his hand to signal the
three behind him bring down their weapons.

Beth stiffened her posture. "I never met anyone called Abraham. Or Rosita, or Tara."

"Carol told you about a quote, 'scientist,' unquote, right?" He hated speaking her name, hated calling her anything other than "bitch."

Beth nodded. "Yeah."

"Just not his name. Well, he had some friends, I think. I'm not an expert on how they came together, but your people have some new blood."

"Was that true what you said about Noah?" she demanded. "Or was that a lie too?"

"That was true. Alex did meet him at Grady and gave him a drawing and a Hershey's Kiss. And yes, Alex is really my brother." He gave a playful roll of his eyes.

His gesture failed to soften her affect. "What happened? With your people and mine?"

The look on her face told him she already knew the interaction had been bad. Of course she did. What other reason would there have been for this secret?

"Our dinner party wasn't exactly a pleasant one. There used to be more of us, a whole lot more. More than your group."

Beth gulped. "They kill 'em?"

"What do you think?"

In time, he would tell Beth about each and every one of them. Mitch, the admittedly idiotic, yet excellent butcher. Gina, the promiscuous Louisianan and talented shot—with one notable exception. Greg, the former Army officer and diligent supporter. Mike, the slacker, but superb gardener. And Mary... he would tell her everything about his mother.

"Why'd it happen?" Beth asked.

Gareth sighed and pressed forward, causing her to wince back. "Okay, okay, I'll be honest: we started it. They came to our home—our last residence wasn't a camp, by the way. It was a place with four walls and a roof. We captured them because we needed them, but somehow they managed to destroy it with fire, bullets, and rage, at least on Rick's part. He has some serious anger problems, you know." She didn't speak, but flitted her eyes across him and his group. "Afterwards," he continued, "we wanted to retaliate. Problem was, there were too many of them. Funny how that worked out. At first, we had the numbers and we lost anyway. Then we didn't have the numbers but thought we'd know better this time, but no. We almost didn't get away. It was humiliating. Utterly and completely humiliating."

She gave a slow nod. "So what? You were gonna take me to 'em and stick my head on a pike?"

"That depends on what you do next."

"Don't look like I got a choice."

"There's always a choice. I always give them a choice. I would've given your people a choice too if they'd have let me."

"Then let me choose to leave!" she pleaded. "I didn't do any of that to you."
It was time to bring out the big guns.

"They killed my mother, Beth."

Her face fell. "What?"

"Mine and Alex's mother. Carol, the one you escaped with. She did it. Albert saw it. Isn't that right?" He looked over his shoulder to Albert who frowned and nodded.

"It sounds like she had her reasons. She would've had her reasons. You had a reason for killin' that girl the other day, then all those other guys. Or did you?"

"Yes, we did have a reason for killing her. That was the truth. And if you sit down and listen, I can tell you all of our reasons. No more lies, I promise. I don't have a reason to lie anymore."

"Fine." She lowered her knife a few inches.

He took a deep breath, searching for the place to begin. "Before your group ruined our home… I guess you could call us happy. We were functional, we had a roof, fences, running water. You know, the good stuff. How we maintained that wasn't easy at all, and a long time before your people came, others did. Bad ones. Now, I won't compare you and yours to them. They may have done some of the same things, but the former did it just because they could."

Her face softened a bit and he asked, "Beth, have you ever lost a parent?" She nodded. "Have you ever lost a friend?" She nodded again. "Have you ever seen it happen?" She nodded once more. "Have you ever been raped?" She shook her head. "Have you ever been really, I mean honest to god hungry? Think about it."

She looked inward and gave a shake of her head.

"Lucky you." He meant it. The only people he wished hunger on had been the Occupiers, who the surviving few had delivered to them.

She parted her lips slightly and said, almost inaudibly, "I'm not lucky."

Gareth gave a bittersweet smile. "To me, you are. Those men, they—"

"I know what you're gonna say." She raised her voice.

He shrugged. "Alright."

"You had some bad people come in and hurt you, kill some of you. I know what you're sayin'. I lost my home, twice. You don't have to prove to me that you've gone through shit too. We all have. And I'm sorry about your mom." A light sheen of tears wetted her eyes. "I really am."

Her remorse over her group member's actions tugged at a place deep inside him. One that flushed with gratitude at the apology. No one had ever apologized for the things they had done to him or his people. Although Beth wasn't directly responsible, or even indirectly, the words saturated his center with a gratefulness that had almost had him speaking the words, "thank you."

That was until he remembered. Recalled the sight of his mother dead on the church floor. Of all the places for her to die, it had to be there. Not just her name etched on the floor, but her blood and the body he never got to bury lying there until she would degrade into bones. And the teary-eyed Beth before him knew the woman who did it. Called her a friend, called Rick her leader.
The gratitude drained from his body and he told her the hard truth, "Carol let in walkers that tore her apart. That's how she died."

Beth did a double-take. "What?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, did you think she very chastely put a bullet in her head? No, Albert had to do that after she died."

"She—"

"Sit on that, Beth."

"Well, what do you want me to do, huh? Choose sides? Pick which one of y'all's right in all this? 'Cause I won't! I'm not gonna play your game, Gareth. I just got out of a place that played games with me and no more."

"You need to hear the rest of this first, I wasn't done. Then we can talk choices."

"Fine."

"So, obviously we took back our home from the thugs who invaded, but we were so hungry. And before we got it back I knew that and I thought about it. What we would do if we survived the fight. Then it dawned on me." He paused, hoping to pull a reaction.

Her eyes bored into his. "What?"

"You've hunted. Animals though can be hard to find sometimes and they're not always enough. They weren't enough for us. So we decided to hunt easier game."
Beth considered squeezing her eyes shut and covering her ears, or running in terror and crying until her face was stinging and dry. Yet none seemed to be enough for what she had learned. She felt so naïve to have trusted those people. Her uneasy feeling about Gareth had been right and then some. Never again would she doubt her intuition.

Gareth told her everything, down the trough they used to drain the blood of the people—people!—they butchered and ate. The very room where Rick, Glenn, Daryl, and Bob had been forced into, an eyelash away from death. He told her of Rick's promise to kill him and made a point to illustrate how the other three shook in terror while Rick remained still, eyes filled with eager bloodlust.

Was Rick's promise of a lacerated end a surprise to her? No, she couldn't deny there was something dark in him. Growing and festering with each new blow he received. But he was her leader, her captain, the one who had always taken care of them—or tried to.

What was she supposed to do now?

This was likely her end, she realized. These people were hunters and she was prey to them. Although Cynthia, Albert, and Kaylee hadn't breathed much of a word since Gareth told. It gave rise to a wonder of how much they agreed with their leader's actions.

Her ultimatum was to either stay and accept the terms, to understand just what her previous group didn't, or be a token of revenge left on her people's doorstep. It confused her. Gareth's reasoning and plans seemed flimsy to her, and the man appeared to be in a place that lacked sense. A place she had seen Rick in before at the prison. Either way, she knew if she failed to escape, she would soon face her death.

Tied with the halved rope she had used to strap herself into place in trees so she could sleep, she sat bound in a small, dilapidated shack the group happened upon while dragging her along. Albert took watch over her while the others convened outside, their muffled voices emanating from outside the door.

The boy sat beside her, pistol in hand, quiet except for his breathing. He had avoided her eyes since the reveal. And truth be told, she had avoided his as well.

After a while, Albert finally spoke, "Beth?"

Beth turned her head to see him at last resting his eyes on hers. They were filled with what she thought may have been regret. No flicker of zeal like she had seen in Gareth's. She hardly knew Albert, but he had a childlike innocence that reminded her of Noah. And at times, of herself.

Before he avoided looking at her, she often felt his eyes on her when she wasn't looking. Being checked out by boys was something she could pick up easily, and she had to admit didn't mind his attention. Yet it was a non-issue now. The nice kid she had talked and joked with was a cannibal, a killer. He had sat beside her while she had been tricked into eating what was not in fact a deer, but a human woman.

Of course, she was a killer too. Circumstances had made her one.

"Yeah?" she replied.

Albert looked away from her. "I just have to say that… I don't want to hurt you because of what
your people did. I mean, I wanted them to be hurt. Or at least Carol and Rick, but not you."

A sprig of hope washed through her. "Then why don't you tell Gareth?"

He scoffed. "Yeah, right. He's too set in his ways," he replied. Beth's hope faded. "And besides, there's no going back after this. If you were us, you'd understand. Some things you can never come back from."

"You can always come back. I believe you can. Even from this."

He shook his head and stared down at the weapon he clutched. "You didn't see it. What we did at Terminus to those people. What they looked like dissected like cattle, like sheep. That's it for us. We made our bed and we have to lie in it."

Beth was silent, watching his listless face as he continued to avoid her eyes. Cannibal killer or not, a sadness touched his voice and claimed his features that she felt herself identifying with. "I'm sorry this happened to you."

He raised his head and turned to her. "I don't want pity."

"Albert, I—"

The door creaked open and in filed Gareth, Kaylee, and Cynthia. Beth straightened her posture.

"You don't need to be scared," Gareth said, stepping over before her and Albert. "No one's going to hurt you. Not unless you make the unfavorable choice."

"You think this'll make you feel better, but it won't," Beth argued. "It won't bring back your mom."

"Hey!" he snapped. "I think I know what will and won't make me feel better."

Cynthia crept to Gareth's side. "Gareth?" He turned his head. "Alex? Theresa? Martin?"

He sighed. "I'm sure they're fine for right now."

"We can't just stay put while they're out there," Albert spoke-up.

"They're going to be wondering where we are," Kaylee added, stepping to her leader's side.

Gareth's jaw tensed. "Guys, I know what I'm doing. We'll find them. Just not right this red-hot minute."

Kaylee slid in front of Gareth, staring up the full foot of height difference between them. "Why is she more important than them? She's not going to agree to give us a try. She's going to try to run and we'll have to make her barbecue. So why don't you give up this quasi-revenge fantasy and find your brother and his wife?"

Beth's jaw almost dropped—she doubted anyone ever spoke to him like that. Anticipating something bad, she gritted her teeth.

Gareth raised his hand, clenching and unclenching his fist, before sighing and letting it drop to his side. "No."

Kaylee shook her head and turned, stomping out of the shack with a slam of the rickety door.

* * *
Beth awoke in the dead of night to a shake of her shoulders.

"Shhh!" a female voice whispered. "Beth, I'm going to help you get out of here."

Beth opened her sleep-blurred eyes, trying to make out the figure before her. One of her people must have come to rescue her, she decided.

"Beth, I don't want to do this anymore," Kaylee's voice said.

Confused as to why whichever one of her people's voices sounded like Kaylee's, she blinked hard several times before she realized it was in fact Kaylee. Looking around the shack, she found the others gone. "Where's—"

"I gave them something," Kaylee explained, beginning to saw the rope that bound Beth's hands with an exacto-blade. "Night time cold medicine. I got it at the supermarket and hid it in my coat. They're um—I dragged them outside. We don't have a lot of time, so we need to hurry."

"Kaylee, I—"

"It's him, it's Gareth," she continued. "Ever since Terminus, after we had to let your people go, he's been different. Terminus was a democracy, but we're not a democracy anymore. And now with you? It's crazy. I don't understand exactly what he wants to get out of this." The rope severed with a snap. "Gareth always makes sense, or used to." She began vigorously cutting away at the rope that tied Beth's ankles. "None of this makes sense. And I don't want to do this anymore. I want another way."

Beth watched Kaylee's quick hands work the blade, afraid she would change shop and go for her flesh instead. "Wh—why should I believe you?"

Kaylee ceased sawing at the rope, grabbed Beth's arm, and yanked down her sleeve. "Because of this!"

She gazed down at the scar on her wrist.

Oh.

Was it that obvious to everyone?

"You've tried before," Kaylee said, letting go of her arm and continuing to cut the rope. "You've been close to it. I've been close too, maybe not to the point of doing that. But if this is my life now, then I can't do it."

Beth furrowed her brow. "I don't get it, you know my people won't accept you."

"They've never seen me before. What Gareth told you, they never saw me set the fire." She finished cutting the rope, freeing Beth entirely from her restraints.

She stayed still, denying the other woman the trust it would entail to stretch her freed limbs. "You tried to kill 'em," she argued. "Burn 'em alive. My people. How do I know this ain't some test Gareth set-up?"

She sunk onto her knees. "I know," she sniffled. "But that's when I thought they were all dead and I had nothing else. Nothing. And I thought I could do this, live day-to-day out here. But I can't, not like this."
"Please. I already feel like shit for wanting to abandon them, and I wish I could bring some of them with me, like Theresa. She's the closest thing I have to a real friend and if she was here, I don't think I could go through with this. I couldn't look at her face and then leave. But I heard you say you thought people could always come back and this is me wanting to come back. Wanting out. Wanting another way."

If the girl before her were lying, then she had a gift for it. The tears in her eyes and desperation in her words tugged at Beth's center, the way Albert had when they had spoken earlier. Yet she had to offer more than a mere look to convince her.

"I can't trust you."

"I'm letting you go." She picked up the severed rope and tossed it aside. "You can go now. And I know how to track, I know how they track. I can help cover our prints. I promise you, I can get us away."

* * *

The sun setting beyond the horizon, Martin sat in a family room lounge chair resting his injured ankle on the coffee table. A quaint fire in the room's stone fireplace burned only enough to avoid possibly igniting the uncleaned chimney. Theresa had since calmed down from her hissy fit and discovered several cups of instant noodles along with a quart of water and a pot for their preparation, as well as forks and spoons.

In the meantime, Martin had been testing the waters to see just how much he could get the two to do for him before they told him off. So far, he had gotten them to bring him a glass of water, and help him to the bathroom where they gave him a change of clothes and a rag to scrub the walker gore off. Though they provided no help bathing which was unsurprising. Although it would have been nice.

Theresa and Alex sitting on the sofa adjacent to the lounge chair, they all dug into the steaming styrofoam cups of noodles. Each one was of the same flavor; hot and spicy chicken. The taste of it wasn't bad, Martin enjoyed spice, but it was a cheap substitute for the real thing. Old, processed, and watered down meat mixed with a host of other materials was unfit to satisfy his palette. He wished some idiot would wander by and accept a bullet in their head.

Just after they finished their meager meal, they tossed the empty cups into the fire, catching with a blaze. Theresa then leaned over and pulled something out of the linen bag by her side. As she set it on the table, Martin's eyes widened at the beautiful sight—a half-full bottle of Jack Daniel's.

"Found this under the bed in the master suite," she explained. "Might as well have a little." She shrugged.

"I could actually go for it too," Alex said, peering at the bottle.

"I get extra, right?" Martin pressed. "I mean, I'm already useless."

Theresa sighed, nodding. "Sure, why not?" She proceeded to pour a bit into each of their empty glasses.

As she handed Martin his, he felt a jolt of déjà vu—the amaretto she had come to his room and requested for her hot chocolate all that time ago.

* * *

Alex know about that? Know there were some problems his hugs and snuggles couldn't fix?
Brushing it off, he took a sip of the whiskey. The bitter taste burned his tongue and sent a trail of fire down his throat, feeling like fireworks when it reached his stomach. Theresa sipped as much as he did, expressing no ill reaction upon its sensation. Alex, however, barely touched the liquid to his lips before grimacing. Martin sighed internally. The cute little bugger could smoke his weight in weed, but couldn't hold his liquor.

Martin took another swig, emptying the glass, and made a pleased sound. "Jesus god almighty that is good."

"I don't think taking the lord's name in vain to describe alcohol is very Christian of you," Theresa said with a tiny smirk.

_Did she just make a joke to me? She needs to drink more, that was actually funny._

"You've clearly never been around Southern Baptists," he responded. "Biggest bunch of hypocrites you ever met. Case in point."

"Hm." She took another drink.

Martin swore he could already feel the whiskey taking effect. It took a little less to do the trick anymore as alcohol consumption was controlled at Terminus and only allowed on special occasions. Which was rightful, he knew, but it had always miffed him.

Theresa poured herself and Martin another shot after they had finished, Alex still nursing his first. After the fourth glass—one of which Martin sneaked from the bottle while Theresa and Alex had looked away—the warmth from the fire paired with the tingling in his body had him feeling the utmost content. So much so, he began to find Alex and Theresa quite favorable people.

After all, Alex was sweet and his artistic side wasn't annoying as he had previously thought, it was endearing. Theresa was feisty and independent, always kept him on his toes. Good for her.

_Such a nice couple…_

A picture on the wall above the mantel then caught his eye, only just viewable through the dim light—one of two smiling black-haired children of no more than eight.

Long before his brain caught up, he began speaking, "You know what I never told no one? Not even durin' pillow talk with Gareth?"

Alex's face contorted a little.

"And what's that?" Theresa asked, gazing into the fire.

Previous inhibitions gone, he began, "When my sister went apeshit and I had to—" he made a gun motion to his head, "there was somethin' I knew that didn't make me wanna pull the trigger any less. She was three months pregnant."

"Why?" Alex asked, resting his cheek against the back cushion.

"'Cause I knew right from day one of all this what kinda people would make it in this world, never had any doubt. The kinda people that'd threaten to break a baby's neck to get out of a tight spot." He stared down at his empty glass, turning it around in his hands. "That and how was she supposed to be properly barefoot and pregnant while runnin' from biters? And she had to be on her meds are she wasn't right. She wasn't on 'em when she went wild. It was a matter of time for her anyway."
"Who's daddy?" Theresa slurred. "I mean, who was the daddy?"

"Oh, I don't know, some asshole she knew. I never met him."

"It makes sense," Alex said. "You probably spared her a lot of pain. How come you never mentioned it?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "I hate people's pity."

Alex lifted his head. "So you always knew what kinda people would come out on top?"

"Yep. Never had a doubt."

Theresa scooted to the edge of the couch. "If you'd have been at Terminus, would you have argued against putting up the signs in the first place?"

"Fuck yes."

"Could've used you." She let out a humorless laugh.

Alex leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. "You think we were morons when you saw the signs for Terminus?"

"Eh… yeah maybe," Martin replied. "But you know, how come you think I wasn't all that surprised when I found about you?" Theresa buried her face in her hands and let out a whine "What? What I say?"

Through her hands, she replied, "You always bothered me because you came in and weren't shocked by anything."

"How'd that bother you?"

She raised her head and looked at him, firelight dancing across her face. "We were all so naïve at the start and you made it so clear you never were. It was like a… you just reminded us how stupid we were. Of what we should've done in the first place."

He was silent for a bit, looking back and forth between her and Alex's weary faces. "Yeah, well, I hardly think if I'd have been there, you would've taken my suggestion to eat the folks who showed up. It's not somethin' you can be told, it's somethin' you gotta learn."
Awaking to a frantic shake of his shoulder and the anxious repeating of his name, Gareth opened his sleep-stricken eyes to find daylight had come.

"Gareth! Gareth!" called the blurred figures of what appeared to be Albert and Cynthia lingering over him.

He pushed himself up on his elbows, a heavy weight threatening to pull him back down. "God... what? What's..." Glancing around, he noticed he was outdoors. "Why—why am I outside?"

"Kaylee and Beth are gone," Cynthia said.

He leaned forward and rubbed his face with both hands. "What do you mean they're 'gone'?"

"She means this." Albert handed him a torn piece of notebook paper. "After we woke up outside feeling like we were hit by a truck, we found it in the shack where they were gone."

Rubbing his eyes again, Gareth pulled the paper from Albert's hand and focused on making out the scribbled writing:

\[
I\text{ can't do this anymore. I'm getting a way out. I'm sorry for drugging you. Goodbye Albert, Cynthia, Theresa, Alex, Gareth, Martin.}
\]

\[-Kaylee\]

Gareth squeezed his eyes shut, trying to will himself out of the dream he must have been having.

"She left!" Cynthia shouted. "She fuckin' drugged us, dragged us out here, and left and took Beth with her! She fuckin' left us!"

The way her voice pierced his ears assured him he was not dreaming.

No.

This was a trick, he concluded. Beth escaped, drugged them, pulled them outside, wrote the note to frame Kaylee, took her hostage, and left. There was no way she would leave them out of her own free will.

No.

Gareth climbed to his feet, heaviness again threatening to force him back down. "No, that's not what happened. Beth must have gotten free, forced her along, and faked the note."

"Why would she do that, huh?" Albert asked. "There is no reason for her to have done that. None."

Gareth began to argue when it dawned on him that there was in fact no reason. "I... No, she couldn't have..."

"You did this," Cynthia accused, glaring at him.

"Excuse me?"

"You and your little dictatorship here! You've lost your way, Gareth. And this whole stupid ass
thing with Beth? I only went along 'cause I thought it'd help your little issues about what an oh-so-sad failure you are! But no, it made it worse!"

Electricity coursed through his system, negating the drug's effects. "I was trying to get us closure for what they did to us! Something, anything is better than how we left it!"

"No, you missed your chance and you still won't accept it. Boo-fucking-hoo you're a terrible leader, you failed us. But it's over, get the hell over it! And you know what? You are a terrible leader now. Not 'cause of Terminus but 'cause of this bullshit!"

Her voice slashed like daggers against his every nerve and he stepped toward her, bringing their faces mere inches from one another. "I have done my best trying to keep us alive! Do you think you could do this!? Because I don't think so. You'd just cry over flowers being too pink and you'd never be able to butcher someone on your own because it's just too damn sad." Her face twitched with a flash of hurt.

"Hey!" Albert interjected. "You don't get to talk to her like that!"

"No, it's fine, Albert," Cynthia assured him. "I don't care what you say, Gareth. I care what you do. And who are we gonna go after now, huh? I swear if you're thinkin' of goin' after Beth and Kaylee and not Alex, Theresa, and Martin, then I'm outta here. I'll look for 'em myself without you."

He shook his head, raising a hand to his hip. "Beth and Kaylee are closer and we can track them directly from here."

"Are you serious!?" Albert demanded. "Let them go!"

" Seriously? Let them go? We don't let them go. We never do. What would that say about us?"

"She made her choice no matter how fuckin' dumb it is!" Cynthia contended. "We need to find your brother. Gareth, come on."

"You know what?" Albert questioned. "I hate to play this card, but you know what Mary would want to do. She'd want to find her son."

Gareth's jaw trembling, he clenched his teeth together in an attempt to make it stop. "Don't bring her into this."

"Too bad, because I am. You know as well as I do what she'd be telling you."

As much as he hated to admit it, the kid was right. After all, Mary had struck him when she learned he had left Alex in Atlanta for the trade. He recalled how sick with worry she was for him and how elated she became when he returned. Gareth knew his mother would have taken off to find Alex the very minute they stopped searching so they could handle Beth. And she probably would have found them already.

"Okay," he murmured. "Let's keep looking for Alex, Theresa, and Martin. But then we have to find Beth and Kaylee."

"I think we should let 'em go," Cynthia said, crossing her arms.

"Kaylee's a traitor now, Cynthia."

"She just wants to be happy and that ain't with us. I think she's a dumbass for doin' it, but I want her to be happy too."
"Why don't we vote on it?" Albert suggested. "When we're all back together, we'll vote on what to do. Like we're supposed to."

Gareth heaved a sigh. "Okay. Okay, yeah. We'll do that. Now, let's gather everything and eat something real quick. Give me a few minutes first to clear my head. I don't like... what did she give us? Some kind of NyQuil?"

Cynthia shrugged. "Feels like it."

She and Albert then proceeded off toward the shack, opening the creaky door and disappearing inside.

A songbird chirped overhead, illustrating the fresh and sunny morning. Based on the sun's position, Gareth pegged it around seven to eight AM. Mornings were his favorite time when the rest of the day was open and full of possibilities. This day was no different.

Strolling over to the side of the building, he lowered himself onto the ground and rested his back against the wall. It crossed his mind to retrieve the tape recorder he had been using for more personal musings, but decided against it. Closing his eyes, he tried his best to envision his mother in front of him. Images of her appeared along with his departed father, Michael, and girlfriend, Chelsea. He avoided imagining the latter two's counsel when he could, but they often showed up anyway, telling him what he was uncomfortable to hear.

Mary came to him wearing the pink button-down shirt she had worn to work every Friday before the turn. Michael materialized next to her, donning the simple smile that formed wrinkles at the edges of his eyes. And Chelsea sat beside Gareth, laying her head on his shoulder as he stroked her long black hair.

"Why did you do this?" Gareth pictured Mary asking. "Did you think I'd want you torment that girl because it'd make it better?"

"Why else would I be doing it?" he replied in a whisper.

"I wish they were all dead, you know that, but it's over. It's not like last time with the Occupiers. You missed your chance. There was too many of them. It's time to let it go."

"Alex is the last one of us you have left," Michael said. "He's your family, your brother. What would you do if he were dead? If you found him, Theresa, and Martin dead?"

"I'd just keep going," he replied. "I'd have to."

Mary reached for his hand and he imagined her touch warming his skin. "I know you have to. You always have to keep going, but you're not right now."

Heat formed behind his eyes. "I was just trying to not to fail them again. To give them some kind of resolution, something to help. After the Occupiers, we had a way to make it better. We could remember what we did to them and it gave us something. But now they are out there, thinking they've won."

"I know," Chelsea said. "But Beth wasn't even there when it happened. Guilt by association. It's not going to make you feel better if you chop her up and mail her to Rick in pieces."

He cracked a smile. "I'd never be that crude about it."

"You know what I mean."
"They'd find you," Mary said. "They'll kill all of you like they almost did already."

"Deep down you know you'd all wind up dead," Michael added.

"And then where will you have gotten them?" Chelsea questioned. "You said you were doing this for them and for Terminus, but then you'd all be dead. It'd all be for nothing."

"Were you saying something?" Albert's voice broke through his delusion.

Gareth's eyes flew open to see Albert and Cynthia standing at the corner of the shack. "Yeah, just mumbling stuff. It helps."

"Right," Cynthia said, narrowing her eyes. "Well, I'm ready to eat and get goin' 

Gareth rose to his feet. "Of course."

* * *

While Martin remained home alone—a gun resting in his lap for any possible intruders—Theresa and Alex took to a quick scouting of the neighborhood. The place looked to have been a wealthy one with large homes surrounded by rich forestry and high-end vehicles parked in some's driveways. One of which was a yellow Porsche housing a walker that threatened them as they walked by. Alex was unsurprised when he spotted a sign indicating a nearby golf course.

"I still worry he's not safe there," Theresa said as the two advanced down the side of the road.

"Don't tell me you care if he is or not," Alex teased.

She scowled a bit. "No, I just—it was such a pain in the ass to lug him here, I don't want all that to go to waste."

Alex gave a slow nod. "Right." He had a feeling she regretted their group share and care the night before.

"Oh hey, um..." She scratched the back of her neck. "I'm sorry about yesterday. Trying to guilt-trip you using Gareth."

"It's okay."

She shook her head. "No, it's not. It was totally unfair and you were right anyway."

"Yeah, well... I was." He let out a laugh which Theresa returned.

"I just... this whole thing sucks and the last thing I want to do is stay put."

"Hey, hey, I know. You don't need to explain it to me."

"Yeah well, I still feel bad."

"Hey, don't. Like Gare always says: look forward."

She offered him a warm smile, the same one she had the night in the church where he tried to kiss her for the first time. Despite his embarrassment since she was unready for the act, he held the memory dear. Homesickness hit him as they trekked along. What he wouldn't give to curl up and sleep in his old bed surrounded by his artwork on the walls.
An upcoming bricked mailbox sporting a written message then caught his eye. "Someone else is leavin' notes."

Only when they made it right in front of the object could Alex make out the black, sloppily painted words:

*Sipsey or bust!*

"Is that this place's name?" Theresa asked. "Or is there a Sipsey somewhere close?"

"I don't remember one on the map. We should be comin' up on Charlotte though."

A creaking alerted their attention from the house beside them. They turned to see a woman with short, grey-blonde hair standing in the ajar front doorway holding a handgun at them. Unsheathing their own weapons, Alex and Theresa aimed back at the woman.

"What are you doing here?" the stranger demanded, looking the two up and down.

"Probably the same thing you are," Theresa replied.

"We ain't gonna hurt you, m'am," Alex assured her.

*Did I just call her 'm'am'?* He felt it a bit over the top

"How long have you been here?" the woman asked, taking a tentative step forward.

"Just since yesterday," Theresa replied. "We're planning to move on soon. Don't worry, we're not here to encroach your territory."

"So, how long *you* been here?" Alex asked.

"A while," the stranger answered.

"Really? 'Cause not every house has been hit."

"It's a big neighborhood, buddy. I hadn't gotten around to it yet."

Alex put on a friendly smile. "Well you know uh, we can share with you before we head out. We got some supplies, lunch and dinner for later too."

She raised her eyebrows, sarcasm tinting her weathered face. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, we were just seein' what else we might be able to find before we head out."

"It's just the two of you?"

Theresa nodded. "We have one more three houses back keeping watch."

*Probably more like napping or jackin' off."

"It just you too?" Alex asked the woman.

"Just me," she confirmed.

"If you want us to go back to our place, we will. We don't want any trouble."

"We don't have any problems with you," Theresa added. "And we don't have to."
The leg? The head? The chest? Should keep her alive for a bit...

The woman looked them up and down again before lowering her weapon a smidge. "Okay." She took a step back and Theresa fired her pistol, hitting her in the knee.

While Alex's ears rang, the stranger cried out and pulled the trigger on her weapon as she fell on her back, but missed her targets. The two sprinted over to her side and Alex kicked away the gun that rested in her palm.

"Don't move!" Theresa ordered. "Don't make this any harder than it has to be."

* * *

"You're fucking sick," the legless woman declared, lying up against the wall beside the fireplace. "I've seen some shit, but jesus! God, I can't believe how stupid I was..."

Alex, Theresa, and Martin had eaten most of her leg, keeping her alive to preserve the meat. Alex loathed the particular act. He much preferred killing them right away so they wouldn't have to see what was being done to them.

Sitting beside Alex on the coffee table, Theresa laid her finished leg bone on the plate between them. "Alright, listen, we're not doing this because we want to. I mean, we found a little food in there." She pointed toward the kitchen. "But we'd finish that in a day. And now we have you for a day, so we have two days' worth. See? It's one days' worth or two. And with you, we have enough to stay here and be fed for two more days. It only makes sense."

Her only response was to shut her eyes.

"Hey," Alex said, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "What's your name?"

She opened her eyes halfway and murmured, "Alex."

"Oh, that might be a problem, 'cause so is mine."

"Why don't we just call you 'Ally?'" Theresa asked, gazing into the fire instead of at the woman she spoke to.

Ally remained quiet.

Martin leaned forward from his place on the lounge chair. "Yeah... you know I hate to ask, but y'all haven't built me that splint yet, so—"

"Oh, I'll do it," Theresa said, climbing to her feet.

"No, no, I will," Alex volunteered.

"No, I need to go too," she said. "Come on, moron, girls' meeting in the bathroom."

Alex felt his muscles stiffen. He had only been alone with the meat once and had hoped never to be again.

Theresa moved over to the chair and helped Martin up, then allowed his arm around her as he kept his right leg off the ground. After she guided him out of the room and outdoors, Alex debated over whether to speak to his namesake or not.

Ally's half-lidded eyes had opened all the way and she stared at him, her expression part malice
and part devastation. Her eye color was a lovely shade of light green that he felt tempted to comment on, but given the circumstances, figured she might find it disturbing.

"So, uh..." He twiddled his fingers. "You from around here?" She continued boring her eyes into his.

Idiot. Might as well have asked her if she saw the game last night.

"Hey listen, I wish we didn't have to do this, but we do. It's nothin' personal. It's you or us and I gotta pick us. I gotta pick me and Theresa and even Martin over you. I know that don't fix it, but I just wanna let you know."

Ally glanced down. "Theresa... so are you two an item?"

He nodded. "Uh, yeah. So you see why I gotta put hers and my—"

Ally lurched forward and plucked the wedding band from Alex's finger, then hurled it into the fire.

"Hey!" Alex bolted up, searching to see where it landed and spotted it on a log consumed in flame.

He attempted to pull the ring back using his shoe, but instead pushed it forward to where it fell underneath the woodpile. "No, no, no, no, no..."

Kicking away various wood and the grill rack, avoiding catching his shoe on fire, he saw the ring by the back wall. A narrow space allowed him to slide his foot back and pull the ring out of the fireplace and onto the tile. Alex then knelt down and picked up the scalding hot jewelry with his sleeve.

It was stained with grey and warped into an oval shape, unable to fit on his finger. Turning to face Ally, he saw a slight smirk on her face. The sight made his cheeks flush red. He dropped the ring on the rug and kicked her across the face, forcing her to cry out.

"You stupid bitch!" He kicked her again, this time hitting her below the jaw. She emitted a choking sound as she fell on her side.

Moving his foot down, he started to kick her in the gut, Ally whining with every blow.

"You ruined it!" he screamed, striking her one last time before Theresa rushed in.

"What the hell happened!?" she shouted, meeting him by his side.

Alex turned to her, breathing heavily. "She—she threw my ring in the fire!" He pointed down to where his wedding band lay.

Theresa crouched down and picked it up, her mouth gaping open as she analyzed the damage. Then handing the ring back to Alex, she marched over to Ally and pulled her up by her shirt collar.

"Don't fuck with us," she spat. "I told you this only has to be as hard as you make it. Got it?"

Ally nodded. "Sorry." She looked to Alex. "I—I won't do anything like that again. I promise."

Pleading with Alex as if he were the biggest threat took him aback. It dawned on him that he had never struck anyone when he hadn't needed to. Gareth was always the one the meat feared the most. After all, he was the leader, the talky one, the one everyone else took orders from. Yet in his namesake's eyes, he was the bad one—the violent one.
As upset as he was over the ring, his anger faded at the fear Ally showed of him. It was not a reaction he enjoyed causing.

"You—you uh, leave Martin out back?" Alex asked, trying to add a fleck of normalcy.

Theresa released her grip on Ally's shirt and let her fall to the floor. "Yeah, I told him to stay put. Actually, you ought to go get him while I remind her what manners are."
Heya everyone! I'll be posting an interlude as the next chapter sooner rather than later (ideally).

Thanks again to all my readers and I love getting your comments!

Standing on her toes beside Alex, Theresa clutched the top of the fence and peered out at the desolate neighborhood. Then resting back on her heels, she turned to her spouse and asked, "Did you ever lie about your height on your driver's license? Because I did."

"Oh hell yeah," he replied, a smile growing on his weary face. "I think most people did."

She oriented back to the fence. "I got away with five-four and a hundred and ten pounds."

"That's nothin'. I had five-ten on there for years."

"How the hell did you manage that?"

"I straightened my shoulders and had this pair of shoes with lifts. I didn't buy 'em for that reason though, I swear." The two shared a laugh. "Yeah, Gare told me when I was nine about displayin' good posture and shit. An eleven year-old tellin' and nine year-old to 'dress for the job he wanted.'"

She scoffed. "Yeah, that sounds like him."

Alex was silent for a moment, his expression stiffening and lips pursing. "You talk to Ally any after I left?" Theresa nodded. "What she say?"

"Nothing," she replied. "Not one single word. I think she was afraid of pissin' us off again."

"It's me she's afraid of pissin' off."

"Hey, I put the fear of god into her too. She's lucky I didn't cut her fingers off for what she did."

Alex gripped the top of the fence. "I'd never done that to anyone."

"Done what?"

"Just wailed on 'em 'cause I was mad."

"Well, it's not like she didn't deserve it. Don't beat yourself up about it." She turned to him and leaned her shoulder on the fence. "So... how'd it feel?"

"Good at first, real good. Then real bad after I saw how she was lookin' at me. Ugh, I know it don't make any sense. We cut off her leg and ate it, and later we're gonna... I've just never wanted to hurt 'em before and don't want her to think—"

"That you're doing it just to do it?"
He nodded. "Yeah."

The corner of her lip twitched. "I know."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Thought you didn't care what they think."

She bowed her head down. "Yeah well, maybe I do a little. I mean, Gareth always did the talking and I hardly paid any attention. Now we're on our own and I had to deliver the speech. It wasn't as easy breezy as I thought."

"You didn't actually have to, to be honest."

"No, but I felt like I had to. I'd feel uneasy if I didn't, which really surprised me." She exhaled a sharp breath. "I can tell you anything, right?"

"Of course."

"I feel lost without Gareth. As in, stumbling-around-blind lost. And we've only been separated a day. A day."

"Yeah, I feel like that too. God, you know I hate the guy sometimes, but I feel like a fish outta water."

"I think that's why Martin hasn't taken off, because he'd feel that way without him too. Well, that and Gareth would make him filet mignon."

"You know, when Martin disappeared Gareth told me he wished he had taken off 'cause he wanted to—"

"Y'all talkin' about me again?" Martin piped-up from behind them.

Can't have any god damned privacy, Theresa thought, biting her cheek.

The two turned around to see him lumbering through the ajar glass door on his recently fashioned wooden splint.

"Oh yeah, you're all we talk about when we're alone," Alex quipped.

Martin continued moving toward the yard's center. "Heh, yeah well, I had to get outta there. Your twin kept on starin' at me with her big old sad, green eyes."

"She's not my—" Alex sighed.

Martin edged forward another several steps, then stopped at the picnic table. "You know, she's already gettin' black and blue under her chin and on her cheek. You did a hell of a number on her."

Theresa scowled. "You really come out here to get away from her or to rub that in?"

"It's fine," Alex said, raising his hand. "She still quiet?"

Martin nodded. "Thankfully. Hey, if you get that ring hot again, you might be able to warp it back."

"Yeah, that's what I thought I might do," he replied, slipping his hand in his pocket and pulling out the charred jewelry.
"Can I see?" Martin asked, holding his hand out. Alex slid forward and dropped the ring in his hand. He held it up to his eye. "Oh yeah, I think this can be warped back. My friend Larry did some weldin’ and metalwork, so I know how to get this fixed...ish."

Theresa squinted. "You mess with that and what, you want a foot rub in exchange or something?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh, are you offerin'?"

"No, I just meant what do you want?"

He shrugged. "I just like dealin' with metal is all. I don't want nothin'. Unless you two really wanna rub my feet."

"Shhh!" Alex silenced upon the sound of footsteps from the other side of the house. "I think I hear —"

"Get down," Theresa instructed as she and Alex hunkered against the fence. Martin fumbled down beside the picnic table, attempting to keep pressure off his leg.

Theresa rested her hand on the gun in her holster, ready for a fight. Attuning her ears, she took in each crunch of leaves and scrape of the ground to assess the number of feet. She figured the gait belonged to at least three people.

As the steps neared the part of the fence she hid behind, a crisp and clear male voice spoke, "This might be like a needle in a haystack."

Theresa sprang up alongside Alex to spot Gareth, Albert, and Cynthia directly on the other side of the fence.

"We found you!" Cynthia beamed.

Gareth broke out into a relieved smile. "We saw your signs."

"Clever, huh?" Alex boasted. "All my idea."

The newly-arrived three hurried around through the back gate and the scene erupted into a gleeful reunion—barring Martin who offered simple waves of acknowledgment. Taking Theresa by surprise, Gareth's first action was to wrap Alex up in an embrace. Alex held his arms rigid at first before thoroughly embracing his brother back. Cynthia came from behind and almost squeezed the air from Theresa's lungs as she held her. Despite the pressure, she was too happy over the reunion to fight it.

While Theresa provided Albert a one-armed hug, it dawned on her that through the frenzy she had failed to notice Kaylee and Beth's absence.

She separated herself from the reluctant Albert who tried to hold on longer. "Um, where's—"

"Kaylee and Beth?" Alex finished, his delighted face falling as he looked around the group.

*Bitch. That fucking bitch.*

After Gareth settled them into the living room—one over from the still-living Ally—he told them everything. The accidental reveal, Beth and Kaylee's escape, and the knock-down-drag-out between him, Cynthia, and Albert. Alex and Martin also told of the events after their entrapment
by the horde. The other three expressed no surprise that Martin had injured himself.

"I have to apologize," Gareth proclaimed, sitting on the edge of the sofa with his long legs planted on the floor. "Not just for Beth, but for how I steamrolled you and didn't listen. I'm sorry that I wasted a whole day on Beth instead of looking for you." His eyes moved across each of them as he spoke, penetrating them with a regret Theresa hadn't seen him give in ages.

Although thrilled to hear Gareth doing the unspeakable and admitting he was wrong, Kaylee's actions rang in her head like a siren.

*She was my friend! We were all there together when the Siege happened and we lived through it together. I held her when she was ready to off herself! And she just ups and leaves now?. God, Gareth saved her life. Fucking ungrateful whiny little cunt.*

Yet on the surface she stayed quiet, having voiced no words since Gareth began talking. Instead, her eyes traced the intricate designs of the Persian rug beneath her feet.

"Tess?" Alex asked.

Swirls of burgundy, gold, and royal blue filled her vision as she followed each twist and turn of the rug's pattern.

"Hey, Tess?" He nudged her arm.

Her head jerked up to see everyone watching her. "Huh? What?"

"You just hadn't said anything."

She looked back down and dragged her fingernail over her diamond ring. "What do you want me to say?"

Gareth's brows twitched up. "Well, you and Kaylee were close, weren't you?"

"So?" She shrugged. "Are you waiting for me to have one of my typical outbursts or something?"

"No," Alex replied. "We—"

"Yeah, pretty much," Martin interrupted. Alex threw him a harsh glare.

Theresa heaved a breath, looking back up to the group. "I don't want to be mad. I'm tired of being mad. I don't feel like having one of my famous 'outbursts,' okay?" She wondered if they took any special notice of the shattered lamps and tables in the room. The ones that she put there.

"Alright then," Gareth replied. "I promised Albert and Cynthia we would vote on what to do, if we should hunt her or not. I'm sure you know I think we should. I don't want to, but she—and of course Beth—are meat."

"You know Kaylee was suicidal," Theresa blurted out.

He gave a slow nod. "Yeah, I had a feeling she was."

"No, I mean I found her outside one night with a gun by her side and she was going to use it. But you know why she didn't?" She waited for a response, but received none. "Because she didn't want to be eaten. She even said she thought about walking into a horde of dead ones, but she'd be eaten that way too. She didn't want to be meat and saw no way she could die and not be." Her mind flashed to the memory of sleep paralysis making her hallucinate her own butchery.
"We're all made of meat, Theresa," her leader said.

"I know."

"I don't wanna," Cynthia piped-up. "She just wants to be happy and I love her too much to treat her like another meal to hunt. It ain't like she died of somethin' else and we had her 'cause she agreed to it. Like when people said they wouldn't accept what we had to offer at Terminus, they made a choice to be meat even if they went kickin' and screamin'."

"She did make her choice," Gareth argued. "She's not one of us anymore. She knew what she was getting herself into the second she decided to untie Goldilocks."

"I don't care. I vote no. All it's gonna do is prove to her we're the kinda people she don't wanna be with no more."

Martin scoffed. "That's her problem."

"You ever tried givin' a shit about anyone but yourself?" Cynthia barked.

"Oh yeah? Who's the one who ran away 'cause it's all too fuckin' hard for her, huh? Left her friends behind to find a fluffy pink cloud to live on with that blonde bitch? 'Cause I don't think that was me."

Theresa took a deep breath, hating having to agree with Martin. "He's right, Cynthia. If she cared about us, she'd still be here. So why should we care about her? She thinks better of Beth and her group than of us."

Alex scooted forward on his seat. "She was gonna kill 'em all not too long ago. Now she's up and decided they're a better option than us. I don't wanna send her a fruit basket for it."

"Alex, come on," Cynthia pleaded. "I thought you of all people would understand."

Too bad, so sad.

"It's not that I can't sympathize a little, but man, I worked with her. We'd hang out in the infirmary at night and she'd teach me medical treatments. And sometimes we'd just stay up in there and talk for hours. But looks like none of that's important enough to her."

He paused. "She hates what we do more than she loves us."

Cynthia leaned back in her seat, silent.

Albert turned to his friend. "Cynthia, no one wants to live like this and I don't blame her for it. But she doesn't care about us enough to get through it."

"Well, maybe that's our fault," she said. "Maybe we never showed her how much we care."

"We did," Theresa contended. "I always made sure she knew she was part of the team. Alex and I would go out of our way to invite her to play games with us. Like once, we taught her to play our special version of Candyland. And—"

"Pity friendship," Martin remarked.

"What?"

He leaned forward, grimacing at the strain it put on his leg. "'Go out of our way' sounds like you saw her as a charity case. You spent time with her to make yourself feel better, not 'cause you
wanted to.

Theresa felt her nerves catch ablaze, a flurry of words and insults all trying to escape her mouth at once. Balling her fists and pressing her nails into her palm, all she could utter was, "You don't have any idea what I feel about her."

"Alright, fine, no I don't. But I think the reason you 'went out of your way' was 'cause you felt bad for her. Kay's not an idiot, I'm sure she could tell. I'm not sayin' all you see her as is a charity case, but that's how it started."

Why was he saying these things? In recent times, they had been able to get along for the most part. They had developed an understanding, or so she thought. Why was he still so hell-bent on hurting her?

"You can't come sit next to me and make it all better, Theresa. I'm not a toy that can be broken and repaired." Kaylee's words echoed in her head.

Oh.

"And you know how it'd be? 'Poor, poor, Kaylee. Such a tortured soul. Martin, start a fire and get out the salt.'"

Oh, god...

Theresa buried her head in her hands, her throat beginning to ache as she realized Martin was right.

Alex ran his hand up and down her back. "Martin, she didn't think that," he snapped. "She didn't think we were nice to her outta pity. You didn't know her at all, man. Don't make assumptions based on—"

"Guys," Gareth broke-in. "We're veering off-track. Can we at least agree that Beth is calories, regardless?"

Theresa lifted her head from her hands and nodded along with the rest.

"Can we talk to her at least?" Cynthia asked. "To Kaylee? When or if we find 'em, before we do anything to her, can we just talk? Try and get her to... I don't know... just..." Her jaw trembled and her eyes glistened wet.

Gareth nodded. "Of course we'll talk to her. I want to talk to her too."
Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoy this interlude! It's a bridge between now and some big changes that are coming for our group.

Tracking down Kaylee and Beth had so far proven a fruitless effort. Their trail had gone stone cold as if the two had been plucked from above. And Martin's injury had the unfortunate effect of slowing their progress. Still, the group journeyed north in hopes they would stumble across the pair.

Over the span of their travel, no living people had shown themselves in over a week. Gareth had always pondered a worse than worst case scenario where all survivors except for them had perished. In literal terms, he knew it was improbable, but there was a reason cannibalism was only practiced among animals in the most extreme circumstances. A species can't survive if it eats itself. The memory of a hungry coop of chickens that belonged to a childhood friend sprang to mind.

While the family had been away, they had left a supply of feed for the birds—something in hindsight Gareth thought dimwitted. When the family called Gareth to check-in, he found that wild birds had gotten into the corral and eaten all the feed. One of the poultry that had died from an uncertain cause he found being fed on by most of its fellow birds. If the chickens had been left indefinitely, they would have died off, likely eating each other until only one remained. Maybe that was all they were doing, Gareth thought, prolonging the inevitable. Until they would fade away with only one left, starving and awaiting death.

The growls of their stomach grew harder each day with no definite relief. They required at least 7,200 calories a day among them to survive, and ideally 12,000. Squirrels, various birds, rationed cans, expired packets of dried goods, and wild berries had added up to at most 6,000 on a good day. Towns held nothing of considerable value and many of the areas they found had been overrun.

On a stretch of road leading to what they hoped would be sustenance, their party had stopped to get their bearings. No one had spoken much since their rest stop. The fewer calories burned the better, every one counted, and they were burning many more than they were taking in in search of more.

Oh no... Gareth regretted having let the previous memory of the chicken coop through. The thought of the birds' meat nearly made him dizzy with a rabid desire. A need that filled his mouth, throat, and body with a vacuum-like plea. He had named them the "Cravings," emphasis on the capital "C." Not since the Occupation had the Cravings afflicted him.

Struggling to push it away, he ambled over to where Alex rested in front of a dingy road sign cleaning one of their guns. "You want me to do that?" he asked, looking down at his brother wiping away at the revolver. "You know I get a hard-on for cleanliness."

Alex's mouth twitched up a bit at the corners. "Yeah, knock yourself out." He leaned back and set his hands in his lap.

Gareth took a place beside him, crossing his legs, and sliding the dismantled weapon before him.
"Talk to him," Mary's imagined voice spoke.

He had been edging away at Alex, finding small moments to talk to him in hopes he could hit that spark again. The one he had found before the Beth ordeal. Circumstances made it difficult, however. Every thought he held was of possible meat, rations, and even long-gone items like Big Macs and Tiramisu.

Beginning to tinker with the gun, wiping its sections with a dirty rag, he debated what to say. And most of all, how to get out what he had tried to ever since their reunion.

"I think that's good, man," Alex broke the silence.

Gareth looked down to see himself buffing away at the weapon's handle. When he started focusing on that part, he was unsure. He stopped his hand, gazing down at his dirt-tinged fingernails. "I always end up overdoing things."

"You're alone. Say it," Michael's fanciful voice urged.

Glancing around, he looked to see if anyone was in hearing range. Cynthia and Theresa stood a ways away looking over a map. Martin was standing beside them, and Albert sat sorting through a backpack.

It was just him and his brother.

If not for the future, then for the past, Gareth had to let him know. "Alex?"

"Yeah?"

Attempting to shut down his overactive brain, his neck growing hot, he let the words flow without restraint, "I… I know I never tell you this and I worry sometimes you think I don't. But after everything, after prioritizing Beth over you, I have to say in my very own words—"

"I know," Alex interrupted.

"Know what?"

"I love you too."
Chapter Notes

Despite Gareth's newly-developed dislike of rural churches, he and his group happened upon one of the Lutheran domination that would provide temporary shelter. A few decayed corpses lay collapsed between pews, but were nowhere near as offensive as the bright orange carpet that blanketed most of the flooring. While the others searched for supplies and attempted to rest, Gareth stood gazing at the long-abandoned altar. He then climbed the few steps up the stage, thinking it resembled that of a TV preacher's when he was a child.

He recalled a Sunday morning while the family was expecting Michael's parents. Mary had one of the pastor's sermons on in the background while she busied around the house. Her hair stuck out in tangled ends as she tried to tidy up the house and keep two young boys in line—lest her in-laws think her untidy and her sons undisciplined. In the flurry, a ten year-old Gareth perched on the arm of the living room sofa and absorbed preacher's words:

"No child is born expectin' to come into the world, homeless, or hungry, or unloved. Those three things are our right not only as bein's on this earth, but as children of Him. Yet in my travels around the world, I have seen children live and die starvin', homeless, and without the lovin' arms of another soul around it."

Gareth possessed one of the three things the man described, but the love of his brother couldn't fill his stomach nor give him a bed to call his own. Funny how the preacher considered love on par with food and shelter, he thought. Who he would be if he lacked all three things, alone in the elements was a mystery—one he had come close to uncovering.

Rubbing his temple, he tried to push away the latest in an array of old memories that had been flooding back. Looking toward the future was his default, but the effect of hunger had dizzied his mind, causing it to spin in untypical ways. In fact, during the Siege he had spent a large chunk of time ruminating on the past.

At least the memory wasn't all-consuming as the recollection of the chickens was. Of course, he would be more than happy to eat the pastor if he were there.

* * *

Unfastening his belt, Gareth pulled it one hole tighter and secured it. His slimming was minor, but enough to make his belt looser. Having to do such a thing again was a slap in the face. The answer he had given to the question of hunger had become inapplicable due to the bizarre lack of other survivors. Although, he thought it unlikely every part of the world would still be filled with people. Some pockets must be desolate, and apparently, they were in such a place.

Despite his lack of control over the circumstances, again he felt he was at fault. What if he had been leading them in the worst possible direction? If panning westward or eastward would bring them relief? At least hydration had been a non-issue. Rain had been falling as they travelled, at times torrentially. It made for a steady water supply that they collected in bottles.

Outside the church, Theresa and Cynthia sat on the building's damp front porch, both nibbling a piece of pine tree bark. Alex, Albert, and Martin stood nearby, having finished their share of the harvest. Gareth looked across his weathered and yet again starving people. Martin, however, was a
different case. The ordeal was his first time experiencing real hunger and it showed. Lingering pain from his sprained ankle paired with starvation and exhaustion placed several years on his face. For that and for keeping his group united, Gareth had laid off picking on him. He had to admit he felt bad for the guy.

Gareth gazed across the five again and slid his hands in his pockets. "We should move on soon."

Cynthia sucked on her sliver of pine bark and looked up. "To what?"

"To whatever we can find."

"I thought we were past this," Albert said, eyes vacant and fixed on the ground below him.

"I know," Gareth replied. "So did I. We just have to keep on going until we find something. This is just a dead spot." He raised his three-fingered hand and scratched his head. "I've been saying that so much it's starting to lose meaning. But who knows, maybe there's a cornucopia just down the road."

Before anyone else could respond, a figure stumbled forth from the other side of the church. For a second, hope rose in his chest as he thought it might be a living girl, but its hisses and pallor proved otherwise. The walker must have been a recent turn, he observed. Its clothes were only marginally stained, and its sandy blonde hair retained a light shine against the glint of sunlight that broke through the clouds.

Martin heaved a sigh, pulled the rifle from his back holster, and made his way toward the thing. Raising the weapon up, he bludgeoned the undead over the head just as it reached out to touch him. An epiphany struck Gareth as Martin continued to crush its skull, one that further reminded him of their desperation: the walker hadn't been dead long and might be edible. Since the infected Bob never sickened them, eating a walker itself would not either.

Gareth strolled over to analyze the body, keeping the idea to himself until he got a look at it. From the half of its face that was left intact, it appeared to be a girl in her early to mid-teens—and a hungry one. Her limbs were straight and narrow, and her loose grey t-shirt clung around a tiny waist. The dead spot looked to have affected her as well.

"Women always taste better, even the skinny ones," he remembered his words, figuring this might be an exception to the rule.

As Martin knelt down and cleaned the end of his gun on the girl's shirt, Gareth turned to his people who peered on. "You know, she hasn't been dead too long. We might be able to eat her."

"So, I wasn't crazy for thinking it," Theresa said, licking off her fingers as if pine bark left a great amount of flavor behind.

"I know," Gareth replied, letting out a sharp breath. "Bob wasn't toxic after all, and we can char the meat to make sure. Besides, it can't taste any worse than turkey vultures."

"God, I'd eat five of those right now," Albert remarked.

Gareth began to tell everyone to begin butchering the body when he realized he had to take a poll. "Let's take a vote then."

As he expected, everyone raised their hands, including the reluctant Martin.
"Who wants to man the fire pit out back?" Gareth asked, thankful they had been fortunate enough to have one available since the ground was wet. "Actually..." He raised his finger. "Martin, you do it. You being a fantastic cook and all. We'll break some chairs from inside and burn them. The wood's soaked out here."

* * *

The blood that spilled from the incision to the walker was cold, syrupy, and dark. They went for what they always did first: the legs. Charring it over the fire emitted a scent that filled Gareth's center with both anticipation and dread. Though the virus could be cooked out, the days-old meat ran the risk of sickening them from age. Regardless, they had to take the chance and had plenty of water to rehydrate with if they threw up.

Each one of them sliced off a bit of meat for themselves, all taking time to eye it before digging in. Gareth analyzed the dry, overdone piece before raising it to his mouth and biting off a chunk. Comfort flushed through his body upon the sensation of meat on his tongue, followed by the immensely gamy and sour flavor. In spite of the taste, he relished it. His taste buds lied to him when starving, making the most meager fare resemble a five-star lobster dinner.

Cannibalizing a walker was a new level of desperation. The act of eating people, while unnatural in many ways, was still the consumption of something living and breathing. A body that any hungry carnivore would strike and devour if need be. Walkers were a parody of that circle of life, having shattered it into smithereens. Nature kept throwing him curve balls and he kept doing everything it took to knock them out of the park. And if eating its atrocious parody was its latest pitch, then so be it.

Looking up at his group, he spotted them sitting on the benches around the pit. They wore blank expressions as they took in the meat.

"Not as bad as I thought," Albert commented, wiping his mouth. "Nothing like buzzard."

"At least it's better than worms," Gareth said, recalling their afternoon snack the previous day. "But about as chewy."

* * *

Moonlight streamed through the church's large glass windows serving as the building's only illumination. In the front room, Gareth sat on the steps of the altar beside Martin. Cynthia and Alex had begun to feel ill and rested in a front pew beside their mates. The redhead held her hand over her mouth while Albert nodded off on her shoulder. Alex sat with one foot lying over the edge of his other leg, giving Theresa access as she massaged his foot.

"I should've asked for a foot rub in exchange for fixin' your ring after all," Martin said.

Theresa and Alex cracked small smiles. Martin had taken to reforming Alex's ruined wedding band, warping it back into a misshapen circle that fit over his finger.

"You know what sucks?" Alex questioned, watching Theresa give soft squeezes to the red sock covering his foot. "Is that I feel like I could puke, but I'd still eat more of that deader."

Cynthia nodded, removing her hand from her mouth. "I'd eat her eyelashes."

We were due for one, Gareth thought. Cynthia's occasional oddities had been magnified once again since their hunger set in.
"Fried in butter," Albert added, lifting his head.

"We shouldn't get into another one of these talks," Gareth warned, raising his hand.

"Why not?" Theresa asked, running her nails up and down her spouse's foot. "It's no use ignoring it. Might as well talk about it."

"They won't lose respect for you for admitting you're still human," his mother's words reminded him.

He had avoided speaking aloud of how hungry he was. Admitting he was desperate might put a chink in his armor and at the way his people perceived him. Yet he knew his armor had been torn to shreds already. In fact, joining with them might earn him back the points of respect he lost.

"Yeah, alright," he agreed. "So…" He tapped his fingers on the shag carpet. "I've been thinking about grilled cheese all day." He looked to his brother. "Like we got when we were kids at Stone Mountain Grill."

Alex nodded. "Yeah, I always said they tasted like pennies. Not in a bad way though." He squinted. "Hey, why'd they call it a 'grill'? It was just a regular diner."

Gareth shrugged. "They weren't very creative, I guess."

"The bread was so flaky and buttery." Alex stared off into space.

"Remember the vanilla ice cream with orange soda?"

"The 'dreamsicles'? God, yes."

Cynthia edged forward a tad. "There was a place in Dothan that had those too. They just called 'em an orange float though."

The grilled cheeses and the ice cream combo reminded him of home, of a time when he loved, fed, and sheltered. When he was safe and warm.

He shivered as a jolt of cold crossed his body.

Chapter End Notes

References: "The Starving Time at Jamestown in the Colony of Virginia was a period of starvation during the winter of 1609–1610 in which all but 60 of 214 colonists died."

"According to survivors' accounts, they consumed vermin and boot leather, and, as the winter grew harsher, some ate the dead."

"(...)The discovery of the bones of a 14-year-old girl show clear signs that she was cannibalized. Evidence indicates clumsy chops to the body and head, and it appears the girl was already dead at the time."

Obviously, my adaptation has my group resorting to the icky act of eating a walker since eating people is a "yeah, so?" Hehe. Also, their hunger here (if it's not clear) isn't
as severe as it was at Terminus. But of course having already experienced starvation, they're past moral dilemmas and questioning if it's right or not.
I AM SO EXCITED FOR WHAT'S COMING! I've had it planned since before I even started this sequel. And my excitement over it effectively shattered my writer's block into smithereens. Also, November 6th will mark one year since I published this series. One year and 170k words later and I'm still writing this. I'm never this committed to anything who am I.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Signs of human life had appeared for the first time in weeks. After they had a few more bites of the further rotted walker, Alex noticed fresh indents on the country road leading northwest. Eager to find whomever and whatever the tracks lead to, they gathered their bearings and began following their trail. Alex heaved a breath as he treaded in the back of the party beside Theresa. Nausea had stolen the proper number of hours of sleep from him, leaving a weight pulling at his limbs and a sting in his eyes.

"Look alive, Alex," Gareth urged from up front.

"I am," Alex replied. "Hard to function without my usual ten hours."

Gareth smiled a tad but gave no reply. Unless the tracks led them to the cornucopia he'd spoken of, Alex had a feeling that was the first and last joke of the day.

The road ran straight over the ever-increasing hilly terrain and turned from dirt to concrete. Spring was in the air and expressed itself in vibrant greenery along their path. Inhaling the fresh air, Alex hoped they would find the people driving the vehicle by the end of the day. His insatiable appetite had replaced his usual dread of hunting. Reluctance was a luxury his body seemed to have burned off along with the number of pounds he had lost.

A low growl of nausea began to grow in his gut and he edged closer to Theresa for access to her backpack and the bottled water it housed. As he took the zipper between his fingers, he noticed her face had paled.

He tugged the zipper back and fetched the bottle of water. "If you don't feel good—"

"I'm fine," Theresa interrupted. "I can still move."

He unscrewed the lid and took a swig of the water, tasting a twang of sand. "You weren't sick last night."

"I just—it was that… slimy part earlier." Her face contorted.

"I ate the slimy part too," Albert groaned from in front of Alex. "We shouldn't have, Theresa."

"You'll be fine," Gareth assured them. "Just avoid all slimy parts from now on."

If Theresa and Albert's condition weren't worrying him, Alex assumed he would have laughed at the remark.
"Gareth," Alex began, jogging up to his brother, "can't we rest just twenty minutes? They seem sicker than me and Cynthia did."

"I'm fine," Theresa maintained.

He ignored her and pressed on, "Can't we afford to lose a little time to make sure they don't puke up any calories?"

Gareth scratched his bearded cheek and narrowed his eyes. If their recent bonding had gotten them anywhere, then Gareth would at least consider his opinion before shutting him down. Sans his usual 'oh, Alex, please' reaction in regards to whatever suggestion he had.

"Fifteen minutes," Gareth agreed. Alex breathed a sigh of relief, mentally uttering 'thank you.'

"We're going to lose time!" Theresa argued as Gareth and the others stopped in their tracks.

Alex turned around to see a frown on her parted lips. "You and Albert need the rest."

"Yeah, we do," Albert said, shutting his eyes and sinking to the pavement on his knees.

Theresa threw her hands up and dropped to the ground alongside Albert. Alex strolled past the others and knelt down in front of her. "You're no good if you're gonna throw up what you ate."

She pouted and stared at the ground. "I know."

Over the horizon, the approaching hum of an engine echoed through the landscape.

"Go!" Gareth ordered, pulling out his pistol and gesturing toward a shrub-covered area to the right of the road. "Get ready."

Alex's heart began pounding as they retreated to the side of the road, equipping their weapons and waiting for the vehicle to come within range.

"Aim for the tires and the windows," Gareth said, eyes fixed on where the car would appear.

Alex breathed in shallow breaths through his mouth and curled his finger around the trigger of his semi-automatic handgun. The engine kept becoming louder as it neared, but then quieted to a stop. Doors slamming shut and voices floated from beyond his line of vision.

Gareth looked at Albert and gestured his head to the side. Albert crept forward and peeked around the edge of the greenery. His mouth gaped open. "Oh my god."

"What?" Gareth whispered.

"It—it's Kaylee." He backed up a step. "With three other people, they're—"

"What!?" Cynthia exclaimed.

"Shhh!" Gareth silenced.

"Oh, no," Theresa said through clenched teeth. "No, no, no, no..." She slipped her knife back in her holster, tore Alex's gun from his hands, and lurched forward.

"No!" Alex warned along with whisper-yells of dissent from the rest.

Alex sprang forth and managed to grab hold of her right wrist, causing the gun to fall from her hand
and clatter onto the pavement. Theresa scrambled to grab the gun and hurried back beside Alex and Cynthia. "Oh god, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry…"

A discernable, "what was that?" sounded from the opposing group.

"Great fucking job," Martin mumbled.

"Just get ready," Gareth ordered.

Scraping against the concrete, an assortment of footsteps neared until the figures became visible through the bushes. Two men, one short and balding, another taller, younger, and blond, and a female of around thirty wearing a long brown ponytail each held up assault rifles. And appearing to their right was Kaylee clutching a handgun.

Kaylee gasped and sheathed her gun, then rushed between the two parties. "Don't shoot! No one shoot!" Her head whipped back and forth between the crowds. "I know these people!"

"Them?" the brown-haired woman questioned.

Kaylee opened her mouth to reply when Theresa jumped forth and socked her in the cheek, causing her to fall against the shoulder of the balding man behind her.

The blond and brunette began to move toward Theresa when Alex pulled her back by the shoulders and Kaylee yelled, "No, no, no! Don't!" She rubbed her cheek and pushed herself to her feet. "It's okay! It's okay!"

"You fucking bitch!" Theresa screamed as Alex gripped her by her upper arms. Deterring her anger was of no concern, but the outcome if she became violent again was. "Do you have any idea what we've been going through!? I'll kill you! I'll kill you! I'll—" She broke into tears and fell to the ground, Alex going with her. "I'll kill you… I'll… I'll kill you…” She rested her forehead on the pavement as she continued sobbing.

The shock of seeing Kaylee had paradoxically numbed Alex to the fact that she was alive and well. Holding onto his wife as she bawled, fury flushed through him as it sunk in. There stood the woman who had hurt his wife so much as to make her hysterical, and the woman who up and left them all. The woman whose cheeks had a little extra pudginess to them and who wore unstained clothes.

Gulping, he tightened his grip on Theresa and kept his eyes on the ground as her cries began to fade. Hurting Kaylee was out of the question, no matter how much anger urged him to.

"How long have you been with these people, huh?" Gareth said, fire in his voice. "These more of Rick's friends?"

"We found her and a blonde on the side of the road," a man's voice spoke. Alex decided to look up and saw it belonged to the balding one. "They seemed like they needed help, and like we could use theirs."

Gareth's eyes widened. "Where is she? The blonde?"

"She left," Kaylee replied, continuing to cup her cheek. "She went to find her group."

Martin slid to Gareth's side, holding his weapon a little too high. "You look pretty good, Kay. Like you've been well-fed and bathed and finally found some good enough folks for your tiny golden snatch!"
"Martin," Gareth warned, raising a hand in front of him. Martin exhaled and lowered his gun a few inches.

"Look at us!" Cynthia exclaimed. "While you were off making new and better friends, we've been starving!" She stomped her foot.

"I still can't believe you," Albert said, tears filling his eyes. "God, if we found you hungry and alone then—"

"Albert," Kaylee broke-in. "Guys, they—they took me and her in. There's a place they have. It's secret, they keep to themselves, but take people when they need them. They're good. They have food and water and the best defense I've ever seen. It's underground, they—"

"Oh, just rub it in, why don't you?" Gareth snapped.

"I'm inviting you!"

"Um," the blond man said, stepping beside her. "They're pretty hostile."

"Aw, you fuckin' think?" Martin quipped.

"No, no, it's not their fault," Kaylee urged. "I left them, everything they say is right. I made a mistake leaving. I was out of my mind, and then I found Beth like I told you."

It was clear to Alex that Kaylee was bending the truth by painting herself as the irrational one. And from where they stood, she obviously hadn't told them her leader had been off his gourd, or of anything else. He had to give her points for that.

"You betrayed us, Kaylee," Gareth said, simpering. "You said we weren't good enough for your happy-go-lucky idea of what life should be like. Looks like you got your wish."

"Listen," the brown-haired woman chimed-in. "You don't want this to end in bullets. You and yours don't look so good. I don't think you could hold your own if we got down to business here."

"How about you enlighten me," Gareth began, "what are you doing back out here? We saw your tracks—I assume your tracks—out by a church before we hit the paved part. You come back to get your wallet?"

"Those weren't ours," Naz replied. "No one's been out this far in weeks. We were heading toward an industrial supply store we never fully raided because we're having plumbing problems. We stopped for bathroom breaks, by the way."

"Let's take them back with us," Kaylee said, turning around. "Please, I promise they're worth it. They're just hungry and tired and they're mad and... they have every right to be. We can put off the showerheads for a day or two." She turned back around, wiping tears from her eyes. A red mark had begun to form where Theresa had struck her. "I know sorry doesn't cut it, but there's somewhere you can have a home. I want to make it up to you."

Alex felt ready to speak, regretting having been silent for so long. He let go of Theresa and stood up. "Yeah, your fat cheeks and clean shirt have sorry written all over 'em." A relief spread throughout his chest at the words.

Theresa rose to her knees and wiped her eyes, yet remained quiet.

Kaylee glanced down at Theresa before locking eyes with Alex, a fresh wave of pain filling them.
"I think about you every day, all of you. About what a big mistake I made."

"You have no idea…" he trailed off, his mind coming up blank trying to think of an even more pertinent comeback.

"Please come with us," she pleaded again.

Gareth scoffed. "You really think after everything we'd come with you and a bunch of strangers? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Sometimes you have to swallow your pride to survive. You taught me that, Gareth. And I see you kept everyone alive." She looked across the group. "Don't tell me you haven't had to swallow your pride to keep them breathing since I've been gone."

His jaw quaked. "You think I trust you?"

"I'd never do anything to hurt you. Leave you? Yeah, I did that. But I'd never hurt you or let anyone else hurt you. Ever."

The balding man said, "If she's so sure you'll settle down, then we'll take you back with us. It's a two and half hour drive and we'll need to take your weapons. We have food and water in the van."

Alex's ears pricked up, the idea of food sending a bolt of excitement through his veins.

Kaylee nodded. "Sandwiches. They grow wheat and make bread. They have goats they milk and make cheese. And vegetables. There's enough for all of you. We brought them for us, but you can have them."

Albert narrowed his eyes. "That can't be real."

"It is," the brunette said. "My name is Naz. He's Hector," she said of the balding man. "And that's Skylar." The blond man gave a nod. "We're from a place called Sipsey."

Wait…

"Sipsey?" Alex asked.

Theresa stirred and climbed to her feet, sniffling and rubbing at her reddened face. "We—we saw that name in a housing development in South Carolina."

Naz raised her eyebrows. "You what?"

"The one we got stuck in?" Martin asked.

"Yeah," Alex confirmed. "Someone painted on a mailbox, 'Sipsey or bust.'"


Kaylee turned. "Jackson was writing the name?"

Hector shook his head. "Damn fool. No one's supposed to put our name out there. Drunk idiot."

"South Carolina is a long way away," Theresa said, furrowing her brow.

It occurred to Alex he had paid no attention to what state they were in now. Gareth had been keeping track of their location, but Alex had let it slip his mind. He assumed they were in Virginia
as the last license plate he saw was from Virginia, or at least he thought it was.

"We have plenty of fuel," Naz said. "And we've gone a long ways looking for supplies. But Jackson hasn't been all the way to South Carolina in a year so that sign was old. He'll still get a piece of my mind though."

"See?" Kaylee said, giving a sharp shrug. "The place is real."

"It was a bunker for the military," Naz continued. "A big one, made to withstand a nuclear war. It's a little up in the mountains, you have to go out of your way to find it which is, of course, ideal. We've made it ours."

"This is bullshit," Martin said.

"And why would I let them lie, Martin?" Kaylee asked.

"Well, they could make you 'cause you're two feet high."

She sighed. "You know we have to come from somewhere good if we're this stocked. Look at us."

"If it's so good, why would you risk takin' people in?" Alex asked.

"We don't, usually," Naz answered. "But lately, we've been stretched thin and need more people to keep the place running. And when we come across people who look like they're worth it, we give them a shot. If not, we kick them out on their asses."

Gareth shook his head. "Way too easy."

"You haven't seen the place," Kaylee said. "It's not like where we used to live. It's so much safer."

"So you need slave laborers?" Theresa sneered.

"More people to keep the place up and running," Naz clarified, giving Theresa a dirty look.

Alex straightened his shoulders, unhappy with the woman glaring at his wife. "So what, you their leader?"

Her serious expression collapsed into laughter. "Me? Yeah, right. The boss is at home."

"She'll understand," Kaylee said. "We get along well."

"So glad you finally found someone you can trust," Gareth said. "You've known her what, not even a month?"

"Okay, okay," Naz said, stepping in front of her. "Why don't you lay off and eat something? We do have sandwiches and we will give them to you. Are you really going to turn that down?"

Gareth bore his eyes into hers before glancing over his shoulder and saying, "We vote."

"No," Martin replied without hesitation.

"I... I just..." Theresa stammered. "I can't get in the same car with her."

"You know," Skylar began, "you do have to swallow your pride sometimes."
Gareth looked him up and down. "Would you? If you were me?"

"Yes."

"I say yes," Cynthia said. "We can't keep starvin'."

"I say yes too," Albert agreed.

"What? No!" Martin protested.

"Yes," Alex voted.

Martin bit at his tongue and muttered, "Son of a…"

Theresa oriented to Gareth. "Okay."

Martin took a step toward her. "And I thought you of all people w—"

"Shut up, Martin," Alex said. "You're outvoted. Deal with it."

Martin bit once again at the inside of his mouth.

"I promise you'll be safe," Kaylee said. "You'll be fed and safe."

* * *

Sandwiches. They were telling the truth, they had actual sandwiches. Goat cheese and cucumbers nestled into between two slices of white bread. Naz told them they had a garden on the surface above the bunker as well as a few animals. And with the plentiful springtime rains, their crop had been bountiful so far.

Skylar had pulled out the four medium-sized sandwiches from a Tupperware container. Gareth took charge and made the rationing decisions, dividing them each into suitable sections for six people. Alex swore he could taste every molecule of flavor. His taste buds hadn't contacted real cheese since the turn. The thick, rich, and fatty goodness of it overwhelmed him so much that he felt the need to sit down when he already was.

Despite his dislike of vegetables, the crispy cucumbers made him feel like he was eating springtime itself. The bread was as simple as could be; water, wheat, salt, and oil, but he relished every bit of it. He could tell the others were also overcome. Theresa and Albert ate theirs as eagerly as he did even though they still claimed a bit of queasiness.

Gareth, Alex knew, was happy to have contact with a vegetable again. Before the change, Gareth had ingested three shots of wheat grass a week. Alex was amused at the fact that if he were now handed a shot of wheatgrass with a stalk of broccoli in it, he would guzzle the green liquid and choke down the vegetable in no time.

The van was hollow inside, leaving all except Naz and Hector without genuine seating. After their snack, Theresa rested her head in Alex's lap while he sat against the side wall of the vehicle. Her hand gripped his thigh as he stroked her dark, dirty hair, brushing it behind her ear. His leg eventually fell asleep, but he paid it little mind as his thoughts centered around the sandwich he had had and when he would get to eat again.

He made sure to avoid Kaylee's gaze, although he could feel it on him and especially on Theresa. Instead, he stared out the window, watching the hills rise and the roads twist and turn. The rocky
terrain had him wondering where they grew their crops, but he assumed they must have found a flat enough section. Naz, Skylar, Hector, and Kaylee spoke more about the place as they drove.

Solar panels provided Sipsey's electricity, having been installed by the military shortly after the turn. They brushed over that part, however. How civilians came to live in a government hide-out designed for such end-of-the-world events. Yet they described many of their other perks and features. An underground aquifer, hot running water, and the warehouse abundance of supplies they had stocked.

Then it dawned on him, why everything was so bare in that area—the people of Sipsey had gotten it.

The more the place was detailed, the more Alex figured he must have been dreaming. That any moment his mother and father would blink into existence.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, "Naz" is pronounced like the "nozz" in "nozzle." I named her and I myself keeping reading it wrong hehe.
Sipsey

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Light shone through the van door as it slid open, hitting Theresa in the face and nearly blinding her. Squinting, she sat up from Alex's lap and set her eyes on Skylar waiting outside.

"Come on, guys," the young blond urged.

Behind him appeared waves of green grass and some sort of tin building in the distance. It was her first sight of the place as the confrontation with Kaylee and lingering nausea had diminished any interest she had in peering out the back window during their travel. Skylar stepped out of the way and the hunters gathered their non-weapon supplies. Theresa reached over and slipped on her backpack as those closest to the door filed out; Kaylee, Martin, Gareth, Cynthia, and Albert. Then finally, Alex and Theresa.

The sun was too much and she used her hand to shade her eyes as they adjusted. A gust of wind whipped around her as Naz and Skylar made their appearance. Naz was saying something that Theresa paid no attention to while she brought her arm down and observed the area.

Fences of at least fifteen feet squared around slight hills that rose and fell across the landscape. Sharper tree-littered hills stood beyond the back end of the several football fields-wide area. Yet the terrain was flat enough to host an array of crops at the far end of the compound. Turning, she found the solar panels Naz spoke of taking up a considerable space near an amount of what she assumed was equipment to harvest the power. What she failed to notice was a grand entrance to the bunker, the concrete they stood on only leading to a tin building stuck in a large mound of land.

*Oh, right. 'Impenetrable secret bunker.'* She supposed "top-secret fallout shelter entrance" painted on massive doors would defeat the purpose.

"It's rare we get a straggler up here," Hector said as he, Naz, and Skylar took the lead toward the tin structure.

"That what you call the dead?" Gareth asked, catching up to his and Naz's side. Hector nodded. "Hm, I like that one."

"They're not very good climbers and the most we've seen out here at a time was ten."

*Ten? Just ten!?*

Theresa could hardly imagine a reality with no threat of walkers massing around their fences. At Terminus, they had found sure-fire ways to keep the undead away, but nothing effective enough to allow them to be without worry. The words "too good to be true" ran through her mind and she crossed her arms, digging her nails into her skin to assess how much damage she could do with them. As she continued to look around, her eyes went too far and locked with Kaylee's, sending a new burst of anger through her.

The one and only reason they were walking into the place was to eat. If they weren't hungry, they would have never considered stepping into a den of strangers. And despite what Kaylee had done, Theresa did doubt she would deliberately lead them into danger. Though she could never be a hundred percent sure.
"Over there we have our gardens," Hector said as he halted the group before the cabin and pointed across the complex. "If you want to see our—"

"You promised us breakfast, lunch, and dinner," Gareth interrupted, raising an arm up and resting his three-fingered hand on the shed wall.

Kaylee moved through the crowd to Hector's side. "Yeah, let's not keep them waiting. Come on, guys."

Hector gave a nod and pushed open the doors.

As they entered the building, Theresa edged closer to Alex so their arms brushed together as they walked, allowing her a bit of comfort. Dim bulbs lit up the small room which consisted of more concrete, several buckets, and a wooden bench.

"I know it's underwhelming," Naz said, making it to the other set of doors. "But this is the grand entrance. You'll walk through here, then half way through a long tunnel, then you'll get to a flight of stairs."

As Naz reached for the door handles, Gareth slid forward and placed his arm on the doors in front of her face. "So where's the catch, Naz?" He stared her down. She tightened her lips and looked back up at him.

"There's no catch, Gareth," Kaylee assured him.

He kept his eyes on the other woman. "And what if we don't want to stay?"

"Then don't stay," Naz replied, her lips almost motionless.

"You will want to stay," Kaylee said.

Gareth took a deep breath, looking as if he might bite into Naz's throat, before stepping aside and letting her through.

Theresa reached over and gripped Alex's hand, her heart rate increasing as she stared into the dark tunnel ahead.

"Hey," Alex said. She looked up. "I gotcha. We'll be okay." She pursed her lips and nodded, then proceeded along with the rest.

The long, dank tunnel was lit by the same meager lighting as the previous room. It was both smaller and larger than expected. Enough to comfortably fit themselves into, but small enough have Theresa feeling a tad claustrophobic.

"This is—or was—the blast tunnel," Naz explained. "Supposed to absorb shockwaves from a nuclear blast of um..." She scratched her head. "A lot. Either of you remember the big impressive numbers?" Both Hector and Skylar shook their heads. "Well, I've never given an intro before, so sorry about being shaky."

Noticing an unexpected silence from Martin, the biggest opponent to the journey to Sipsey, Theresa spotted him on the other side of Alex. Martin's eyes roamed up and down Naz's figure as she walked, explaining his quiet.

For crying out loud...
At least he had shut up, she figured. Although, she understood why he cast a 'no' vote in the first place.

When they arrived half-way down the tunnel, Skylar opened a new set of doors to reveal a flight of stairs. "Also underwhelming," he said.

After venturing down the tight squeeze that housed the considerable number of steps, Naz pushed open a hefty, thick metal door. Through it revealed a wide, illuminated hallway with concrete floors, red and white walls, and piping running across the ceiling.

"You sure you want to eat before you get a change of clothes?" Naz asked.

"Yes," Gareth replied.

* * *

The spacious cafeteria boasted an assortment of neatly-arranged tables and chairs upon shiny blue and cream-colored tile. Sitting at one of the tables alongside her fellow Terminants, Theresa felt the room's glossy finish and high ceilings surreal.

Hector had since departed, leaving Naz, Skylar, and Kaylee perched across from the six. Several Sipsey residents occupied a small table near the wall, glimpsing the newcomers now and then, but without speaking.

After what seemed like ages of chit-chat, came what Theresa had been counting the seconds for: an older woman with a long, blonde braid carrying a serving tray holding plates and glasses. She straightened in her seat at the table's end to get a better view, having ceased breathing in anticipation. When the woman made it to their table, Theresa reached up and took one of the platters. The rudeness of her action dawned on her, but she couldn't find a place in her that cared.

The woman laid out the plates, silverware, and cups for the six while Theresa stared at her meal. A hearty serving of fettuccine topped with a tomato sauce beside two slices of toasted bread looked too good to be real. She froze for a moment, stuck between inhaling everything before her and worrying if she did, it would be over in a flash and she wouldn't have enjoyed it enough.

Shaking the thought, she grabbed her fork and dug in. Pasta, she adored pasta. And though the tomato sauce was clearly canned, a generous amount of seasoning gave it zest. The bread was the same as had been used for the sandwiches, topped with oil, salt, and pepper.

Looking around, everyone had quieted as they ate, Naz, Skylar, and Kaylee watching them. Kaylee's expression softened while watching Alex's hands. Theresa turned her head to see him using his fingers to set noodles on his bread before picking it up and taking a bite.

*You do have a fork, you know.*

Although, she realized his habit of eating with his hands was no worse than plucking a plate from the server's tray.

Following the meal, and for the first time in weeks, Theresa was properly full. Her gut expanded under the strain, brushing against her worn grey t-shirt.

"Five-star restaurant we have here," Naz said with a sly smile.

"So," Gareth began, licking his lips, "when do we meet your leader?"
"After you get a shower," she answered, looking their party over. "We have all the hot water you could ask for."

* * *

Naz informed the group they were not permitted to roam the facility freely and would be assigned guards. Since showers were gender-segregated, a shaggy man named Brandon escorted the males of their group to the men's quarters' bathroom. An unease struck Theresa as she watched them depart, offering them a nervous wave. For her and Cynthia, a black-haired Sipseyan named Laura appeared and led them to the showers. Her presence was almost as unsettling as that of a strange man's would have been as Laura stood several inches taller than the five-nine Cynthia.

The women's quarters—having since had areas walled off to create private rooms—contained a communal shower that Laura ushered them into while she proceeded to wait outside. Bright white square tiling covering the floor and walls between the booths again struck Theresa with a sense of unreality. To top it off, she almost yelped as the spray of hot water hit her bare skin. She took longer than Cynthia to bathe, scrubbing, shaving, and exploiting until it felt as if she had taken off a layer of skin.

At the end, she dried herself and got into the new set of clothes waiting for her on one of the sinks. Her reflection in the mirrors came as a surprise, having forgotten the last time she took a good, hard look at herself. Reflections were a funny thing to her. Bizarre how the person staring back at her had the same freckles, brown eyes, and wide forehead as a simple accountant born in Delaware some thirty-odd years before.

Laura guided the women to the room the hunters and Sipsey's leader would be. They shuffled through a lengthy stretch of corridor, down another level, and past several new faces. Most interesting to Theresa was a glimpse of a room that looked to be filled with radio equipment.

Nudging open the ajar door on the second of Sipsey's four stories, Theresa and Cynthia entered behind Laura into a cozy room with stiff grey carpet and a wrap-around couch lining half the wall. Her eyes first noticed Brandon standing by the door and Laura taking a place beside him. She then spotted a younger woman with a head of wavy, strawberry blonde hair perched in the center of the sofa.

That's not her, is it?

Beside the woman was a clean-shaven Gareth and Martin. The former once again earning Theresa's title of 'pretty boy' due to his primped appearance. Albert looked the much like he had before, sans a small amount of stubble. Alex sat at the end beside Gareth, and Theresa hurried across the room to join him while Cynthia took a place by Albert's side.

"Hey," Alex greeted, his face lighting up as she settled on the couch cushions.

"Oh wow," she gushed, running her hand across the shaven, yet still scratchy jaw where his beard used to be. "And here I was getting used to being married to sasquatch."

He smiled as she then ran her hand back to the hair on the nape of his neck, dark waves curling around her fingers. Its softness took her by surprise and she placed her free hand in her own damp hair to see if what had dried was also silky clean, finding it was.

Alex's wide stare alerted her that she must look odd sitting with one hand in his hair and one in her own. Pulling her hands down to her lap, she straightened and gave a nod to the crowd.
"So," the strawberry blonde spoke. Theresa's vision turned to see the woman leaning forward. "You enjoy our showers?"

"Like heaven on earth," she replied, narrowing her eyes at the woman.

"Well, I wasn't expecting so many new faces today, but Kaylee—who had chores to do or she'd definitely be here—told me you were her friends, so I thought we'll see how you like it here."

*Use it and lose it.*

"Well, I'm Gabby Stockwell and I head this place. We're forty-nine strong and with you, we'll be fifty-five. That is if you don't do anything stupid. Don't steal, lie, or hurt anyone here or I will throw you out, you understand?"

"We absolutely understand," Gareth replied.

Gabby gave Gareth a nod and set sights on Theresa. "So, Theresa, I understand you had an altercation with Kaylee? Now, why was that?"

"We have a history," she answered.

"Of?"

She held back a sigh. "We were friends, or close to friends. Then she decided she'd be better off without us and left. I took it pretty hard."

"Well, at least that matches up with Kay's story." She chuckled.

'Kay?' The woman called her 'Kay' as if they were friends. As if anyone other than Kaylee's own people could ever be a friend to her. As if these weren't people she and the rest of Terminus would have lured, trapped, and eaten if they had had the chance.

"She won't do that again," Gareth promised. "Right, Theresa?"

She gulped. "Cross my heart." She placed her hand over her chest.

"Okay," Cynthia said, scrunching her face. "I don't get it. How'd y'all get this place for your own? Ain't this a government set-up?"

"Where are you from, Cynthia?" Gabby asked.

She lowered her eyebrows. "What?"

"I want to know all about every one of you."

"W—well, we all came from Georgia, but I'm from Alabama."

"With all due respect Miss Stockwell," Gareth began, "the woman asked you a question and you answered with another question. I'm curious too, this place is pretty remarkable, and before my friends and I lie down to sleep here, we'd like to know how it came to be."

Gabby smiled at him and raised her hands. "You're right, you're right. I'm just a people person and I love her accent." Theresa held back a grimace. "Well, this place wasn't originally called Sipsey. It was called the Spencer Mountain Bunker, built during the Cold War, then turned into a sort of catch-all government crisis bunker after it ended. At the start of the turn, a few top-level military were able to get here, but not all of them."
"Sucks to have been them, huh?" Gareth remarked.

She threw him an amused smile. "Then all forms of communication went down and they lost contact with the outside world. So, with only a few weeks of food and fuel left, they went outside looking for supplies. That's when we came in."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Me, my brother, my father, and fourteen other people. We begged them to let us in, to—"

"How'd you get all the way up here?" Martin asked.

"Oh, right. You think after telling this story so many times, I'd be an expert at telling it. Well, the seventeen of us knew about this place since we were from nearby. Came from a camp not too far away and then up here because we hoped it was functional. So, we got to the fences and begged to get in but they turned us down. Said we were civilians and of no use to them.

"My dad very, very reluctantly agreed and we started to go our separate ways before we noticed a truck driving back. He had a bunch of us all jump in front of it and yell and scream for help, and when the guys got out, the rest of us and starting firing. We lost two in the firefight, but then we hopped in the truck and they let us in thinking we were their people. You can guess what happened next."

Theresa raised her eyebrows. They took initiative from the start.

"You killed all of them?" Gareth asked.

"Every one."

"Hm. Even with the foot-thick doors?"

"They weren't locked when we got there and... well... I don't think they thought a group with women and children could do something like that."

They have kids here?

"Where's your dad?" Albert asked.

"He got bit on a run," Gabby replied before moving on, "Now, you tell me about yourselves. You all met in Georgia? You've been a long ways."

Gareth shrugged. "Took a midnight train from Georgia."

Gabby laughed and Theresa restrained a groan. Gareth hadn't broken out his grotesque charm since Beth's arrival.

He continued, "We were trying to follow Kaylee. We wanted her back and some of us were pretty mad. Well, no, I'll admit it: I was mad too."

Theresa grit her teeth.

Gabby nodded. "I understand. I can't see anyone not having any knockdown, drag-outs while out there. But again, none of that flies here."

"Of course. We'll oblige the security guards as long as you want."
Yeah, like we'll be here for more than a week.

Gabby pressed her hands together. "Now, tomorrow we'll interview you individually about your relationships with one another and you'll get a medical check-up."

Theresa's ears burned. A check-up? Would it be Kaylee? Or a stranger? No, no way would an unfamiliar person—especially a man—be giving her an exam.

"Who?" Cynthia asked before Theresa could.

"We have two doctors here, and of course Kaylee never graduated, but I'm sure she can—"

"I want her to do it," Theresa cut-in.

Being close to Kaylee was a maddening thought, but she knew they would have to go along with such a thing and Gareth would be interested in the results. He had kept weight, fitness, and health records at Terminus.

"Oh," Gabby began, looking to Alex and Theresa, "I assume you're the couple, right?"

"Mm-hm," Alex confirmed.

"Then be happy. You'll get your own room."

* * *

Four vacant rooms were prepared and set aside for the group, all residing in the same section on the second floor. Gabby told them the rooms had been used as an easy storage space until earlier when they learned of their new guests. Occupying Theresa and Alex's was a full-sized bed with an end table on either side, and a small bookshelf. The room was a tad smaller than the ones they had at Terminus, and its barren, cream-colored walls reminded Theresa of the church before its painted declarations.

Heavy quiet lingered while the two meandered around the space and took in its minimalism. Alex ran his fingers across a row of books on the bookshelf and stopped on the spiral spine of a notepad. Theresa recalled that one of his several sketchbooks at Terminus had a similar spine. Her heart ached thinking of the many pages of his beautiful work left behind. Since their time in the wild, all Alex had drawn was the outline of a hummingbird in Gareth's notebook.

"You think this is what folks who got to Terminus felt like?" he asked, fingertips running up and down the metal spine.

She reflected inward for a moment, the notion only then crossing her mind. "Maybe... probably."

He turned to her. "So overwhelmed with this community—" he made air-marks with his hands, "—that they were scared to death worryin' it was all smoke and mirrors and even more scared to death of wantin' it too bad."

"It is smoke and mirrors."

He locked eyes with her for a few seconds before looking down and sliding his hand in his pocket. Pulling his hand out, he held a wad of tissue paper and unfolded it to reveal a bright, shiny razor blade. "I broke it outta the one I used before we left the showers. For when we're alone with one of those guards. Or even when we're not, I guess."
She breathed a sigh of relief, any weapon was better than none. The thought of having no defense from rapists—who was every man in the compound unless somehow proven otherwise—had terrified her. A razor blade wasn't much, but it was better than her fingernails.

Alex strolled over to the bedside, folded the tissue back up, and slid it underneath the pillow. "So, I guess they expect us to sleep."

A soothing idea a day ago was an alarming one now. Again, she contemplated if arrivals at Terminus had felt the same way. She had had a cautious optimism when arriving herself. Of course, that was before the Siege when she still wore a pair of rose-tinted glasses.

She slipped off her pants, moved to the other side of the bed, and placed them on the nightstand. "I don't see what else there is to do." There was one thing, but the thought of having sex in a lion's den wasn't exactly a turn-on. "Why don't you sleep and I'll stay up, so one of us is awake just in case."

He gave an unhappy smile. "You wanna stay awake holdin' the razor?"

She shrugged. "Pretty much."

He shook his head and began fumbling with the fly on his pants. "No, that's—we both deserve to get enough sleep. Get as much outta this deal as we can."

She began to argue when she realized she could no more convince him to sleep while she sat awake than he could her.

They undressed into their shirts and underwear and climbed underneath the crisp, white sheets. Theresa lay on her back with the covers pulled only up to her hips and stared at the overhead light.

After a stint of silence, Alex spoke, "So uh, uh... you wanna hear somethin' funny?"

She shrugged. "I guess."

He sat up a bit. "Well, even after livin' in close quarters all this time, it still felt really weird to be showerin' in between my brother and the guy he used to... you know. There were walls, but still."

A smile crinkled on her face. "I'd be concerned if it didn't feel weird."

"You should be concerned, 'cause for some reason I am still so damn curious about what that tattoo on Martin's chest is, but I've never been able to get close enough. And no way am I gonna go up to him and ask."

An unexpected burst of laughter struck Theresa and she sat up, raising her hands over her eyes. Only Alex could think of something genuinely funny in such a tense situation. "What is it that makes him so alluring to you Ellwoods, huh?" she teased, lowering her hand and turning to him.

He cracked-up too. "Hey man, if I was gonna go for a guy, no way would it be him. You know me better than that."

They both continued giggling until they were wiping away tears. The thought of Alex trying to check out Martin in the shower without being caught was the funniest thing she had heard in ages.

After they came down, Theresa enjoying the warm glow in her chest, she settled against Alex with her head against his shoulder. She shut her eyes as the refreshing scent of soap and clean linen filled her nose. A bit embarrassingly, she recalled how crazy his scent made her before and when
they first got together. How she would smell his shirts in the laundry room before she washed them, feeling almost dizzy from his musk. She wondered if he ever did the same thing, but knowing Alex, she assumed he had.

It then occurred to her they hadn't kissed since they had been alone, nor had they all day, possibly even the day before. Regret coming over her, she leaned up and planted her lips over his bottom one, taking in the aroma of his aftershave. He smiled against her mouth and kissed her back, light and soft.

At the very least, she could feel safe as long as he was there, even if the safety was fleeting.

Chapter End Notes

Sipsey, of course, is a fictional war bunker modelled on the Diefenbunker (Canada), Raven Rock Mountain Complex (US), and Burlington Bunker (UK). I got the idea of survivors living in a massive Cold War hideout from Vault 101 in Fallout 3.
I've officially been writing this series for one year! I posted You Don't Know What It Is To Be Hungry here on November 6th, 2014. If you'd have told me then I'd still be writing this in a year I would have fallen out of my chair, or off my bed where I usually use my laptop. I think I'm the only one who's been writing about Gareth for so long!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite the suggested weight gain, Gareth had been given a clean bill of health by a former pediatric surgeon. The compound's nifty infirmary was draped in the eerily white gauze of a doctor's office with supplies abound. Stethoscopes, rubber gloves, and a wide variety of medications almost tricked Gareth's mind into thinking he was in a real hospital in the old world. As if he could leave his appointment and run across the street to his favorite Gyro stand for a bite.

Following the exam, Laura escorted him to the cafeteria for an early lunch. They arrived to find several residents seated throughout the room. The only member of his group present was Alex, smiling and chatting with an auburn-haired young boy to his right. Brandon sat a table away reading a book.

*There quivers his uterus again,* Gareth thought of his brother.

Gareth made his way over to the two, new sneakers squeaking against the glossy tile floor.

"Brandon!" Laura shouted from behind him, causing Alex and the boy to turn their heads. "Will you watch these two for me?"

Brandon gave a nod. "They don't even need me here, just here because Roy is." Laura rubbed her eyes, turned, and marched back from where she came.

"Hey," Alex greeted. "Didn't even hear you comin'."

"You didn't hear Laura's big feet thundering forth?" Gareth replied, taking a seat beside him. The kid gave a kind smile.

"Hey man, don't knock those of us with big feet," Alex said, then glanced to the child. "Gareth, this is Roy. He's eight and Brandon's nephew. He said he liked trains, so I told him we used to live in a big train station."

"Really?" Gareth inquired, raising his eyebrows. "Well hi, Roy. What did Alex tell you about Ter—the train station?"

"Just that we were there for a little while is all," Alex answered for him.

"Someone said you came all the way from down south," Roy asked, tilting forward to get a look at Gareth. "How'd you get so far?"

"The Deep South, Roy," Gareth corrected him. "This still is the South. We were looking for someone and we found her. Just hope we can all get along now."
Roy's eyes turned doleful. "Did you have to kill people to get here?"

A shot of pain crossed Alex's face. "Th—that's grown-up stuff."

Gareth shook his head "No, it's not."

Alex looked at his brother with a frown, then back ahead of him. "Yeah, uh... no, he's right, Roy. It ain't just grown-up stuff."

How could it be? Gabby said children were involved in the takeover of the place. He was uncertain if Roy was one of them, but if so, then the kid was far from untainted. And even if he hadn't been, children couldn't be children anymore.

"Never because we wanted to," Gareth said, locking eyes with the boy. "Only because we had to. Like when the people here took this place for their own."

A bit of envy struck him. If he and the pre-Siege Terminus crowd had been in their shoes, no way would they have taken the bunker by force. Especially not with the non-violent Michael at the helm.

"Were you there when they took over here?" Alex asked.

Roy nodded.

Gareth clasped his hands together on the table. "Then you know they killed so they could have somewhere for you to be safe, and here you are, safe. Never had to live out there on turkey vultures and creek water like my friends and I did."

"But you got here now," Roy said with a smile. "Kaylee's really nice and said she thinks you'll like it here."

"I hope we do," Alex said, returning the smile.

"Hey," the rough edge of Brandon's voice spoke. "Roy, let's get you to class, alright?" He shut his book and rose to his feet.

_Oh yeah, Gabby did mention something about 'schooling.'_

"Okay," Roy agreed, then stood up and waved to Alex. "Bye, Alex."

"Bye, Roy." He waved back as Brandon led Roy past them and through the exit.

"Too adorable for words, huh?" Gareth remarked.

Alex let out a breath. "Yeah. And no, I'm not gettin' 'too attached,' so don't start."

"I wasn't going to." Gareth raised a hand. "I know you won't."

"Sorry, I just... nevermind. So, you wanted an early lunch too?"

"They said I could, but since I had such a large breakfast, I don't want to push it and eat too much too fast."

Alex shook his head. "How you got so much self-control, I'll never know, man. I had the omelet and toast and somethin' else I can't remember 'cause I ate it so fast and I still want more. Heh, now I think I can imagine what menstrual cramps feel like."
Gareth laughed. "Yeah, I wouldn't tell a woman that." Alex laughed back. "Oh, and when I left, Theresa was still in with Kaylee."

His face sobered. "I've been worryin' about that. And uh..." He leaned in and lowered his voice, "I swiped a blade from one of the razors yesterday, but I kept it on me before Tess could ask for it 'cause Naz came in sayin' it was time to go."

"You think she'd slice Kaylee's throat open while she's checking her reflexes?"

"Well, no, not here, but... I feel kinda bad about takin' it now. Like I tricked her."

Gareth had sworn to keep out of marital concerns and opted to change to subject. "Well, Kaylee is very lucky, you know."

Alex reclined back and rested his hands on the table. "Yeah, she is. Wasn't killed by Terminus burnin', us, or the elements."

"She and Martin have an amazing number of lives, don't they?"

"Well, hello," Gabby's voice rang. The two men turned to see the perky woman standing by their table.

Gareth noted her chipper smile paired with plucked and arched eyebrows. Such a cosmetic feature looked odd to him as even most of the women at Terminus had long since forgone shaping their brows.

"Hi," Alex said, giving a wave.

Gareth offered a polite smile and nod. "Gabby."

"You boys get your check-ups?" she asked, stepping over and taking a seat from across from them. 'You boys?' Gareth had to hold back a look at that line.

"Not yet," Alex replied.

"I did," Gareth said. "Everything seems fine, I'm just a little weak. And I'm sure you'll find Cynthia has low blood pressure, but she always has. Even when she was healthy."

"You used to keep track?" Gabby asked, sliding her elbows forward on the table. Her forest green sweater hung loosely enough that when she did so, her chest and lack of bra were exposed.

Alex straightened his back and averted his gaze to the area behind her. Gareth stayed still, glancing at her cleavage once before looking back to her bedroom eyes.

*Oh, great, she's some kind of nympho. Naturally.*

Gareth replied, "I have a thing for keeping records, lists, etcetera. Especially when it comes to my friends' health."

Gabby brought her arms closer to her body, pushing her breasts together.

*Oh, come on.*

"I get so happy when I meet a man who cares about his people so much." She smiled and quirked her brow before looking to Alex.
"You're so lucky to have such a caring brother. You better be just as sweet, Alex."

Alex bolted up. "Yeah, I gotta—gotta go see my Theresa—my wife. She'll um—oh uh, I need an escort. Do I—"

"Oh, forget about it," Gabby interrupted, waving her hand. "You can go on your own. It's not that far."

"Th—thanks." He spun around and shuffled toward the exit.

Gabby watched him leave before turning back to Gareth. "He has to be your younger brother."

Gareth nodded. "Two years apart."

She leaned back, once again veiling her chest with her shirt. "I wanted to give you your interview personally, and I hoped Alex too, but I guess he's a diligent husband."

"Yes, he is."

All ridiculousness aside, he didn't appreciate her flashing and flirting with his married brother. Nonetheless, if she wanted to play some flirtatious game, then he figured he might as well play back. Not out of interest, but to gather as much information from the woman as he could.

"Well, were you going to have an early lunch?"

"No, I don't want my stomach to burst."

She smacked her hands on the table and stood up. "Let's take a walk then."

* * *

Gabby led Gareth through many more areas of the complex while they chatted and told each other more of their past and present.

Among Gareth's carefully tweaked history included the story of his missing fingers. He told her Albert had shot them off during a walker altercation.

The room meant for emergency government cabinet meetings interested him greatly. A childlike urge struck him to sit in the big chair and imagine he was the president, ordering that Atlanta be bombed to contain the outbreak. They used the room for Sipsey's weekly 'board' meetings as Gabby called them. Gareth thought the term 'board meetings' a tad pretentious, but assumed he would have chosen a similar term if he led the place.

Much to his surprise, as he and Gabby strolled down the long halls, turning the corner was an orange cat with white feet, chest, and tip of the tail. Keeping one non-essential animal fed was unusual enough, but Gabby informed him there was another cat at the facility—an elderly tabby—as well as a white terrier dog.

However, the most impressive experience was the machinery room on the first and lowest floor. Sipsey's power, water, temperature, and air quality were all controlled within it. Stepping down a few metal steps, Gareth heard humming from the various mechanisms. Gabby directed him toward the power control in the back of the cramped space while she explained each of the devices' functions.

"You clearly care a lot about you people," Gabby said as she stopped in front of the water filtration
device. "It warms my heart." She placed her hand over her chest, causing her breast to wiggle.

_You're barking up the wrong tree, lady. I've always been into legs and wide hips. It's Alex who's spent the better part of his life obsessed with boobs._

Gareth took a step toward her. "If I didn't, they wouldn't be here. I'd do anything for them and to keep them safe. That's why I—no, we—decided to come here despite our reservations. We needed to be fed."

"So, if you weren't hungry, you wouldn't have come?"

"No way."

"Well, from what I've seen so far, I think you could fit right in here. I just worry..." She scratched her head and crossed her arms.

"About Theresa?"

"Can she live here with Kaylee? You all have problems with her, but she seems the most upset by it. Why is that?"

Gareth searched for an answer and realized his own uncertainty regarding her devastation. The two never seemed like best friends at Terminus. Theresa was closest to Mary and Alex. Although he had seen the women play card and board games—what Martin deemed as 'pity friendship' on Theresa's part.

He raised a hand to his hip. "You know what? I'm not entirely sure. I think she handles betrayal badly."

"Do you?"

"Of course I do."

"What would you have done if you found Kaylee alone?"

_Probably had a barbecue._

He pursed his lips, feigning a look of contemplation. "I'd played the scenario over in my head, believe me. We were following her, not to the tee, but we knew she was heading north. She'd been with us ever since... a long time. I don't know if I could've hurt her. I felt like it when I saw her, especially since here she's been fed, clothed, and sheltered while we've been living in the pits."

"This must be really hard for you," she said, her voice soft as velvet.

_And oh thank god you're offering your tits to comfort me._

"It is, but I have to do what's best for them. And that might mean keeping them here even though she's here too."

A bit of queasiness nudged at Gareth's gut. Whether it was from his syrupy words, or the fact he hadn't eaten an egg since pre-Occupation Terminus, he couldn't tell.

A warm smile claimed her face as she gazed up at him with sea green eyes, and he glanced at her chest to communicate interest. For a moment, he was sure she would lean up and kiss him, but then backed away. Relief came over him as she did so.
After all, he wasn't going to whore himself out to get in good with the boss, nor be anyone's lap dog. A bit of flirtation had proven fruitful, but he wasn't about to let go any further. Besides, for all he knew her interest was also insincere and she was playing him as well. Perhaps she had been testing the waters to see which men in their group would respond to her advances.

And she goads Alex and me when Martin and Albert desperately need to get laid.

"Well," she began, "let's head back to where they gave your people their interviews."

They departed the machinery room, leaving the steady hum of the running equipment behind. Gareth admired the bunker's order and cleanliness as they trekked up through the next few floors. Living in the wild, he had gotten used to the muck, but felt at his best in a well-maintained environment.

The rest of the group's interviews had been given in the infirmary after their exams, a few of the exams having been given by Kaylee. Gareth wondered if she was happy to be back in her element.

Bitch, he caught himself thinking.

Upon arriving on the fourth-floor medical ward, they found Martin and Albert in the overflow room each sitting on one of the beds.

"How'd your exams go?" Gabby asked as she and Gareth stopped just beyond the doorway.

Gareth wondered if she would give them the same sultry treatment as she had him and his brother. It was telling that she had done no such flirting with the men when Theresa and Cynthia were present.

"We're fine," Albert replied with a shrug. "Said I needed to put on weight, but that shouldn't be a problem."

"I had slow reaction times or somethin'," Martin said.

"Pretty sure you did even before our involuntary hunger strike," Gareth teased—his first jab at Martin in weeks. Under the circumstances, he figured he could take the burn.

"Ha-ha," he snipped. "How you doin', Gabby?"

"Good," she answered. "Is Kaylee nearby?"

"No, but that other guy, uh... Juh-somethin' is."

"Jason," she corrected. "Well, I thought Alex, Theresa, and Cynthia would be here."

Gareth noticed the bitter emphasis on Theresa's name and chewed on his tongue. He was beginning to dislike the woman. In addition, he observed her lack of special attention to the other two men in the room.

As if planned, Cynthia then entered through the doorway followed by Theresa and Alex. They exchanged hellos and filtered toward the center of the room. Alex grabbed Theresa's hand as soon as his eyes met Gabby's causing Theresa to give him a sideways glance.

"How'd you do?" Gabby asked. "Any trouble?" Her vision lingered on Theresa.

Gareth bit harder on his tongue.
"I got low blood pressure," Cynthia informed her. "Always had though."

Alex frowned. "Yeah, and I have near-sightedness."

Gabby rubbed her hands together. "Oh well, there's contacts and—"

"I know," he interrupted. "I'd rather not do either. I mean, I didn't even know somethin' was wrong on my own, so it can't be that bad.

"And man, there's no way I'm wearin' glasses or stickin' my finger in my eye every day."

Theresa rolled her eyes and shook her head. "He wants to wait until he's blind."

"No, just half-blind." He gave a playful few shakes to her hand and a faint smile appeared on her lips.

"Well, you think it over," Gabby said. "It's your choice."

Better be.

* * *

The inability to tell if it was day or night in the bunker made Gareth uneasy. 12 AM, 7 AM, and 3 PM all looked the same. According to his new leather-banded wristwatch, it was 6:37 PM when Laura escorted him back to their quarters after dinner. How time had gotten away from him so fast, he didn't know. Naz and the a few other Sipsean's garden tour did seem to drag on forever. They had droned on about each crop and the amount of water and fertilizer it needed to keep going.

A dead-silent Laura resigned to the room at the end of the hall with the door open to keep an eye on them. No way any of them could go somewhere without her seeing it. Both efficient and lazy, Gareth thought. He began to knock on doors to see if any of his people were in their rooms when he heard a repeated clicking from the one two down from his own. Pushing the ajar door open, he spotted Martin perched on the end of his bed holding a pair of fingernail clippers to his fingertips.

As Gareth took a step inside, Martin looked up and asked, "What?"

Gareth was unenthusiastic about a one-on-one with the man, but felt obligated to thank him for having agreed to come to Sipsey despite his dissent. "I've been meaning to talk to you."

Martin tossed the clippers onto the dresser a few feet ahead of the bed, making a clank. Gareth noticed he left the handle sticking out—one of his pet peeves. He moved to the table and grabbed up the tool before spinning the handle around and setting it back down.

"Why do you always gotta play O.C.D.?" Martin asked, tapping his fingers on the bed.

Gareth forced a smile. "First of all, I spotted a few unopened packets of Fruit Stripe gum in the cafeteria when Gabby was showing me around. Second, I wanted to say thank you for agreeing to come here even though you were outvoted. I do appreciate that and wanted to give you credit."

"I'm touched you remembered my favorite," he said, curling his fingers and looking down at his nails. "And you're welcome, I guess."

Relieved he got the ordeal out of the way, Gareth began to leave when Martin spoke again, "No, you know what?" He turned back to see Martin glowering at him. "I need more than 'credit.' "First," he began, holding up his fingers to keep count, "I didn't take off when I wanted to. Or after
you made me puke my guts out. I didn't leave Alex and Theresa to the biters when we got outta that car, and you know how fuckin' easy it would've been to? To get rid of the bitch who's treated me like shit for all this time? But did I? No. And I've done everything you said after that no questions asked until you polled us about comin' here. And yep, I went along with that too even though I didn't want to."

Gareth focused on the four fingers Martin held up. "What else do you want?"

"Admit I'm a better man than Kaylee," he replied, lowering his hand.

He choked back laughter. "Kaylee's never been a good man."

"You—you know what I mean. Kaylee the treasure who was there when everything went down but then took off like you were so sure I was gonna. So say it."

His lips formed a genuine smile, impressed with Martin's forcefulness. "You're right, you are better than her." He took a step forward. "You're more loyal, you're stronger, and more dependable. I did always think of you as out any minute, just using us to stay alive for a day longer. But you know what? I think I had some of that anti-outsider bias too. And Kaylee's problems flew right over my head because I didn't want to see them. Because oh no, no one of us would never leave after everything we've been through."

Martin's face softened. "I didn't go through it and I stayed."

"And then you got to know what it's like to be hungry."

"Yeah, I did."

"So, you also understand a little more why we've always been so bonded together. What made us go from zero to eating a man's liver. Why Theresa freaked out so much when Kaylee left."

"Can't say it makes any less sense to me now."

Gareth slid a few feet over in front of him. "I guess you want a cookie and a hug now?"

He gave a laugh. "They bake cookies here? 'Cause I'm still hungry all the damn time."

"It doesn't go away with a day or two of three square meals."

"Can't imagine it ever goin' away now."

"Oh, it does. Eventually," he replied, taking a deep breath when the aroma of lemon struck his senses.

Something Martin was wearing or had bathed in must have been lemon-scented, he figured. Cookies on his mind, he imagined lemon ones. Sweet, sour, buttery... the thought made his mouth salivate with need.

"May I help you, sir?" Martin asked as Gareth realized he had been leaning toward him.

Oh no. No, no, no. Not again. Was it the hunger? Pheromones from Gabby stirring his sex drive? Or merely the need to feel sated in any way possible? Regardless, Gareth wanted to know what it was on Martin that smelled so good. And if it were on his skin, he wanted to see if he could taste it.
The two locked eyes for a moment and Gareth tried to remind himself how much he had grown to dislike him.

**Obnoxious, disrespectful, arrogant, redneck moron.**

Yet it was no use. Gareth moved down, cupped Martin's face and planted a kiss on his lips. The strong lemony scent hit him just as Martin winced back and cried, "Whoa, what the fuck, man!?"

Gareth removed his hands and stared back into his shocked expression.

What else did he expect? Even Martin had to have enough pride to reject the person who had mistreated him for a few kicks. However, it was still Martin, and he had always been easy to buy.

Hoping to avoid total embarrassment, Gareth forced a smirk and said, "Why don't you make me gag like I did you?" He decided that at least ought to get a chuckle out of him.

Martin straightened his shoulders. "You... can't be serious." He ran his eyes across Gareth as if searching for a wire.

Gareth stepped over a few feet and pushed the door shut, then moved back. "I'm not going to offer to do this again. You know, make it up to you like this? Not that I won't enjoy it at least a little." Martin didn't reply, only stared back at him as Gareth began unbuckling the other man's belt. "Are you going to stop me, or what?"

"Haven't decided," he replied, squinting.

He knelt down, sharp arousal flushing through him as he undid Martin's fly and zipper. "Well?"

"I'm still deciding."

Gareth snickered. "No, you're not." He ran his hand over Martin's groin, illustrating his obvious excitement.

Martin sighed. "No, I am, 'cause you all but said you hate my guts and—oh... okay..." he sputtered as Gareth began taking him. "Okay, okay you—Jesus, Gareth."

Within seconds, Martin was putty. Gareth delighted in his reactions; rocking into his mouth and letting out little whines as he took him in deeper. Although, he didn't gag as he had no reflex for it—the joke to Martin having been a figure of speech. As he continued, he had to reach down, undo his pants, and fondle himself, the sheer bliss of the act being too much to ignore.

Two minutes later and it was over, Martin released himself, and Gareth took note that part did not taste lemony. Gareth found his own satisfaction a few moments later, sating his craving for at least a short while. In the aftermath, he was displeased with the mess made on his hand. Though he wasn't keen on dirtying an innocent quilt, he wanted to spite the other so he wiped his hand on the blanket beside him.

Heaving through breaths, Martin said, "Classy." He then gripped Gareth by the shirt collar and guided him up, giving him a sloppy kiss and licking throughout his mouth.

The citrus scent appeared again and Gareth decided it had to be some sort of aftershave or shampoo. It sent waves of joy through his already endorphin-filled system and made him let out a small pleased sound. Martin then pulled away and made the most **obscene** slurping sounds followed by a gulp.
"So, how long had it been?" Gareth asked, laughing a bit.

Martin ran his hands up and down Gareth's arms. "Gina."

Oh, Gina.

The Gina debacle had been a tricky one. She had a fling with Martin, broke it off, begun a real relationship with Greg, then proceeded to cheat on him with the former. When discovered and confronted, Gina swore she would be faithful to Greg. Whether that happened was uncertain. Greg for sure had not found out because Gareth knew Greg would have literally killed Martin for it.

"Oh, right," Gareth said. "Well, you know I've lost sleep worrying over your neglected libido."

Martin beamed, leaning down and nipping Gareth on the neck. "Gimme about fifteen or twenty minutes and I'll be ready to play tummy sticks."

"How I've missed your eloquence."

He pulled back. "Oh, Gareth, make love to me!" he mocked, melodramatically pawing away at his shirt.

Gareth hadn't intended to do anything else with him, but knew he wouldn't feel satisfied until he had gone the whole mile. After all, he wanted to make Martin say uncle.

Chapter End Notes

Okay just to be clear, even if this story ends with the whole world being nuked or engulfed by a solar flare THE CATS AND DOG WILL LIVE. I PROMISE YOU. NO NEED TO WORRY ABOUT THE FATE OF THE CATS.
The group was at last assigned chores and responsibilities, as well as permitted to go on their own throughout Sipsey. Alex drifted around the hallway by his quarters, sweeping sand and debris into neat piles. Despite his affinity for doing as little work as possible, he was relieved to have been made useful. Even in a foreign place, sitting idle had him uneasy.

While he swept away, he imagined a permanent stay at Sipsey. Gareth hadn't drawn up an escape plan, yet they had been told they could leave whenever they wanted. Of course, that could have been a lie. The same lies had rolled off Alex's tongue to newcomers at Terminus.

Steps approached from around the hall's corner. Alex hoped it was one of his people, but to his disappointment, it was Gabby.

*Oh no.*

Her face lit up as she neared him, and held up two small objects he couldn't make out.

*Oh yeah, nearsighted.*

"Al-ex!" she called in a sing-song voice.

He forced a smile and leaned the broom against the wall. "Hey, Gabby."

Already he felt like he was doing something wrong. Having inadvertently seen her breasts made him feel he had betrayed Theresa. Though he had seen many other women's chests during their relationship—dead ones. But at that point they had become meat and nothing more. He licked along the roof of his mouth at the thought of how good women's breast meat tasted.

Gabby stopped before him. "I know you said you didn't want anything, but…" She held up a case for contacts, and one for glasses. "Once you find out how much better you can see…"

"Don't I gotta be fitted for some or somethin'?" he asked.

She gave a playful roll of her eyes. "Well, yes. But at least try them. They're both for nearsightedness and if they don't work, you can—"

"Thanks." He grabbed them from her hand.

"Oh, don't worry." She waved him off. "You'll still be able to see your pretty brown eyes either way. You know, brown eyes are so underrated."

A ragged breath escaped his lips. "So you got all these supplies from every place you could find around here. That's why me and mine couldn't find anything. 'Cause you people had gotten to it already. Sorta plays into your favor if you think about it. Make us so desperate we have to come here or we'll starve to death."

*Did I just accuse her of luring us into a trap?* The irony wasn't lost on him.

Her bright expression darkened. "We had to think of ourselves first."

*We first, always.*

"Is lettin' us in here still thinkin' of yourselves first?"
"It is because we need the help. As you can see…" She turned her head, glancing around the hall. "This place is huge."

"And why's it suddenly so hard to maintain?"

"It's always been hard to maintain. We've been looking for new people for a year now, and they're not as easy to find as you'd think. But you and yours? You're a godsend."

"So what happens if you don't need us anymore?"

She batted her eyelashes and grinned. "We'll always need you."

*Why don't you go see if Martin wants to fuck you?*

He gave a nod. "Guess that makes sense."

"Listen, I understand you don't trust us, I wouldn't either. Especially not after you know what we did to take this place. I promise you though, you're vital to us already and you can have a home here."

He pursed his lips. "Mm-hm. Yeah, I'm glad to hear that, but I'm gonna put these in my room and try 'em later. I wanna finish my job here."

"Oh, okay." She clapped her hands together. "Such a good worker. Well, you let me know how it goes, Alex."

"Sure thing," he agreed.

The prospect of living there permanently had lost a bit of appeal.

* * *

Dairy day was upon them. The Sipseans had fresh dairy twice a week in their breakfast and lunch. For this lunch, they served the same goat cheese and cucumber sandwiches they had on the road, but with added tomato slices and basil leaves. Despite the tasty sandwich paired with an onion and potato soup, Alex hoped someone would catch a piece of meat soon. Naz and others had said they came back with a deer or quail now and then.

Sitting at a cafeteria table alongside Gareth, Cynthia, and Albert, Alex wiped his bowl clean with his finger and licked off the remains.

"These people love their carbs, don't they?" Gareth said, holding up and scrutinizing his half-eaten sandwich.

Cynthia took a gulp of water from her glass and said, "Mama was always goin' on low-carb diets. She made these 'quote cheesecakes unquote' with no crusts and Sweet 'N Low that were just god awful."

Gareth smirked. "And how much did she weigh when she died?"

She set her glass down, licking her lips. "Oh… well… two hundred."

"That's what I thought." He bit off a chunk of his bread crust. "Deprivation never works. How many times have we tried to trick our bodies into thinking we're not hungry? You can't trick it."

"My mom went on diets too," Albert said, licking his spoon. "Low-fat ones. She was probably a
hundred and forty pounds before... things."

"Wouldn't have lasted," Gareth said, tearing off a piece of the bread.

Alex wiped his mouth with a napkin, shaking his head at his brother's certainty of the health of a woman he never met.

Albert sighed, from what Alex thought was Gareth's comment until he said, "I don't like this crowd. I can feel them staring at us."

"We're strangers, new blood. Can you blame them?"

"No, but that doesn't mean I like it." He gathered his items onto his tray and stood up with it. "Well, I'm out of here, guys."

"I'm gonna go too," Cynthia announced. "I don't like goin' no where without someone I know." She arranged her tray and rose to her feet, then headed alongside Albert to deposit them.

"Mm," Gareth began, taking a sip of his drink, "we never got a chance to talk about yesterday."

"What about yesterday?" Alex asked.

"Uh, the cleavage queen?"

"Oh, right. Yeah, she found me in the halls earlier. Gave me glasses and contacts to try on."

"I see. She wearing a bra this time?"

"Well, I didn't *look*. Though I might've gotten a little snippy with her after she said brown eyes are 'so underrated'." He made a face.

Gareth smiled and bowed his head. "It's hard to believe sometimes."

"What?"

"Oh, you."

Alex leaned forward. "What? Why?"

"Hot chick hits on you like that and you're *offended*."

He smiled a bit. "Yeah well, my wife's hotter, man."

Gareth laughed. "You could've been a nineteen-fifties stick figure husband." He picked up his sandwich and took another bite.

"Oh, like a Ken doll?"

He shook his head. "No, you have to have muscle tone for that." Alex breathed a laugh and began to reply when Gareth interrupted, "Oh, I almost forgot; did you tell Theresa about what happened?"

His face fell straight. "Nah, man. I don't think it's a good idea, least not right now."

"Not a good idea to tell me about what?" the throaty voice of his spouse asked from behind him.

*Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no...*
Alex turned in his chair to see Theresa standing beside Martin, her eyes darting between him and his brother. Wondering why he hadn't heard them coming, he glanced down and found Theresa wore slippers, and Martin sandals.

_Sandals? Of all the times to wear sandals, it had to be today._

"Alex?" Theresa's voice broke through his thoughts.

"Oh, um… I…" he sputtered.

"Uh-oh," Martin muttered. "You're in trouble."

Her face tightened. "Alex, not a good idea to tell me about what?" She looked to Gareth.

"Gareth, what?"

"Um…" Alex searched for the words. "G—Gabby she's been—me and Gareth—hitting on us."

Her eyes went ablaze. "What!?"

"Did it yesterday," Gareth chimed-in. "Came, sat down with us, then leaned over and flashed us. When I talked to her for the interview she was all sweet smiles too. Don't know what her angle is, but I worked it just enough to give her the idea I might be into it so she'd tell me more. I'm not into it, by the way."

Martin scratched his cheek and appeared to muffle a laugh. Why he was amused by Gareth's information, Alex didn't know.

Theresa took a hard step forward. "And why were you going to keep this a secret?"

"Well, 'cause you've been stressed out and I didn't want you to—"

"Are you serious? It's not your choice to decide if I get stressed out by something."

"I know, you're right, I—"

"No, you don't know. What did you think I'd do? Go off and smack her like I did Kaylee? Is that it? You don't want your crazy wife to get out of hand again?"

He stood up. "No, I—"

"Hey," Martin interrupted. "Folks are lookin' at you two."

Alex took a look around the room to see most people staring at them from their seats. "Let's talk about this in private."

She nodded and took the lead past the tables, out into the hallway and around a corner. Crossing her arms and glaring at him, she said, "Okay, give me your side again."

"I wasn't gonna keep it from you forever," Alex explained. "Just until we were a little more settled."

"Did you tell her to stop?"

"No, but I didn't reciprocate. I didn't wanna get under her skin when we just got here. I'll tell her to stop now, I promise."
"Would you have told her to stop if I hadn't found out?"

"Yes."

"When?"

He let out a sharp sigh. "I don't know, I didn't have it planned out."

Her arms fell to her sides and she scowled. "So this is what you really think of me? A loose cannon that needs to be controlled."

"Tess, you know I don't think that."

"Then why didn't you trust me to not do something I'd regret!?"

"I—I don't know, I screwed up. I'm sorry." He slid forward and reached for her hand.

She pulled back. "No, just leave me alone, Alex." She turned and headed back to the cafeteria.

Alex began to follow her when she spun around. "I said leave me alone!" She raised her hands and whirled back around, marching around the corner.

His heart pounding and chin quivering, he had to make it up to her. Or at least take some sort of action. Gabby.

Where'd she be at noon?

He turned and barreled down the hall, hoping to bump into someone to ask when he ran into Naz.

"Hey, Naz?" he called.

She stopped before him and smiled. "Hi, Alex."

"You know where Gabby is?"

She brought her fingers to her lips. "Um… I think I last heard she was in her office."

"Her office? At lunchtime?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes she has things to do that run late. I don't ask."

"Alright. Thanks," he said as she gave a nod continued on her way.

Alex pulled a map of Sipsey from his pocket and began following it to Gabby's office. He had hoped to avoid confronting her, but she had crossed a line by coming between him and Theresa. Even if the fight was his fault, Gabby was the cause.

If he told her straight up to cease her advances, would she get mad? Kick him or all of them out? Reaching the steps to the next floor, he thought of what would have been done to her at Terminus. A warning would have been issued for her to stop harassing them, and if she ignored it, she would have ended up in a traincar.

A jab of longing hit him. Troublemakers at Terminus had been easy to deal with. He could always count on his fellow residents to provide a hospitable environment. Without that home field advantage, problems were tricky. Yet if he didn't act on the complication it would only worsen.
Alex crumpled the map in his hands as he made it to the second floor. Being the agreeable one left him ashamed. He had been the one always waiting for someone else to act, for his big brother to protect him and take action. The one who hesitated to bash the head in of the man who threatened to kill him and then shoved him against a car. Instead, he was relieved when Theresa took over and killed the thug for him.

"You better be just as sweet, Alex."

Was he without the self-respect to allow himself anger if someone hurt him? Deep down, he always felt he deserved it. How could he have the audacity to be upset that someone harmed him after the horrible things he had done?

Yet he hadn't cowered when Sasha tried to kill Theresa, nor when Ally threw his wedding band into the fire. But as with Gabby, they had harmed Theresa too, and protecting her was never hypocritical.

When he arrived at Gabby's office he found the door open. Taking a deep breath, he slipped the map in his pocket and knocked on the doorframe.

Gabby grinned from her desk, littered with knick-knacks and stacks of paper, and stood up. "Alex! It's so good to see you." She made her way across the room to him. "Did you try the—"

"You need to stop hittin' on me," he interrupted.

She tilted her head. "What are you talking about?"

"You've caused problems for me and my wife and that ain't okay. We don't have to stay here, you know."

She narrowed her eyes. "What problems? What's she done?"

He clenched his fist. "Argued with me 'cause I didn't wanna tell her about you flashin' me and my brother."

She glanced down. "Okay listen, I don't know what you think I've been doing, but I haven't been flirting both and you and Gareth. Why would I do that?"

"I don't know and don't care, but please stop. This place has everything we need, but we don't need someone tryin' to mess with any of relationships. Like I said, we don't have to stay here."

Her face fell. "Did Gareth back you on this?"

"Yeah," he lied. "Didn't come himself 'cause this is my problem. Flash him all you want, he don't seem to mind, but leave me alone. I'm not interested."

She grew silent for a few moments before asking, "Do you know the difference between a wolf and a sheep?"

"What?"

"No one here is a sheep, Alex, and no one here is a wolf. We try to maintain a balance between the two. One that lets us be strong and human at the same time."

Alex knew how Gareth would respond to that.

"And which one am I?"
"You've struck a good balance between the two so far. Just keep it in the middle, okay?" She tilted her head again and smiled.

A threat.

"I'm glad we're on the same page then." He turned and slipped out through the doorway before she could reply.

A surge of adrenaline rushed through him as he began down the corridor. Telling off Gabby would not be an instant fix for his and Theresa's problem, but it was a start.

The echoes of Gabby's voice then made Alex stop in his tracks. Tip-toeing back, he heard what sounded like a phone conversation and recalled Sipsey's telephone system.

As he began to turn back around, he caught, "...oh, just give Naz's husband a sandwich."

Naz was married? He hadn't seen her with a man.

Shaking it off, he started toward his room figuring he might as well try on the glasses and contacts the ridiculous woman gave him.

* * *

Theresa had been absent from dinner which Alex expected. It was best to give her space when upset, so he abstained from trying to find her. Gabby ignored him when she saw him in the cafeteria, paying her attention to Gareth instead.

Afterwards, he followed a few of them to one of the three recreation rooms in the complex. It was nicer than the one at Terminus, though he noted most things there were. The room was painted an unsavory shade of dark green, but contained a pool table, television, stereo, and various games. He began to ask if they had Candyland, but knew Theresa wouldn't be up to playing their special version that night.

Scanning the semi-crowded room of unfamiliar faces, he wondered where she was. Despite wanting to give her space, he was uncomfortable being totally unaware of her whereabouts in the strange place.

From behind an older, taller man, Martin appeared and scurried up to Alex with glass half-full of a golden liquid. "Hey man, just a heads up: I told that guy Josh you were like Picasso and drew sharpie tattoos on us once. Now he wants you to do that for people here."

Alex glanced behind Martin, searching for wherever or whomever he got the glass of what he assumed was alcohol from. "Man, I didn't agree to—"

"You don't have to do it. I was just tryin' to relate when he said he sculpt's or some shit. You could do that eagle thing like you did on my wrist. That was fuckin' awesome." He raised the glass to his lips and took a long swig.

"Yeah fine, whatever. Uh, have you seen Theresa?"

He sniffled. "Yeah, I saw her headin' back to our dorm with Cynthia to study calculus and eat cookie dough in their nighties."

Alex cracked a smile. "They really go back to our quarters?"
"Yes, they actually did. I saw 'em before I came this way. Don't know where the rest of 'em are which sucks 'cause I wanted to get Albert shit-faced. And hey, don't worry about the girls and have a drink. I mean, watered down, stale, flat, light beer wouldn't still be too hard for your palette, would it?"

Knowing Martin was prodding for a rise out of him, Alex ignored the remark. "No, I can't right now, I need to take a shower. They had me pullin' weeds in the garden."

"God damn, you're uptight."

His ears rang.

Uptight?

Alex scoffed. "I am not uptight."

"Then blow it off and have fun. Look where we are. If we don't stay here, you'll regret not havin' had a vacation."

"I'll come back when I ain't so dirty, alright? Damn, dude." He shook his head as Martin smirked and took another sip of his drink.

Alex rubbed at his eyes, turned around, and headed back out the door.

The very idea of him, Alex, being uptight sent his head into a tizzy. Did Martin have any idea who he was talking to?

However, being lax wasn't an option. Though when he could get away with it, he had done a less than stellar jobs on mundane chores at Terminus. That laziness hadn't struck him at Sipsey yet. He was nowhere near comfortable enough to slack off.

Arriving at the showers, something about the quiet of the empty room amplified the noise in his mind. His head started to ache.

Uptight? he thought again as he began undressing. Setting his clothes on the sink counters, he realized he had forgotten to get a clean set from his room.

I'm not uptight, I'm too lazy to go get clean clothes. I'll shower and wear the sweaty ones back to the rec room. See? Not uptight.

Martin's comment affected him more than he cared to admit. He tried to push it away and instead concentrate on the heavenly hot water that flowed from the showerhead. However, it was useless.

Pre-turn Alex wasn't uptight, that was for sure. His former self he considered an aimless, lazy, failure. One who stayed in a dead-end relationship for two and a half years with a woman who poked holes in their condoms trying to use pregnancy as a trap. The woman he remained with for six months after discovering her scheme because he didn't want to confront her, nor be alone. Wanting to be that guy again was absurd. Why had he spent so much time fantasizing about his old life?

Rubbing a bit too with the shower brush, he tore the scab from a cut on his hip he received from a thorn a week earlier. He winced at the sharp sting and beads of blood that pooled from the raw skin.

Alex hurried to dry himself and re-clothe, then held a wad of tissue paper against the wound and
headed for the infirmary. The pain wrenched him from his racing thoughts, thrusting him into survival mode even though it was a minor wound.

Through the halls and up to the fourth floor was the infirmary. The door stood open and Alex froze when he saw Kaylee standing behind the examination bed.

*Oh no.*

He considered leaving but he had to bandage his cut.

"Oh, hi," Kaylee said, giving an awkward smile. "What happened there?"

"Uh, I accidentally tore off a scab in the shower."

"Well, there's bandages in that box on the table and some ointments in the drawer behind me."

"Thanks." He started for the box when Kaylee headed past him toward the door out. "Wait, you don't gotta go."

She stopped by the doorway and turned to face him. "You don't need me. It's not like Cynthia threw another vase at you."

Despite the incident with Cynthia, that day had been one of his fondest memories of Terminus. Chatting with Kaylee and introducing Theresa to smoking marijuana was a time post-Siege Terminus was a real sanctuary. It seemed like years ago.

He stepped over to the cardboard box and pulled out a roll of gauze and tape. "It's a big place, but we can't avoid each other forever. And I'm too damn tired to be mad right now." He strolled over to the drawer that housed the ointments and pulled it open.

Kaylee moved back over to the box and delved through it, though she didn't seem to be looking for anything in particular. "Hey, you know, I never told you this, but I— I could tell when I met you, um… that you were an artist because of your hands. The way you held the pen when you wrote my name down on the list, I knew right away."

Alex rolled up the side of his shirt and tucked it between his underarm to allow usage of both hands. "Just from writin' my name?" He uncapped the tube of ointment and deposited a generous amount on his tender wound.

She turned around from the box. "My mother always said we all have hands made for something. Like mine are for healing, yours are for drawing. And… oh, Gareth's are for pointing the way."

He smiled as he taped the bandage down. "That's for sure, but he's been listenin' to us more since you left. He knew he lost it with Beth and it was really big of him to admit it. You should've stuck around for it." He let his shirt fall back down and placed the supplies on the counter.

"Well… it was me leaving with her that prompted all of that. Maybe my abandoning you was just what he needed."

"Are the reasons still there?"

"Huh?"

"Why you left, you can't have done a one-eighty on the reasons why you left. Maybe you did one on the fact you acted on 'em, but not why you did."
She glanced down before giving a small, somber smile. 

"Primum non nocere."

"After all this time?"

She shook her head. "I know, it's stupid, but... there's some things about yourself you can never shake, you know?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know."

Alex ran his thumb over his fingers. The man who occupied his body before the turn had used the same hands to draw and paint. Of all the things he had come to dislike about that other guy, he was grateful he left him with such a talent. Perhaps designing sharpie tattoos on Sipseans would be good for him.

"Oh, and by the way," Kaylee began, "I think Theresa's hands are made for holding and helping." She paused. "Same for Mary too."

"You sayin' I married my mother?"

"Oh, no I mean—"

"I'm kidding."

She laughed. "Oh, okay."

"Oh hey, speakin' of, which of 'em's Naz's husband? I must've missed him."

She furrowed her brows. "What?"

"Her husband. I heard Gabby talk about him, but I'd never seen Naz with him, I don't think."

"He's dead."

"But I heard Gabby on the phone talkin' about givin' him a sandwich."

"Well, then it was past tense because he croaked a while back. Type one diabetic couldn't get his insulin in time. Went into a coma for a while, then died. Or something like that. I didn't ask for specifics."

Alex took several steps forward. "But she said 'give Naz's husband a sandwich.' Present tense."

She scratched her head. "She did? Well, then she's putting a sandwich on his grave... No, no, you must have misheard."

"Guess so."
After her fight with Alex, Theresa had broken down sobbing in the third fourth floor rec room by herself. Cynthia found her and ushered her back to her room where they spent most of the night together. She enjoyed her time with Cynthia, much to her surprise. They tried on different clothes, fiddled with their hair, and eventually talked about her situation with Alex. Yet she was unwilling to share a bed with Cynthia and left her room in the middle of the night to return to her own.

Alex lay in the dark snuggled underneath the bed covers, mumbling gibberish in his sleep. She almost reached over to touch him as she took a place by his side, but recalled his lies and turned her back. The next morning, she slipped out of the room while he was still asleep, and had Albert escort her to the first floor to oil the machinery. Albert then had to get to his own chores, leaving Theresa with nothing but the sound of running machines.

Steps echoing from the metal stairs made her set down the oil bottle and slide her hand into her pocket to grip the tissue-wrapped razor blade. When Alex appeared from around the corner, she released her hold.

While she was unable to bring herself to talk to him the previous day, their time apart granted her a cool head. She wanted to hear what he had to say.

"You came back last night," Alex said. "I woke up after you got in bed."

She crossed her arms. "I didn't want to sleep by Cynthia. That and she was on the left side of the bed. Because of your non-negotiable need to be on the right, I can't sleep now unless I'm on the left. So…"

He smiled a bit and edged forward. "I missed you yesterday."

"I know. I missed you too."

"I told Gabby to knock it off. Went straight to her office and told her point-blank. Hadn't had her try anything since then."

She breathed a sigh of relief and shut her eyes for a moment. "Thank you. That and telling me was all I asked."

He broke the distance between them and gazed at her with puppy-dog eyes.

"Tess, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am. When I said I'd marry you, I agreed to love every one of you. The happy Theresa, the sad one, the angry one, the insecure one, the scared one… and I do. I'll never treat any one of 'em different again. I promise."

Such sappy words usually had her blushing or giving a playful groan, but tears rolled down her cheeks. She rushed forward and they shared a tight embrace.

"No, not the puppy look… Mary told her he perfected it at only a year old."

"Tess, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am. When I said I'd marry you, I agreed to love every one of you. The happy Theresa, the sad one, the angry one, the insecure one, the scared one… and I do. I'll never treat any one of 'em different again. I promise."

She giggled. "I could tell."

"Still true though, okay? I swear on every ounce of weed I ever smoked or ate in brownie form."
She giggled again as a wild idea crossed her mind. One she didn't think Alex would agree to, but figured she would try anyway. "Is Gabriella up on the surface?"

He pulled away and brushed the side-swept bangs from her forehead. "Last I heard. Why?"

"We could jump straight from this to our mind-blowing make-up sex in her room. Unless she keeps it locked."

He laughed. "Are you serious?"

She dropped her arms to wrap around his waist. "Mm-hm."

"You feel safe enough to do that?"

Lack of privacy, protection, and chronic hunger had made occasions of intimacy few and far between. And though using Gabby's room was risky, the thought of doing it there turned her on enough to negate her apprehension.

"I don't care if it's safe or not," she replied. "Not now."

"Oh, well, it does kinda need to be safe. You—"

"I saw a pack of morning afters in the infirmary. Come on, let's pay the bitch's room a visit."

* * *

Theresa fiddled with the tie in her hair as she and Martin stood watch a ways outside the complex's back fence. Walkers had the tendency to crop up as Spring began and the Sipseans preferred to have people keep an eye out for them. Though Theresa thought them spoiled since they considered a gaggle of four undead "a lot."

The indeed mind-blowing sex she and Alex had in Gabby's room played in her head on a loop. More than anything, she awaited her shift's end so they could go back to their own room and do it again. However, the dry warm air and fresh scent were welcomed after the hardness of the bunker. Theresa had tuned Martin out at what she pegged a thousand words ago. Times like those she regretted becoming peaceable with him as he seemed to think she cared for his chattering.

"...think Gareth's idea's right," Martin finished. "Don't you?"

She furrowed her brow. "Huh?"

He sighed. "The ten-to-twenty-year theory?"

She brought her hand up and rubbed her eye. "Oh, right. Yeah, it makes sense. But their brains haven't decayed yet. Even the ones that are just walking skeletons."

"Nah, it's gotta happen." He pulled off his baseball cap and began scratching away at his head. "This goddamned lemon shampoo they give you is givin' my scalp a rash."

"I actually think they call that 'dandruff'."

Martin continued to scratch. "No, it's not, it's different. There's no flaky anything, it just itches."

When he placed the cap back on his head, she recognized the Atlanta Braves logo on it. As baseball had been the only sport she remotely cared for before the turn, she wondered if he chose it from
Sipsey's wardrobe on purpose or just wanted one to replace the tattered Detroit Tigers one he'd had since Terminus. Her lips parted to ask, but then pressed back together—rue the day she would ask Martin a sports question out of genuine interest.

He then raised his index finger to his lips and pointed ahead of him. Expecting a walker, Theresa drew the pistol in her belt and Martin his. Cynthia instead emerged from the woods, blood staining her hands and her face wet with tears.

"You know I almost blew your head off," Martin said with a sigh, then lowered his gun. "What are you doin' out—"

"The hell happened to you?" Theresa asked, looking her up and down.

Cynthia glanced down at her bloody hands. "I—I don't… I was…. Skylar…"

"Red, you're gonna have to form words here," Martin said.

Theresa re-sheathed her weapon, hurried to Cynthia's side and placed her hand on her shoulder. "What about Skylar?"

"He's dead," she whined.

"Why were you with him in the woods?"

"Brandon spotted some deer yesterday, so he sent us out to see if we could catch some. And then he…"

Theresa's muscles tensed. "Did he hurt you?"

"No! No, that's just it. He didn't." Her face crumpled and she held her hand over her mouth.

"Do not tell me you killed him," Martin groaned.

She threw her hands up. "Just… come on." She whirled around and began hustling back from where she came.

Theresa and Martin trailed behind her as she pushed through yard after yard of brush and tree limbs to reveal a small clearing. Cynthia marched over to a body on its back and stared down at it. Upon closer inspection, Theresa saw it was indeed Skylar—a very dead one. His chest had been punctured and blood drained out from his the wound onto the ground below him. A hunter's knife lay beside him, the clear murder weapon.

"What the fuck happened?" Theresa demanded, peering at his half-lidded eyes and parted lips.

Cynthia began sobbing. "I… he—I don't what… we were out here and he said…"

"Be nice if you got that sentence out this year," Martin griped.

Theresa clenched her fist. "Just tell us what happened."

She wiped her eyes and turned to Theresa. "He said… he said… he was talkin' about the party tomorrow and said… 'ready for a good time'?"

Oh.

"Oh, Cynthia…"
"What?" Martin asked.

"The Occupiers, Martin. They used to say that."

Certain phrases and words triggered memories for many female Terminants, including Theresa. When she and Alex engaged in dirty talk, specific things were off-limits. Once he had spoken something that the leader of the thugs said to her and she pushed Alex off her without thinking, nearly sending him over the bed's edge.

"I don't know what happened," Cynthia continued. "He said that and I was alone—with him. I didn't know him, and he said that, and I grabbed my knife, and I…"

Martin sheathed his gun and slogged over to the foot of Skylar's body. "Can I please ask what the hell the big deal is? He's dead, so what? We've done a lot worse. So have you."

Theresa resented his tactlessness, but also wondered why she was so torn up.

Cynthia glowered at him. "The 'big deal' is I didn't need to! He wasn't threatenin' me, or gonna hurt me, and I wasn't hungry. There's no reason for his death, it meant nothin'! It was for nothin'."

"Hey? Hey?" Theresa urged, moving past Martin and to her side. "Look at me." Cynthia crossed her arms and oriented to her. "I know this is hard, but we need to cover this up."

"She's right," Martin agreed. "You just killed one of their own. Accidental or not, they won't care. If they don't kill us, they'll definitely toss us out."

"How?" Theresa asked. "How are we going to cover this up?" She rubbed her temple.

He shrugged. "Let's make steaks." Cynthia let out a whimper. "You say he disappeared, and we come back with some of that venison you were after. Then he wouldn't have gone to waste. Right, Cynth?"

"Yeah, I… guess," Cynthia replied.

"You think they'd assume we brought back Skylar for dinner?" He crossed his arms.

"Probably not their first conclusion, but it's way too suspicious."

Martin stared down at Skylar's body and dropped his arms. "Yeah, I guess you're…"

She raised her eyebrows. "Right?"

He hummed an agreement, then asked, "How long's he been dead?" He slid over, leaned down, and took the knife beside the body.

"Ten minutes, maybe," Cynthia answered.

"You should've gotten his head already. I've seen 'em turn in less than ten." He edged forward and drove the blade through Skylar's forehead.

"A walker attack would be our best bet," Theresa said. "But where are we going to find one? And convince them when he clearly wasn't munched on. I mean, he's already too dead for one to be interested."
Martin straightened his back and flicked blood and brain matter from the knife. "We'll have to get him messy."

"With no dead walker around they'll never believe that."

He made a displeased sound and ran a wrist across his forehead. "I'll go look for a biter. I oughta be able to find one since I'm a magnet for trouble and shit."

Theresa watched Martin hurry off into the woodlands before putting her arm around Cynthia. "Hey, it's going to be okay," she assured her. "We'll get this taken care of, alright?" Cynthia pursed her lips and nodded. "You were there for me last night, now I'm going to do the same."

"Did y'all make up?" she asked.

* * * Boy, did we ever.

Theresa smiled. "Yeah, we made up."

"Oh, thank god."

In a streak of luck, Martin was able to find a walker and lead it back to Skylar. The skeletal thing was, as expected, uninterested in Skylar's corpse, instead opting for the three live bodies around it. Martin killed the undead and laid it beside the body, then assisted Theresa in using the knife to imitate walker bites to Skylar's abdomen.

Cynthia gave the Sipseans at the gate a tearful story hearing a commotion when she left Skylar to take a bathroom break. In her fable, she heard yelling, ran back, and found the walker on top of Skylar ripping into his chest.

The dead man was taken to the fourth floor morgue and laid out on a steel table where Naz looked him over. Theresa, Martin, and Cynthia joined them, all the while repeating their story.

The door burst open and in rushed a small blonde woman Theresa didn't recall the name of. "Skylar!" she bellowed, rushing to Naz's side. "How did this happen!? How did this happen!?"

A misty-eyed Cynthia stepped forward. "I went to go behind a tree and I don't… he didn't—"

"He's not an idiot! He wouldn't have gotten bit so easily!"

Naz placed her hand on the girl's shoulder and the blonde clocked her in the nose, sending her stumbling backward. Cynthia was backing away as the woman started for her, and Theresa rushed in front of her friend in defense.

"Move!" the distraught woman barked as she shoved Theresa aside, slamming her into the side of the steel table.

"Ow!" Theresa exclaimed as sharp pain radiated across her lower back. "Bitch!" she muttered.

"Hey!" Martin yelled, darting over and blocking the blonde's path. "You wanna go, hun? Come on, then."

She looked up the near foot of height difference between them before her face crumpled and she spun around into Naz's arms behind her. Naz held a hand over her struck nose as the girl bawled against her neck.
Theresa gripped her back and steadied her posture, knowing she would awake with a bruise the next day.

Cynthia hugged herself. "I'm sorry… I—I tried to get there in time. Really, I did."

The door swung open again and in walked Albert, Gabby, and Laura. Albert scurried to Cynthia and wrapped her up in a hug.

Theresa's cheeks went hot as Gabby pranced across the room, but quirked a smile at what she and Alex did on the leader's bed.

"Oh… Skylar…" Gabby said, she and Laura approaching the man's body on the table. "God, you think you're immune, that stragglers are easy, but…" She looked up to Cynthia and Albert, then around to Theresa and Martin. "She came right to you?" The two nodded. "Cynthia?" She looked back. "Didn't you have the walkies? Why not radio back to Frank on the outside first?"

"That's a good question," the grieving woman asked, turning her head.

"Hey!" Albert protested, separating from Cynthia.

"Skylar forgot 'em," Cynthia replied.

"Figures," Laura commented. "He was forgetful like that." Sadness touched her hard features.

"Where's Gareth?" Theresa asked.

"On his way," Gabby replied.

"Can I go then?" Martin asked. "I already told you everything, and I've needed to take a leak for about twenty minutes."

Theresa wondered if he intended to intercept Gareth and tell him the truth of the matter. If not, she would. That and she grew tired of standing around pretending to be interested in the death of someone she didn't care about.

"Yeah," Theresa spoke up. "I have to go too. I mean, we can come back if you or Gareth need us to."

The blonde still clinging to Naz gave both Theresa and Martin a dirty glare.

"You two go everywhere together, huh?" Gabby said, narrowing her eyes.

Theresa knew what she was insinuating and pressure grew in her chest. The knife from Martin's belt was in reach, she could plummet it into Gabby's head if she were quick enough. Or jam it into her throat so she would gag and drown in her own blood. Next, she could shove Skylar in the back and lay Gabby on the steel table. Martin's knife was sharp enough to strip the meat from her bones.

"Pretty people taste better."

Gabby was pretty, and Theresa had no doubt she would taste delicious. If only it were Terminus. If only they were the top dogs in the pack. Yet they had to conform, keep secrets, and worry what the higher ups would do if they learned too much.

Theresa wished they could make Sipsey theirs. Dreamed of Gareth shoving Gabby out and taking the helm—where he belonged.
"You don't think this'll look suspicious?" Albert asked as he shut the door behind him, joining the rest of the hunters in Gareth's room.

"Oh, it would," Gareth replied from the edge of his bed. "But no one's out there. I have ears like a bat, I'd hear them if they were."

"Still feel like we're bein' watched," Alex said. "I always feel like we're bein' watched here."

"We're not," Gareth assured him.

"We ain't gonna tell Kaylee, right?" Martin asked.

Gareth scoffed. "Of course not. She's one of them. Hasn't been one of us in a long time. Now, Cynthia, I'm sure people will ask you again about it. What's your story?"

Cynthia gulped. "I with Skylar and I had to pee, so I went a ways away and right after I was done —"

"See, now that's kind of convenient. You just pulled up your panties when you heard him yell."

She scowled. "What, you want me to say I hopped up mid-piss?"

Martin cracked up and raised his fist over his mouth.

Gareth broke a tiny smile and rose to his feet. "Did you say you heard him yell after you were done, or just that you heard him yell?"

"Heard him yell."

Theresa scratched the back of her neck. "She didn't say she had to go to the bathroom when we got back, so why don't we make it she heard him after?"

"You're right," he agreed. "Okay, let's go over it again, Cynthia, Theresa, Martin, go."

The three went over their story repeatedly until they got the tale down. And Gareth reminded them to avoid telling it in the same words so it wouldn't sound rehearsed.

Finally, he dismissed them and they went their separate ways. Theresa glided back to her room to find a change of clothes for the evening. As she removed her black tank top to change into a loose burgundy t-shirt, Alex slunk through the door and moved behind her.

"Hey," she began, placing her hands through the shirt, "I feel like I have to—" He cut her off by placing his hands on her backside. She grinned.

He slid his hands up to her forming bruise. "This hurt yet?"

"A little."

He kissed her neck and ran his hands across her bare stomach, then up to her breasts which he rubbed through the bra. "I hope we got the whole ordeal in the box. Mainly I'm just glad you're okay, but I'd like to knock around the chick that shoved you. I still wanna show you how happy I am you're okay though. I wanna..." He leaned in, his lips by her ear, and whispered in explicit detail how he wanted to go down on her.
Heat rushed to her core and she squeezed her eyes shut. "I need to go see Cynthia. Albert's been put on kitchen duty and I don't want her to be alone."

He pulled back a little. "Oh."

"It's just for two hours." She turned around and pulled the shirt over her head. "Then you can show me all you want."

He smiled. "Okay, you… have fun?"

"I actually did have a little fun last night. She was there for me when you and I were at odds and I want her to have the same thing."

"Pity friendship." Martin's accusation crossed her mind. But this time she asked herself if she truly wanted to help Cynthia, and concluded she did. Though her distress at killing Skylar was irrational, she cared that Cynthia cared. The same way she cared when Alex did.

"Yeah, you go," Alex said, taking a hold of her hands. "I'll be here I think."

She leaned up and pecked a kiss on his lips. "Try those pens and pencils Naz gave you on that blank notepad. I miss seeing your stuff."

"I might."

"Okay." She let go of his hands, turned and exited through the door.

Outside, she found Cynthia's door closed and knocked a few times.

Cynthia answered already wearing her frilly pink nightgown. "Hi."

"I thought we could do those manicures tonight since I wasn't up to last night?"

"Theresa, I… you don't gotta do this."

"Yes," she argued, stepping past her, "I do."

Cynthia turned to face her. "No, I mean, Martin's right, Skylar was just another one to add to the body count. Nothin' new."

Theresa sighed and planted herself on the bed. "I won't lie and say I disagree because yeah, Skylar was just another body. I don't care he's dead, but I care that you had a flashback and that killing him upset you."

"And paintin' our nails is gonna help me?"

"Doing girly crap always helps."

"But your problem's fixed, you made up with Alex. My problem's not over. He's still dead and they could find out I killed him."

"It is over. We took care of it. And now…" She hopped up and pushed the door shut. "We're going to use these people's nail polish stockpile and paint our nails and get away with what you did."

"Why? Why do we get to come in their house, drag our muddy shoes on the rug and blame the dog?"
"Because we can."
Martin could see right through Gareth. Through the cool, collected, decisive leader to the fact that at his core he was like everyone else. Gareth reacted to touch, became aroused, and made the same groans when he came just as everyone else. Though still daunted by the man, Martin felt he held a secret about him. The secret that they were fundamentally the same.

His leader servicing and rolling around undressed beneath the sheets as an apology engorged his ego. The ego that grew when Gareth went back on his statement that their tryst was a one-time relapse. However, Martin knew he would come back for more since he left his socks in his room. A dumb ploy, he thought. As the man would never be as thoughtless to leave his socks behind.

After Gareth left following their second round, Martin's eyes began to water and nose run as if he inhaled a helping of pepper. The pillowcase he received that day had a dusting of fur over it.

* * *

In his pre-turn home on the edge of Savannah, Martin sat on the rough green rug at the end of his bed. Marion appeared cross-legged before him cradling a baby dressed in a fuzzy blue onesie.

"See?" Marion said, smiling and gazing down at the child. "This is the little guy I would've had. The one you decided I shouldn't have."

"I did you a favor, Mare," Martin replied with a quick sigh.

"I know. This world's brutal. Too ugly to bring somethin' like this into it."

He looked down to see his arms buried in a white cooler, hands around his nephew's neck. "What the hell!?"

"Do it. Save him from bein' ruined. It's just one twist, man."

* * *

Damn cats.

From the orange and white tint to the fur, he knew it was from the one named Heathcliff. He liked cats and had pet Heathcliff the day before while covering his hand with a sock. Yet the allergy he developed to them in his mid-teens held strong.

When his reaction began, his parents opted to give away their black and white Manx, much to the dismay of his sister, Marion. Martin asked them if they would vacuum the house more and allow him to take an allergy medication—anything to save Marion from giving up her cat. Luckily, they agreed, marking a time when he felt his parents reasonable for once.

Claritin… Claritin… he thought as he stripped off the pillowcase and headed to the laundry room. After dumping the case, he made it to the infirmary to see what medications they had on deck. The drawers housed a plethora of boxes, bottles, and packets of pills. He noted a cabinet with a lock above him where he assumed they kept the fun drugs.

A box of generic Claritin rested at the back of the drawer and Martin retrieved two pills from it, though he thought their capsule form unusual.
He released his grip and brought his hands to his side. "Really? You're gonna pull this on me? I wasn't even related to that kid. You know what? You always guilt-tripped me. I thought I was finally free of this when I put a bullet through your fuckin' psychotic head."

Marion leaned forward and hugged him, the cooler between them disappearing. "Oh, shut up, Martin. We both know you don't mean that. Don't be dead."

Martin kept his arms at his side. "I ain't dead."

"Maybe." She tightened her grip and warmth enveloped him. He had been sweating pressed against Gareth's skin mere hours before, but he hadn't been warm—not in years.

Giving in, he placed his hands on the soft material of her royal blue sweater and patted the long, straight black hair that ran down her back.

She let out a pleased hum. "I think you still love me."

"Doesn't matter." He rested his head on her shoulder.

"Liar. I always know when you're lyin', dummy."

The side of his mouth twitched up. "I don't appreciate this."

"Mm-hm." She pulled away and looked down at the baby she held again. "I think he looks like you. Well, he looks like both of us since we might as well be identical twins." She ran her finger across the baby's cheek. "See? He's got that puffy thing goin' on under his eyes like we do."

"Nice lookin' kid. He'll definitely be able to get a good amount of tail when he's grown."

She laughed. "Ew, you had to go and ruin it!" She gave him a playful shove.

He smiled. "Of course. Man, still wish you'd have given me the name of the guy who knocked you up then said get lost. I'd still like to fuck him up."

She giggled. "Well, it would've all been good. He gave me this little guy. All worth it. Even if he isn't around."

"So what would you have named him?"

She pursed her lips. "Um… I don't know. Thought about Bobby."

"Oh, hell no. That just makes me think of Bobbi from two doors down who used to step outside in just her britches and yell at the neighborhood dogs."

"Forgot about her. Keeled over of a heart attack right? She was like three-hundred pounds."

"Yeah, somethin' like that. Always thought I'd name my son Devin. Don't know why, kind of a douchey-ass name in hindsight."

Her eyes lit up. "Devin! I love it." She turned and beamed at her baby who was then in a white bassinet beside them.

"I shouldn't have killed you. Should've tried to shoot you in the leg or somethin'. At least before I went for the head."

Marion turned back to him, her face glowing with a maternal warmth. "It's okay."
"No, it ain't. 'Cause I didn't even think. My fraternal twin sister and I shot her right between the eyes."

"That's why you're still alive, 'cause you acted. Didn't stop to think, didn't try to be the guy that saved babies, just did what you had to. I didn't have my meds when I went off and I shouldn't have still been takin' 'em anyway 'cause those doctors said they could cause birth defects. So either way, I was S.O.L." She paused. "I still love you."

He scoffed. "Then you got no idea the shit I've done."

"Yeah, I do, actually. I know every horrible bit of it. Watched it pile up day after day and I still love you just as much as I always have."

"Then that's what really makes you crazy, duck sauce."

"Good, then I don't wanna be sane." She edged forward and rested her head on his shoulder.

* * *

Whatever Martin swallowed in that box was not Claritin. The drug never made him feel as if he held a hundred pound weight on his body. His dreams always floated away seconds after waking, but this time they lingered along with the drowsiness of the medication.

Marion. Her image was so real, so vivid. Her face, the sleekness of her hair, the blue of her sweater, and most of all, her warmth seeping from her skin onto his. She had been as real as he was.

A nightmare was preferable over the sickly sweet vision of his sister and her child. Dreams of pleasant memories and cute hypothetical futures were lies. Nightmares he welcomed; they were a reality.

* * *

"There's tons of sad people around with the funeral earlier. So if we get drunk, it won't be outta the usual," Martin said as he strolled beside Albert to the cafeteria. "'Cause you know, sadness and all. And I never got you shit-faced the other night. Or Alex."

Any excuse to drown himself in drink and forget his dream.

Albert gave a small grimace. "Yeah, I don't really want to be shit-faced."

"Did you speak?" They turned the hallway corner. "'Cause all I heard was foghorns. It's my job as your elder to get you properly wasted."

Albert quirked a smile. "Yeah, okay. Let's start with peach schnapps. Blueberry wine."

He sighed as they passed through the archway into the cafeteria. "Man, don't even joke about that."

Scanning the room, he spotted Alex sitting at a table near the kitchen beside the child he thought was named Roy.

Aha.

Martin and Albert crossed the room to their table, Martin then breaking through Alex and the child's conversation, "Hey, kid, you're gonna need to skedaddle."
The child looked at him with big eyes. "I know."

Alex threw Martin a look. "Dude, he was just about to go. It's almost his bed time anyway." He turned back to the boy. "That's what a grown-up looks like who never learned manners, Roy."

*Damn, does he have baby fever.* Since his bets with Greg and Chuck at Terminus as to when Theresa would get pregnant never panned out, he wondered if Albert would want to wager. The thought then wandered to Marion and her child.

He pushed it away and took a seat across from Alex, sighing. "Sorry, kid. I was raised in the barn they called lower middle-class Savannah, Georgia."

Albert shook his head and took a seat by Alex, looking at Roy. "Can you make it back to your room alone?"

Roy nodded. "Yeah, I guess I should go." He climbed to his feet.

"Take care," Alex said with a smile. Roy waved and headed off toward the exit.

Martin placed his elbows on the table. "Nice when you don't have to wonder if they'll be on your dinner plate, huh?"

Alex scowled. "There a reason you're botherin' me?"

"Martin wanted to get us drunk," Albert said.

"Yeah, go see what you can find in the kitchen," Martin suggested.

"What if I don't wanna get drunk?" Alex asked.

"Oh, for the love of—you two are givin' me gray hairs. At least have _one_? You had two shots of tequila the other night, then left." Alex shrugged a reply.

Albert stretched and stood up. "I'm going to go see what they have whether you want to join or not." He turned and headed to the kitchen.

"Oh no," Alex muttered, looking behind Martin.

Martin glanced over his shoulder to see Gabby approaching with her trademark smirk. The woman grated on every nerve in his body. Her cockiness, the way she seemed to think she owned their group, and her painted on eyebrows made his skin itch.

Alex stiffened in his seat as she stopped by their table. "You need somethin'?"

"That brother of yours," Gabby said, raising a hand to her hip. "Always getting away from me."

"Don't know where he is."

*Damn.* Martin thought Alex might hate her more than he did.

To get the chinchilla speaking in a rude tone to someone meant they ticked him off pretty bad. The fight he witnessed between Alex and Theresa was a considerable one, though it appeared the happy couple made up as he saw them looking fine and dandy earlier.

"Martin?" Gabby inquired. He shook his head. "Alright then." She let out a long exhale and looked to see Albert returning with three glasses between his fingers and a bottle of whiskey. "Albert? I'm
concerned about Cynthia after what happened. She seems like such a gentle soul. You know where she is?"

Albert halted by the table and set the bottle and glasses on the table. "I think she was playing… uh… Mario Kart in the rec room."

She smiled. "Oh, I'm glad you're taking advantage of all our luxuries. Well, I'll go see her." She gave a cheerful wave and went on her way.

"Chick's hidin' somethin' big," Martin said as Albert sat down next to him.

"Naz's husband," Alex said.

He slid Alex and Albert a glass. "You think she has his walker somewhere?"

"Walkers don't eat sandwiches. But I don't know, she might've sounded like she was kiddin'."

Martin unscrewed the bottle's lid. "Oh, I know what it is. She has a whole reverse harem locked up somewhere. You and Gareth were candidates. Or Gareth is at least."

"Wouldn't surprise me, honestly," Alex said, pushing his glass forward.

Martin poured a shot into his cup, then Albert's and his own. "Well, the question isn't if she has somethin' fishy, it's what and where."

"You remember Linda?" Albert asked Alex, lifting the glass to his lips.

Alex downed the whole shot at once, his face contorting. "Yeah."

Martin wondered if his 'uptight' comment affected Alex so much that he needed to prove him wrong. He smirked at the notion.

Albert took a sip, expressing no reaction, and looked to Martin. "When her brother got bit, she tried to keep his walker around like a pet."

"That before the band of assholes took over?" Martin asked, draining his glass. They nodded. "Well, you know what? The only way you're gonna get anything outta Gabby is to liquor her up and get under her skirt. Albert."

"What? Why am I doing it?"

"Cause she irritates the livin' shit outta me."

Alex laughed. "I don't think she shops in the junior's section, man."

_Ooh, the chinchilla bites the baby kangaroo._

Martin raised his eyebrows. "Whoa, Alex, that's cold."

"Yeah, really," Albert said, taking another swig.

Martin refilled his glass. "I know, you're a big boy."

Albert stole the bottle away. "You remember that time I clocked you in the face? That was incredible."
He shrugged. "Eh, it was alright. I've had better."

"Hey, I never got my shot at you," Alex said. "Albert, let's hold him down. If itty-bitty Beth could
choke him enough to make him black out, then imagine how bad we could fuck him up."

"It was fuckin' dark, man," Martin bit. "Totally overcast, no moon."

Though his annoyance was real, thoughts of the dream of Marion began to recede to the back of his
mind.

* * *

After leaving a buzzed Albert and Alex, Martin lumbered back toward their group's quarters. He
would pass out soon, but before he did, he needed to find Gareth. Needed to sink his flushed and
tingly skin into his.

Martin turned a corner and ran straight into Theresa.

"Hey! What the hell!?" she exclaimed, backing away.

He attempted to focus on her. "Oh… sorry, duck sauce."

She squinted. "What did you call me?"

_Oh, crap_. He forgot how and why he developed that pet name for his sister, but knew he had used
it since they were very young.

He scratched behind his ear. "Huh? Nothin' just… um…"

She sighed. "Great, you're plastered again. Please be careful not to say anything that—"

"I won't, and I didn't. Hadn't talked to none of them Sipsey fuckers. I'm fixin' to go pass out
anyway." He glanced down and noticed her blue, long-sleeved shirt. "Wow, that's a nice color."

She cracked a smile. "And they say men don't notice things about a woman's wardrobe."

"And your hair… it's…" Hers was a shade or two lighter than Marion's, but stopped just past her
shoulders and created a similar contrast against her shirt as in his dream. "Oh…" Theresa wore a
loose, short, black skirt. Marion hated pants and almost exclusively wore short skirts unless it was
too cold.

Martin reached out to touch her shoulder and Theresa edged back, her wide eyes boring into his.

_That's Theresa you're pawing at, you moron._

He brought his hand back. "Oh… god, I am wasted."

She nodded. "Uh-huh. Try not to sprain your ankle or step in a snare on the way to your room."

He laughed. "Aw, you're—you're so funny, duck sauce."

_Damnit._

"Right… bye," she said, hastening past him.

A stab of grief hit him as he was left alone. Someone else walked past him, a middle-aged male
Sipsean whose name he never learned. The man gave him a cross look as he went, as had many residents during his trek back to his quarters.

_Fucking assholes, judging me like they have the right…_ 

Continuing back to Gareth's room, he stopped and stood in the hallway and attempted to recall which room was Gareth's. He concluded it was the one to his right and intended to tap on the door with his knuckles, yet ending up repeatedly smacking both hands against it. No reply. Rotating the knob, he pushed it open and staggered inside.

It was Gareth's room, right? Did his have the beige carpet? The room _was_ organized meticulously. Therefore, it had to be his.

He shut the door behind him and kicked off his shoes, then tried to place them in a neat row by the door. Gareth would be bothered if he left them strewn about.

Failing to align them just right, Martin mumbled, "Guy's fuckin' got me pussywhipped, fixin' my damn shoes for him." He turned and fell to the bed, shutting his eyes. "High-maintenance tight-ass."

After beginning to doze off, the opening door broke through his haze and his eyes fluttered open halfway.

"Theresa said you were wasted and she was right," Gareth's said, shutting the door behind him.

"Come here, baby," Martin urged, giving a come-hither motion. "Rub me all over with those eight fingers." The man was still adept with his remaining digits. Though the new metal piece he wore over the stubs was a tad chilly when brushing against sensitive skin.

"Nah, I usually prefer it when the other guy can get it all the way up."

Martin's eyes flew all the way open and he bolted up. "Hey! I'm _fine_, I can get it all the way up."

Gareth grinned, made his way to the bed, and perched on the edge beside him. "It's so funny. You drive me absolutely insane. Always have. Just keeps changing as to in what way."

"Oh yeah, you keep sayin' things like that." He gripped Gareth by the shoulders and pulled him in, planting a zealous kiss on his mouth.

He pushed his hands away and leaned back, licking his lips. "You taste like whiskey. I hate whiskey. Drives me insane in the bad way."

Martin made a sound of discontent. "Fuckin' _chirst_ you're a picky ass motherfucker."

He sighed. "Tomorrow, alright? Now please get the hell out of my room. Your hangover's going to be one for the ages and I don't want to have to kick your liquor-soaked self out of my bed afterwards."

He glowered. "You know what? I don't even wanna fuck you anymore. Hurtin' my feelin's and shit."

Gareth snickered and Martin rose his feet, trudging for the door when he added, "And take your shoes."

* * *
Martin pushed open the front doors of the country church and headed down the aisle. The place looked identical to the one where they confronted Rick and his group. Yet it was a different building, occupying a separate space in time.

Marion stood at the end of the aisle with her hands in what looked like a metal dish of some sort.

"Marion?" Martin called, quickening his pace. When he made it to, her hands rested in the water-filled dish holding her baby under. "What the fuck are you doing!?" he demanded, plunging his hands in the tub.

"No, it's okay!" Marion assured him, nudging him back with her shoulder. "He's a believer. I heard him say it. A miracle child." She smiled and stared into the water.

"He can't talk, he's a week old! You're gonna kill him!" He shoved her aside and she fell to the floor with pained yelp. He yanked the baby from the water held its limp body in his arms. "How do you do CPR on a baby…?"

Marion climbed to her feet and rushed back over. "What happened!?"

"What happened is you killed him! You crazy fucking bitch, you killed him!"

Horror washed over her face. "No, no, no, no he told me he was ready to be one with god. He accepted." She gasped and gazed at her child's stilled body. "He's in heaven now."

He dropped the body back in the tub with a splash, wetting his shirt. "He's not in heaven, he's fucking dead! And you get to stick a knife in his head and bury him! I ain't helpin' with this!" He shoved her again, harder than before, and she toppled backward, her head smacking against the step up to the altar. She lay motionless.

His hand gripped the revolver in his belt. If she were dead, he needed to get her before she turned—the kid too. Though even if she were alive he figured the time was right to send a bullet through her head anyway, had been for a while. He was sick of her. Sick of her illness, sick of the chain she had around his neck.

Drawing his gun, he aimed and fired into her head, making her body jerk.

Finally free.

* * *

Nightmares were always better. They showed him the truth—the array of realities that could come to pass. Marion drowning her child out of a delusion that it spoke and wished to be baptized had been a genuine possibility. One of many he considered while watching her go about the camp three months pregnant with no one but him knowing. Many scenarios ended with him killing her. Better he did it early and out of compassion rather than malice.

Chapter End Notes

I've always loved writing Martin in contrast to the others because while they have layer after layer, Martin's 90 percent selfish asshole and that's so fun to write. That being said, I thought it was time to give him a part that's actually really humanizing (but dark) and give light to the other 10 percent.
About a dozen Sipseans worked throughout the garden, taking advantage of the rain-free day to tend to their crops. Gareth stood beside Naz helping her shovel fertilizer on what would grow to be tomato plants.

"I don't want prosthetics, to be honest," Gareth said, keeping a firm hold of the shovel with eight fingers. "I can do this just fine. Fire a gun just fine. Feed myself, dress myself, I'm perfectly capable."

"Well, if you change your mind, talk to the docs," Naz said, leaning the shovel on a wheelbarrow and brushing her sweat-dampened bangs from her forehead. "I know it wouldn't be twenty-first-century robotic level, but it's something."

He placed his shovel against the wheelbarrow beside Naz's and held up his left hand. "I'm sort of proud of them in a way. Shows I faced dire peril and survived." He flexed the three fingers.

She squinted. "From Albert?"

*Oh, right. That story.* He wished he had chosen a more impressive explanation for the missing digits.

"Hey!" a familiar gruff voice called.

Gareth turned to see Martin approaching from the bunker's direction carrying a sheet of white paper.

"How are you today, Martin?" Naz greeted with a smile.

Martin muttered a, "Fine," and stopped in front of Gareth, holding up the paper. "*Your brother* left this on my pillow."

Gareth examined the image, recognizing Alex's artistic style right away. "That looks like you."

"Yeah, last night I spilled that I used to work at Wendy's in eleventh grade."

He snatched it from his hand. "Aw, look at your chubby cheeks and copious amount of acne. Naz, we should put this on the fridge in the kitchen." He held the picture out to her.

Naz peered at it and stifled a smile. "It's pretty good." She looked to Martin. "Why is he—or you—giving a thumbs-up?"

"'Cause Alex is actually an asshole under that mister polite guy bullshit."

Gareth smiled as he continued scanning the illustration. His brother was drawing again, and drawing something *funny.*

"So, how accurate is it?" Naz asked.

Martin sighed. "Pretty accurate. That's why it pissed me off."

"Hey, acne is no one's fault," Gareth said, lowering the drawing to his side. The other man's expression remained rigid.
God, does he have a fragile ego.

"Oh, Martin, chin up," he added. "You clearly grew into a vision. Some of us were born breathtakingly beautiful, and some had to fight their way there."

Naz broke a laugh and Martin's face softened a tad.

"Alright, fine," Martin said, shrugging. "I was half-kiddin' anyway. Damn." He slid a hand in his jeans pocket and pulled out a white cartridge—an e-cigarette.

Oh, joy. He did find the damn things.

Gareth opened his mouth to comment on Martin's acquisition when Naz said, "No offense, but the smell of those things make me feel nauseous."

Martin placed the e-cigarette between his lips. "Okie-doke." He flicked the switch on the device, turned, and began off toward a wooden shed by the back fence.

Gareth folded up Alex's drawing and put it in his shirt pocket. "I'll be back in a minute, Naz. I have to talk to him about something." She gave a pleasant smile and a nod.

A cloud of sweet, yet cheap and manufactured-smelling vapor floated from the e-cigarette as Gareth caught up to him.

Following him might look suspicious, but he doubted anyone would assume he had something extra going on with Martin of all people. Gareth remained unsure why he allowed it to keep happening. The other man was always able to get the damnedest hold on him.

"Oh, don't worry, dear," Martin teased as he and Gareth strolled side-by-side. "It's a nicotine-free one. Still proud of myself for never pickin' up a real smoke again since all this."

"Honestly, that is impressive," Gareth admitted. "What is that? Cotton candy?"

He nodded and brought the device back between his lips, wrapping them around it and sliding them back and forth.

He's doing this on purpose.

Gareth averted his focus to the shed they approached. "Since you were so hung over this morning, I didn't get a chance to speak with a coherent you about what we think Gabby's got behind closed doors."

He took a brief inhale. "What we know Gabby's got behind closed doors. She strikes me as a shrew in disguise."

Gareth glanced across the fields to see if any Sipseans watched them, and found their attention elsewhere. "I think she either tried to sink her claws into Naz's guy, or did, and it ended badly. Of course, that makes me worry about Alex and Theresa."

Martin nodded along, sucking again on the e-cigarette.

He repressed a sigh and continued, "Also, I asked around about the story with Naz's husband in the diabetic coma and people all said the same thing. In almost the exact same words like it was rehearsed. What was it I told you the other day? Make sure to tell your story in different words and phrases to make sure it sounds organic?"
"Yes, sir," he replied as they turned the corner around the woodshed, giving them distance and a bit of privacy.

"Oh, don't get me tingly in the middle of the day, sweetheart."

He scoffed. "That was a joke, you'd have to beat me bloody before I'd really call you sir. You know, steal my dignity like you sometimes do."

_Ouch._

Gareth leaned his shoulder against the shed wall. "I thought I returned what I stole."

"No, I _took it_ back. By bein' a better man than Kaylee, remember?"

How reclaiming his dignity involved sleeping with the man who pushed him into the pariah role was beyond him. Yet Gareth's own method of apology lacked the pride he sought to hold onto with such vigor.

"You're right, you did take it back. And for the official record, I am…" The word caught in his throat. "I am…"

"Damn, you can give me a blowjob easier than you can verbally say you're sorry." He laughed.

"I'm sorry. See? I did it."

"It's alright, man. I mean, it ain't alright, but I don't feel like holdin' a grudge against you for it. Especially not after the past month. You did right by us."

Warmth touched his center and he half-smiled. Credit had to be given to Martin for being honest. Whether it be positive or negative, he could count on him to mean what he said.

Martin continued, taking another hit of his e-cigarette, "Nah, life's too short anymore and I got nowhere else to go since y'all are the only folks left who remotely tolerate me. Now, don't get me wrong, if I saw, say, Tyreese, I'd lose my shit. That's a world of difference, though."

Gareth let out a long breath. "That's good to know. I just… I still feel naïve for not seeing Kaylee as our real Judas. Watching her go around since we've been here… At first, I was too overwhelmed by all of this. Which is what I think she wanted. Warm beds and hot meals to convince me to let bygones be bygones. But you know what?"

Martin's brow twitched. "We should find a way to toss her out in that dead zone?"

Gareth smiled. "We can take everything she's given us and then some. The minute we can take something from her, we do."

"Yeah, and how the hell would that happen in fuckin' candyland here?"

"It always happens. These people think they're entirely separate from the world out there, and that makes them weak. Kaylee's bought into their candyland ideals already and she's weaker from it. Just have to wait until we see a vulnerable spot and hit it."

Martin slid the e-cigarette back into his pocket. "Can you even imagine Kay all on her own? Havin' the balls to actually kill someone, cut 'em up, and eat 'em herself? I mean damn, I'll give your brother credit, he was mildly impressive out there. And Cynthia didn't bat an eye about scarfin' that Ally chick in the housin' complex even though she kept talkin' to her." He paused, staring off at the
tall fence. "Albert, though…"

Gareth lifted his shoulder from the shed. "He numbs out. That's what he does. During the occupation, he wasn't numbed out. Not even close. But he found his way to deal with it. And as long as it works, there's no problem. It's not like you have to chat about the weather in the middle of every grisly deed."

The shed door on the adjacent wall creaked open and Gareth ceased breathing.

He hoped the wood was thick.

Skylar's cousin, Lucy, stepped around the corner of the structure holding a hand shovel. "I knew it," she said.

What did she hear? His talk of wanting to make Kaylee pay? The oral sex comment? Eating people? All of it?

Gareth slid a step forward and put on his salesman face. "Lucy, I won't lie to—"

"I knew it! Knew there was something wrong with you people ever since I first saw you! Cutting up and eating someone!? You're fucking cannibals! We brought cannibals into our home!"

Martin stomped to Gareth's side. "You wanna say that a little louder, hun?"

"Martin, shut up." Gareth moved a few feet in front of him. Lucy edged back. "Lucy, we couldn't come out and say it. There's a lot we haven't told you because we'd rather leave it in the past. And that? Yes, it happened. Only a few times. Martin and I are the only ones who can bare to talk about it."

"Cynthia, that Cynthia!" she cried. "That's why she acts so weird. Some sort of brain-eating disease!? What!? What is it!? How do I know she didn't take a bite out of Skylar!?"

* * *

Sucking up to Gabby had indeed been a good tactic as Gareth needed her understanding more than ever. He wished he had worn a button-up shirt so he could unfasten the top ones for good measure.
Gareth told Martin to leave and inform their group of what happened. As he left, a wide-eyed Lucy bolted from Gabby's office and scurried past them.

Taking a deep breath and licking his lips, Gareth stepped into her open doorway. The space had become even more cluttered since his last visit. So full of stray papers, books, and knick-knacks that it caught his attention better than the woman herself did. Forcing his vision away from the mess, he met Gabby's severe expression.

This was it.

Gabby folded her hands on the desk. "I would ask why you didn't tell me, but I know why."

He took a few steps forward, putting on a frown. "Are we done for? Do you want people like us in your house?"

She rose from her seat and edged around the desk. "We have rules. Rules that prohibit harming anyone else here. Against the needlessly violent and cruel. And after this… well, I'm conflicted."

He slid forward and she inched back for a moment before regaining her composure. "We'd never hurt anyone here, I promise. We have no reason to."

"And you haven't. But Gareth, why? How could you do that? I can't fathom how—how could there be nothing that—"

"Why couldn't we just eat cake, you mean?"

Her face dropped. "No, no, I didn't mean that. I meant, how do you decide to do that?"

He gave a bittersweet smile. "You'll never learn to accept it if you pussyfoot around the words."

She gulped. "How did you decide one day to eat people?"

"You remember how it was before the turn? People—especially women if you'll pardon my insensitivity—celebrated when they found out they lost a few pounds. When their clothes were looser and the number dropped on the scale. My mom used to announce to everyone when she had lost five pounds. Then after the outbreak, we got stuck with nothing and my mom wasn't boasting about losing weight anymore. I saw my clothes get bigger on me and had to tighten my belt a hole further and knew if I didn't do something we were going to die."

"So it was your idea?"

He gave a nod. "You have to think of what needs to be done first, not what you want to do. When you took this place, I know you didn't want to do what you did, but you needed to."

Gabby leaned back against her desk. "Go on."

"The word ends and you open your eyes and think, this is amazing, I survived it. I'm still here. Living through the first few weeks of the change was the easiest part. You never imagined how hard it would get after that."

"You're definitely right about that."

You still have no idea what it's really like out there, lady.

She raised her hand. "Gareth, I just have to ask: who you… ate, did you kill any of them? I've heard of people doing it to others who were already dead. And that I can understand, in a way."
"Just one—a stranger named Bob who'd been bitten. Illness is cooked out of the meat and he was going to die anyway. We did it ourselves before the fever could."

She narrowed her eyes. "And before then?"

"Like you said, people who were already dead."

"You didn't ask if you could do that to them."

"If it had been me, I'd have wanted them to. It was always a last resort, please believe me. Always. We ate songbirds, turkey vultures, pulled worms out of the ground, and slurped up organic hand lotion before we ever got to that place."

She tilted her head. "Are you still in that place?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you hadn't seen any living people in nearly a month when we found you. Hector, Skylar, Naz? Would you have—"

"They gave us another choice. A better one."

"And I assume Kaylee also—"

"Yes."

He waited for her to mention his desire for revenge against Kaylee, but she remained silent.

Gareth continued, "When I saw those sandwiches, I thought I might live. Then when I saw the fences and crops? I felt like I was in a five-star hotel. That I could live again. But if you want us to leave, I understand."

_Blowing that amount of smoke up her ass ought to help. Oh, Gabby, my savior. Release me from my dark, dark ways._

She stared at him for a few seconds, then shook her head. "No, I don't want you to leave. I also don't know how the rest will feel. Apart from Lucy." She paused before straightening her posture. "No, you know what? You didn't break any rules or hurt anyone here, so in my eyes, you did nothing to warrant your leaving."

A sick thrill coursed through his veins. He was playing the woman like a fiddle and it was working. It never thrilled him to trick and lie to newcomers at Terminus, yet this was different. Whomever he wanted himself and his people to be at Sipsey, they could. Painted as victims of circumstance and nothing else. Tucking away the truths of the train cars, a blood-collecting trough, and meat hooks to a dark place.

* * *

Did everyone know yet? Most of them had to by then, though Gabby said she would call no public meeting on the matter. In a world with a deficit of entertainment, gossip traveled quickly. Even Terminus hadn't been immune to it.

Gareth's stomach growled as he made his way to the cafeteria. Most Sipseans he passed threw him odd glances, but they failed to faze him as he had seen much worse. The fear of god and raw hatred in a person's eyes were impossible to forget. A few wary stares were nothing.
Reaching the cafeteria, he spotted the rest of his people perched at a table in the corner of the room. It was crucial they not cower away in light of a fraction of their dirty deeds going public. Gareth had been adamant to Alex over the radio room's intercom that they all go to dinner together.

Kaylee's whereabouts were unknown. Though he felt no sympathy for the effect it would have on her.

More odd glances ensued as he advanced through the cafeteria to greet the other five. Alex, Cynthia, and Albert wore placid expressions while Theresa and Martin appeared more irritated than anything.

A casserole dish lay in the center of the table with several portions doled out onto Theresa, Alex, and Martin's plates.

*Okay, that's new.*

Gareth took a place beside Alex. "Why did they do this?" He motioned to the casserole.

Cynthia reached over and grabbed the metal spoon resting in the dish. "Said they do this once in a while, let us pick our entrée. It's got barley and black beans and tomatoes and squash and some other stuff. It's real good." She lifted up a serving and brought it to her plate.

"You waited for me?"

"Yeah," Albert answered. "They," he pointed his thumb to Martin, Alex, and Theresa, "wouldn't. Me and Cynth' have manners." Cynthia handed her leader the spoon.

Gareth cracked a tiny smile. "Thank you."

"They're staring at us," Theresa said under her breath, picking at her half-eaten dinner with a fork.

"I know," Gareth said, taking a serving for himself. "They're imagining what we looked like eating a person. Their problem, not ours. Just ignore them."

"Heh, I went to the infirmary earlier," Martin began, leaning back in his seat, "told the quack I think I have an abscess in my teeth. He gave me some aspirin and a few capsules of amoxicillin. The package said it expired in ninety-nine. Don't wanna waste anything good on them people-eaters, you know."

"I'll talk to Gabby about that," Gareth assured him, taking a bite of the rich and savory casserole.

"What do we do now, Gareth?" Alex asked, turning to his brother. "Gabby might be on our side, but what if one of these guys tries to smother us in our sleep? If not, we'll just be goddamned pariahs."

Gareth set his fork down. "You want to take off?"

"The way they've looked at me? I shouldn't have to deal with that shit, man. Was hard enough at Terminus, but there we always got our way. They... they didn't get to look at us like that for long."

"Alex, how do you think they'll look at you if we leave because of this?"

"It would make us look like we think we're guilty too," Theresa chimed-in. "Like we have clouded consciences."

"Do you have a clouded conscience?" Gareth asked him.
Alex looked between the two of them. "No."

He returned to his meal. "It doesn't matter if we do or not anyway. I'm not ready to leave yet, none of us are because it's dead out there. Eat every bite of what's in front of you and do what we're supposed to do next."

Theresa leaned toward Martin. "It was you, wasn't it? You're the one who started shooting your mouth off."

"Yep," Martin snipped. "And I did it purely to irritate you, sugar."

"Guys," Gareth warned. "Please don't start. Not now. Besides, I mentioned something about wanting to stick it to Kaylee, but either Lucy didn't hear that part or didn't tell Gabby."

"Hey, what about Kaylee?" Cynthia asked. "I saw her earlier and she looked pretty spooked. Didn't say nothin', though. Should we say somethin' to her?"

"She's not one of us anymore, Cynthia," Albert argued. "She should have to deal on her own."

"Yes, she should," Theresa agreed. "Kaylee was all on her own, wasn't she?"

The torrid past she wanted to rid herself of had found her. Gareth wondered what he could do to twist the knife.

"You know what?" he began, "I'm not entirely sure Lucy didn't hear what I said about Kaylee, but I don't see why she'd hold back any incriminating evidence. I'll talk to goldilocks again, but for Kaylee, I know what I could say to make her look a little worse than us. And she couldn't argue it without blowing her story too."

* * *

Gareth headed to his room for a fresh change of clothes before he would find Lucy. His mind spun full of ways to salt Kaylee's wounds as he wrapped his hand around the doorknob and pushed it open.

On his bed sat no other than the very squeaky-voiced pain in the ass he intended to find. He froze in the doorway, searching Lucy's face for signs of hostility, but instead found it touched with sorrow.

"First of all," he began, starting toward her, "these are private rooms now, Lucy. Second, what do you want?"

"I came to say I was sorry," Lucy replied. "For all of it. Sorry I wigged and blamed Cynthia, sorry I shoved Theresa, and sorry for… going mental when I heard what you all have had to do. I'm sorry."

"Huh. Wasn't expecting that."

He quirked his brow. "Thank you. Gabby tell you to come say sorry?"

She shook her head, her eyes expanding. "No, no, I wanted to because I… I…" She pressed her lips together.

"You…?"
She sprang up, marched over to the door, and shut it. He stared down at her, noting a brown tint to her roots contrasting with the pale blonde of the rest.

*What, oh, what will she do when the world runs out of tacky hair bleaching kits?*

She balled her fists at her sides. "I just have to say it."

"Which is?"

Her jaw trembled. "I—I can't do it anymore, and you and your group, even though you're... you're the only ones who I think might have the guts to... to..."

"To?"

"Stand up to her. Gabby. You don't know what it's like, what she does to me. Calls me at 3 AM because she wants something to drink and doesn't want to get up out of bed. Makes me spy on other people, follow them around and try to overhear what they say. Never on you, surprisingly, but on Theresa and Alex, and Martin a few times. Once she asked me to come over here at night and press my ear against Theresa and Alex's door. I couldn't." She looked down, grabbing a lock of her hair and fiddling with the ends. "I mean, what if I heard them... like... doing it. So I lied and said I spied on them but didn't hear anything. If she found out I was lying, she'd hit me. Seriously."

He ruminated on her surplus of information, staring her dead-on. "If you weren't spying on me, then why were you in the shed?"

"Coincidence, I swear. I didn't know you and Martin were going to go over there. I know, I know, it sounds like a lie, but I swear it's not. Besides, she told me to stop listening in on Martin because I never heard anything good." She glanced down and stroked the ends of her hair again. "Well, I did hear him say something earlier that she'd want to know... about him and you." Her eyes flew up to him. "I didn't tell her, though. She'd be totally upset about it."

He bit his tongue to avoid mocking her, *'Like, oh my god, she'd be like so totally upset!'*

The woman was ridiculous. No way was she not sent by Gabby to gauge Gareth's trust. However, she had yet to say anything of his intents for Kaylee.

"Was that all you heard?" he asked.

"Uh, well, it was sort of hard to hear all of it. I heard a lot more of what Martin said because he's kind of loud."

Gareth had to laugh at that one. "Yeah, well, I still don't know why I'm supposed to believe you."

Her brow furrowed. "What? Why would I lie?"

"Gabby sent you here to test me. See what I'd do if one of hers wanted to go against her."

She shook her head. "No, no, no, I'm serious! I hate her. What I told you isn't even all of it!"

*Naz's husband.*

Gareth licked his lips, tempted to ask, but decided telling an untrustworthy person that he held knowledge he wasn't meant to too dangerous.

"Get out," he ordered.
Lucy frowned. "No, Gareth, please. I really am sorry I did what I did. I have no right to judge, you're right. I've been here almost the whole time. Never had to be out there. Gabby was right when she reminded me of that."

"Out."

She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it and gave a nod. Stepping toward the door, she grasped the knob before turning and saying, "Just keep your brother close, he's your family. I've lost all of mine now. I was one of the lucky ones for a while and now I'm not. But you still are."

A touch of empathy almost hit Gareth's center, but sped by before reaching its target.

"Goodbye, Lucy."

_Time for a talk, Kaylee._

* * *

Gareth creaked open the door to the infirmary, and as he expected, Kaylee stood at the counter messing with a box of equipment. The woman had spent more time in the infirmary at Terminus than she had in her own room. Organizing and counting supplies that didn't need to be organized and counted for the umpteenth time. Keeping busy always seemed to soothe her.

When she turned around, her features stiffened and her body froze. Her body, so healthy. Only having endured starvation once instead of twice. And those happy, pudgy cheeks akin Martin's in Alex's illustration were enough to make Gareth's own cheeks turn pink with something other than happiness. Yet she remained a slip of a thing. The small, brave girl who told him off via a foot of height difference. Of course she did. In the nightmare of the Occupation, he told her to be brave no matter how big the threat.

Kaylee blinked in quick succession. "Gareth… I—"

"Oh, Kaylee," he started, pushing the door almost shut with his foot, "who do you think I am?"

"What?"

"You brought us here, you vouched for us, and we have food, shelter, and safety. Now you think you earned back the right to wail with us about how they found out an ounce of our dirty secret."

She edged forward and stopped before the examination table. "Yeah, we do have some common ground. They're looking at me the same way they look at you. I saw it."

"I'm still waiting for a reason to cut and run, but surprisingly, I haven't found one yet. Now, I admit I've been a little blinded by how comfortable it is here. I've had such a good night's sleep the past few nights that I'd been able to look at you without wanting to snap your neck."

Her pink cheeks paled a tad. "Then try to move past it."

"You know, I'm an opportunist. And no, I can't kill you, or chop you up and cook you, not if we want to stay here and avoid ending up dead. Believe me, I'd rather be with no one but my own, but it's desolate out there and this is an opportunity. Gabby's absolutely batty about me, and if I told her our home was destroyed and Beth was part of the group who did it? Bad, bad Kaylee."

Her mouth gaped open. "Please, please, don't do that."
"They might know about the eating people thing, and yeah, that bodes well for none of us. But at least we stuck together after one of us rushed off into the sunset with one of the people who torched Terminus. You could argue what I'd say to her, but then you'd have to get into telling her the dirty little details. You know, why their group destroyed Terminus. The whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you god? Bad idea."

She gave the table a swift kick. "You were off your rocker, Gareth! Stop acting like you held my hand and read me bedtime stories and I bailed anyway! You ignored me. I know you knew how bad off I was after Terminus and all you gave me was a pat on the back. I wished my—our—leader would talk to me like you did Alex or Theresa or even Martin in your weird way." She threw her arms up. "But hey, I've never been a favorite."

"Oh, I see, I have favorites now?"

"Yeah, I know, Alex is your brother and Theresa's your sister-in-law, but I was miserable and you did nothing. You paid more attention to Martin, for god's sake. Punishing him or whatever the hell you were trying to do."

He slid to the side of the exam table. "You made yourself invisible, you didn't want to be seen."

She scoffed. "You know what you do when someone disappears? You try to bring them back! You try to make them seen again!"

Gareth set his hands on the table, making Kaylee wince. "You are not a victim anymore, stop acting like I forced you away. I'm sorry I was off my rocker. I mean that through and through. But they stuck with me. They stayed. Think about it, who are the ones with the biggest problems with our diet? I'd say it's Alex and Cynthia, maybe Albert to a degree. Yet they stayed. I know they'd never bail because they care about each other and staying alive too much to bail. You didn't."

Tears glistened in her eyes and her lip quivered. "I'm sorry. I've said that a thousand times and this is me trying. You're right, I should never have left no matter how tired of it I was."

"Can't go back, Kaylee."
Orange Sunset

Hunting. Of course they were good at it. Alex could practically hear the snide whispers and judgement from people back at Sipsey while he and Theresa were out. Though getting away from the place and their newly unveiled truth was a great relief.

Springtime hunting trips were an occasion Sipseans looked forward to as it promised fresh meat. And since walkers and other people were scarce nearby, many animals were ripe for the picking. Two teams of three and a couple more of two were to be stationed in areas overnight around an hour away. Hector and Naz declined Martin's eager request to go, much to his chagrin. Instead, they elected Alex and Theresa as one of the pairs.

"I'm not blind," Naz had explained. "I know Gabby's been hard on you two for... reasons. And for the record, I don't judge you. I saw you out there. I can't imagine what you've been through."

Despite her sympathy, Roy's reaction was the one that stuck in Alex's mind. The boy's fearful eyes and hunched shoulders when he waved to him the day before. He should have known better than to think he would never have to see that look again from someone so innocent.

Laying a snare in the woodlands, Alex imagined one designed to catch a human. They spoke of it in the past yet never tried it, certain that walkers would only stumble into it instead.

"Did you bring the canned peaches?" Theresa asked, rummaging through the bag draped across her shoulder.

Alex let go of the spiky trap and stood up. "Oh, shit. No. I meant to."

She let out a short sigh and scratched her head. "That was supposed to be our noon sugar fix."

"I'm sorry, I'll go back to the cabin and—"

"Oh, hush, you." She waved him off. "We'll be fine. We have peanut butter and bread."

A hunger pang nudged his gut. Peanut butter and bread were good, but not great. If they were lucky, they would catch enough game to spare a rabbit for themselves. Or else it was the vegetarian fare they packed from Sipsey.

"Peanut butter fingers?" Theresa asked, taking a jar of it and unscrewing the lid.

Images of cooked fingers smeared in peanut butter crossed his mind before he realized what she meant. "You hate it when I eat with my hands. What's your angle?"

She shrugged and gave a playful smile. "No angle. Peanut butter's not pasta or meatloaf—how could you not eat it with your fingers?" She held out the jar and wiggled it.

Alex slid forward and stuck two fingers inside. Cool and sticky butter clung to his skin as he pulled them out and licked the substance. Theresa dragged her finger across his and took a smidgen for herself.

"Hey, that's stealing," Alex said, licking his lips.

"What? I don't want my hands to get sticky."

He licked off another helping and took in the blooming springtime scenery around him. It appeared
sharper since he finally gave in and decided to wear the contacts after all.

"You know, I never thought I'd say this, but I miss Georgia."

Theresa's brow furrowed. "How?"

He shook his head. "Fuckin' Yankee, raggin' on my home state." Theresa giggled and he continued, "I don't know... just the change in scenery. Used to the way Georgia looked, you know? You ever miss Delaware?"

She took another slip of peanut butter. "Not really. There wasn't a lot to miss. It's incredible the things I don't miss."

"Like what?"

"Traffic, light pollution, bills."

He licked the last of the peanut butter from his fingers. "I missed all that stuff for a while, even though I hated it too. Actually, I—in college—I drew a piece for my class called... uh, what was it... oh, 'smothered sky' or some stupid name for light pollution in Atlanta."

"Mn, I grew up in the city. We never saw the stars at night. And I hated being outdoors because it was dirty, and now I prefer it. I can't stand cities anymore."

* * *

The couple bagged five turkeys and five rabbits. Less than what they had hoped, but sufficient. They spared one rabbit for themselves, skinning and cooking it for supper along with a few canned vegetables. Preparing the rabbit was a morbid task, one Alex would never enjoy. Though it brought him solace that he wasn't doing to deed to something that could talk.

Alex joined Theresa at a tiny table in the cramped cabin and sipped on the strew-like dinner. "Funny to be so far from Sipsey again," he said.

"Feels like a dream," Theresa remarked. "Out here, it's hard to imagine a place like that exists just an hour away." She sipped her water.

After every fourth bite, guaranteed. If Theresa had a drink with her meal, she always took a sip of it after every fourth bite. When Alex mentioned it to her, she said she never realized she did it nor knew why.

"Man, I do get tired of wakin' up without sunlight." He chewed a fatty piece of rabbit.

"Some people say they sleep in the top house on occasion." She picked up her half-full bowl and set it in front of him. "I'm done."

"Seriously?"

She nodded. "Amazingly, yes, I don't want the rest of it. And..." She stood up. "These pants are tight." She smiled and twirled around. "Oh, honey, have I gained weight?"

He looked her up and down, laughing. "Yes."

"Good." Theresa made her way across the creaky wooden floor and to the backpack resting by the door. Digging through it, she pulled out a pair of army pattern green shorts and changed into them. "Much better."
Alex helped himself to the remainder of his dinner along with Theresa's. Afterwards, they cleaned up and stepped outside to watch the sunset. The two settled onto a cushioned porch swing, Theresa sprawling across the bench and resting her feet in Alex's lap.

"You evolving from caricatures of Martin yet?" she asked as Alex opened up his new sketchbook and placed it against her ankles.

"Yeah, I thought I might," he answered. "Could still draw one of him oh, I don't know, in a rockin' chair, wearin' a bonnet and knittin' a sweater."

"Oh, please do."

"Well, I'd have to do it just for us 'cause Gareth said he tattled on me." He began tracing the outline of the trees before him.

The oranges and yellows of the sky transferred to his page a tad exaggerated; the trees a little greener and the sun a little larger.

Eating dinner with his wife, relaxing outside together, and drawing felt almost normal. Nothing unsavory led to their accommodations. The meat wasn't human, they weren't scrounging for supplies, and the area was as safe as unfenced land could be.

Taking a deep, satisfying breath of the evening air, it hit him like a freight train—he missed his mother. He missed his father. The two people he wished more than anyone were there to enjoy the peace and quiet with him and Theresa were dead. They could have all been together. Mary could have been safe and protected just like he and Gareth promised they would keep her. Michael could have—

No. Letting himself think of his parents making it to Sipsey only brought him pain.

Guilt set in, weighing down his limbs as he stared at the drawing before him. There he was, becoming healthy, safe, and enjoying his time with Theresa instead of grieving. He should have cried more, had more bad days, and had more nightmares. But he had gotten along fine without them.

Setting the notepad aside, he saw Theresa gazing out at the landscape, waning sunlight painting her face with a warm glow.

Alex tapped her ankles. "Can we switch?"

"Mm-hm," she agreed, pulling her feet away and sitting up.

He edged over and lay on his side, resting his head in her lap and gazing at the same sight she had. His hand wrapped around her thigh while she played with his hair. Relaxing shivers washed through his body. Yet his parents remained first and foremost. Imagining what they would look like next to him in the dusk landscape.

Gareth.

Had he done enough for his last family member? Were they even friends? Would their parents be proud of how they had fared together?

His throat tightened and he pressed down on her leg. Theresa knitted her hand between his and squeezed, making him curious if she picked up on his distress. At least for the time being, he figured he could try to focus on her and forget the lost possibilities.
Awakening to sunlight was a pleasant change from the artificial light of the bunker. Alex lay warmly entwined with Theresa, but a slight pressure in his bladder and curiosity to check the snares urged him up. Slipping out of bed, he picked up his strewn about clothes from the floor and redressed. He ambled to the window and peered out to see an array of shrubs obscuring the snares. Voices floated from behind the plants.

* * *

What the hell!?

The place was supposed to be remote.

Scanning the room for a weapon, he spotted a hunting rifle leaning against the back corner wall. He crept over and took it in hand. Getting Theresa would put her in danger. Though two against whoever was outside would be better, and she would want him to wake her. Regardless, he made the split decision to go alone.

Alex gulped, dryness making his throat sticky, and crossed the room. His hand pulled the door open and he sprung out. "That ain't yours!" He held the gun to a bedraggled man and woman crouching by the filled snare. "Don't make me use this. Go on your way." The pair raised their hands, eyes darting back and forth to the corner of the shack behind him. They each had a knife on them, but no firearms. Alex edged forward. "I said, drop it!"

Their vision kept switching from him to the corner of the shack.

Great. They're not alone.

He aimed the gun at the brunette woman's head. "Tell whoever's back there to come out with their hands up and no gets hurt, okay?" Silence. "God damnit, I'm not in the mood to play your games!"

Still no response.

Should I?

His finger applied more pressure on the trigger, preparing for what he would likely have to do. Yet the two stayed motionless and no one appeared from behind the shack.

"If you're back there, come out!" Alex yelled.

Frantic steps made him whirl around to the cabin's corner. Another brown-haired woman emerged, holding a knife to a half-dressed Theresa's throat. Alex lowered his weapon.

How did she…?

The window.

Oh, no. No, no, no…

A whine escaped his throat as he met his wife's terrified eyes.

"Mira?" the woman holding Theresa called.

"Do it," the woman beside the snare replied.

Alex began forward when Theresa shouted, "I'm pregnant! Please, don't!"
He froze, uncertain if she was lying or not, but agreed, "We just found out! Please, man, she's my wife."

The woman lowered the knife a bit, looking at her two group members. "Mac, Mira… that's against our rule."

Mac and Mira made their way from the trap to the porch steps. "You really pregnant?" Mac asked, narrowing his dark eyes.

Theresa nodded. "Yes, yes. I swear I am."

Mira's vision lingered on Theresa for a moment, then said to Alex, "Set that down."

Alex kept his sights on Theresa as he placed the rifle before his feet, mouthing "it's okay," before turning to Mira. "Now let her go."

Mira gave a nod to the other woman, stepped over, and took Alex's weapon. "Take them inside."

The other girl lowered her hand and shoved Theresa forward. Alex dug his nails into his palm. The bitch was going to die for that. Especially if Theresa was—

*She's not really. Of course not. She would've told me.*

After both being ushered into the cabin, Mira looked the place up and down before pointing toward the tiny kitchen's pantry. "The closet."

The woman behind Alex and Theresa escorted them to the pantry and pulled open the door. "Get in."

A dark space. They were going to trap them in a dark space.

*Not again.*

Neither of them moved.

"I said, get in!"

They complied and proceeded to huddle in the bottom of the pantry below the shelves. The door slammed shut, and from what light shone in under, one of them looked to be propping a chair against it.

Alex reached for Theresa's wrist and leaned into her ear. "Are you really—"

"No," she whispered back, grabbing his hand and squeezing hard.

He wanted to sigh in relief, but only bit his cheek.

"They know we exist," Mac's voice sounded. "We can't just let them—"

"The girl's pregnant," the other female interrupted. "We have a rule."

"Well, what do you wanna do, Jackie? Leave them here?"

"I don't really think that girl's pregnant," Mira said. "She's skinny as a board."

"There is a thing called the first trimester," Jackie argued.
"Let's just leave them in there and get the fuck out of here!" Mac yelled.

"Alex?" Theresa whispered, holding up a razor in the dim light. The same one he gave her their first night at Sipsey. The one she had carried with her everywhere she went like a safety blanket. "Stashed this in a wad of tissue paper in my underwear."

"Y—you brought that along?"

She shrugged. "Stuck it in my bag, and good thing I did. We'll get out of—"

Unintelligible yelling cut her off, and Alex flinched. How long would their verdict take? Less than a minute had passed, but his legs ached as if he had been trapped there an hour. The shouting continued as something crashed to the floor. A wave of stuffy heat overcame him while Theresa said something his brain failed to decipher. With each thud of his heart, his airway felt to be closing shut.

They were at the mercy of strangers. Trapped in the dark. A deep breath caught in his throat and forced its way out in a violent gasp.

Theresa's arm wrapped around him. "Alex? Hey, it's going to be okay."

"No, it's not," the voice of a long dead man echoed.

Why was he so weak? Did he really think telling off Gabby had been strength? Courage? Who was he kidding? He was still the coward hiding behind the safety of his big brother.

"Look at you, boy! Whimperin' even more than the bitch next to you!"

Theresa set the blade down and gripped his quivering, clammy hands. "Follow my lead. Breathe in and out. Copy me." She took a deep, steady breath and then released it.

Alex tried to imitate her, sputtering, but getting in a shaky dose of much-needed oxygen. Again and again, he attempted to breathe with her and ignore the loud people outside.

Not there, not there, not there...

No. They weren't in the train cars surrounded by wild animals, they were in a closet with three morons outside having a pissing match. And they were indeed not helpless. A razor was a small weapon, but any sharp tool could be made deadly.

"We're going to get out of this," Theresa assured him, picking up the razor. "We'll cut all three of their throats with this if we can." He nodded, inhaling a ragged breath. "Okay, I have an idea. Follow my lead." She leaned in and told him her plan.

It was risky, but Jackie seemed to be the most sympathetic for Theresa's "pregnancy."

* * *

"You have to let us out!" Theresa screamed. "Something's wrong! Please!" She banged her fists on the door, making it shake.

"What's your fucking problem?" Mac grumbled.

"I—I think I'm having a mis—miscarriage. I'm bleeding everywhere!"

"Let us out, man!" Alex urged.
No reply.

She pounded on the door again. "I'm begging you!"

Mira and Jackie's voices erupted from the other side, followed by the chair being moved away. It opened to reveal Jackie staring down at them, pity painted on her middle-aged features. Theresa sat up on her knees, revealing smears of blood from the incisions she had made to the insides of her thighs.

"Oh, crap..." Jackie said.

The air from the outside cooled Alex's sweat-dampened skin as he guided Theresa up. When Jackie reached out to Theresa, he lurched forward and yanked the strange woman to him. He pinned her arms to her side while his wife held the razor to her throat.

Mira held up Alex's rifle and Mac waved his knife, moving into an attack position so cheesy-looking Alex almost thought to laugh.

"Put them on the ground," Theresa commanded. "Kick them away, then step backwards five steps."

Mira scowled. "You were never pregnant, were you?"

"Please, just do what she says," Jackie pleaded. Her body quivered against Alex's.

For a moment, an ounce of sympathy attempted to break through before he recalled she had done the same to Theresa.

"They'd do the same to you if they had the chance," Gareth had said.

Alex tightened his hold.

Theresa began to drag the blade sideways a tad, breaking the skin and spilling a drop of blood. "Once you drop them, I'll stop cutting." Mac lowered his knife, and Mira set her rifle down, followed by her own blade. Theresa ceased slicing. "Five steps." The two obliged. "Alex, take the razor."

Alex gripped the razor and held it against Jackie's skin. Her racing pulse beat against his hand.

The floor groaned as Theresa bridged the gap between her and the rifle. She took it in her hands and stood still for several moments, Mac and Mira falling oddly quiet.

Now they shut up.

Alex braced himself for what would come next, what always came next. Yet Theresa stayed as silent as a stone, the two before her white as a sheet.

What is she waiting for?
Blood Soak

The way the cold blade felt pressed against Theresa's neck remained fresh on her senses. Yet her finger remained motionless around the rifle's trigger.

Mac and Mira's eyes had reflected inwards—the way many people's did when they knew their death was imminent. But the hostile group only had two knives among them, and Theresa and Alex were leaving anyway. Was there a reason to?

_Run! Leave! Before I change my mind!_

If she fired, Mira and Mac would be dead and Alex would cut Jackie's throat. Then they would have to dispose of their bodies before they left. Was it even worth the extra time it would take?

"Go!" Theresa shouted, her voice faltering. "Just get out of here!" She glanced over her shoulder to Alex. "Let her go." He froze a moment, staring her dead-on. "It's easier if they get out of here." She turned back to Jackie and Mac whose eyes had returned to the present. "Try your knife and your friends are dead."

Jackie scrambled away from Alex while Mira and Mac began to tiptoe. Theresa fired a shot at the pair's feet, making them flinch and scamper away.

Her ears rang, barely able to hear the shriek rising in her throat, "If I ever see you again, I will shoot you dead and leave your bodies to rot!"

After the door slammed shut behind them, Theresa lowered the rifle and moved to Alex. "Are—are you okay?" She rested the end of the gun on her wrist and took his hand. "You're still shaking."

Looking down at their locked hands, she assumed his touch was making her own hand tremble, but her rifle was quivering in her grip.

"This whole thing was my fault," Alex said, avoiding her eyes. "If I'd have woke you up you wouldn't have gone out the window and she wouldn't have gotten you. I was tryin' to keep you safe and I just made everything worse."

It dawned on her to be mad at him for attempting to be a hero, but the last thing she wanted was to make him feel worse. "It's okay, we're okay. That's all that matters." She squeezed his hand. "Now, let's get out of here."

***

"I am so sorry, I really thought it would be clear out there," Naz said, standing by the couple's vehicle just inside Sipsey's fence.

Alex scoffed. "Yeah, well, you thought wrong."

"Hey," Gareth called as he jogged across the concrete driveway to meet them. "I heard what happened. Naz walkied me. Are they—"

"They got away," Theresa interrupted, crossing her arms. "They shoved us in a closet and left. We were eventually able to force the door open."

Alex threw her a sideways glance but didn't refute her words.
"Why did I just lie?"

"We'll take your haul," Naz said. "And you two can rest."

* * *

Already, Theresa felt spoiled for missing a wash after one day without it. Nevertheless, she opted for a relaxing bath to get her mind off what she did—or didn't do. The clawfoot tub resided in the women's bathroom surrounded by a white shower curtain. Since it was midday, most people were out and about, leaving the room vacant. Perfect for a relaxing soak.

Steaming hot water filled the tub and entwined with lavender bath beads. A day's worth of grime melted away as she immersed herself. Though she sought to clear her head, the incident replayed on a loop. Three people had shown up at the cabin, one held a knife to her throat and was going to kill her in front of Alex. Then, the three locked them in a closet and debated whether to kill them. And Theresa showed them mercy.

_Mercy._

Nevermind the task of disposing of three bodies would have been arduous, she let them live after hurting both her and Alex. After sending her love into an anxiety attack.

Nodding off, various ways she could have killed them filled her half-dream state. The immediate aftermath, their lifeless bodies lying on the wooden floor, the spilled blood, and the heaviness of their corpses as they would have been dragged off.

She slipped away into unconsciousness.

* * *

A chill shook her body as she awakened to lukewarm water. Her bath appeared to have turned red and she rubbed her eyes, assuming her vision was sleep-stricken. Yet the ruddy water remained. She made a low noise and shut her eyes again, trying to will away the sight when something brushed against her leg. Her eyes flew open to a doll's arm floating beside her bent knee. By her foot was a Barbie's head, its blonde hair tarnished red, but painted on smile dry as a bone.

Theresa yelped and flew up out of the tub. More Barbie heads, torsos, and limbs peppered the bath alongside toy plates and forks. Her teeth chattered from the air on her wet skin and she hurried into a fresh change of clothes without bothering to dry her stained body.

Tightness built in her chest and her breathing became ragged.

*What kind of sick joke is this!?*

Whirling around, she sped out of the bathroom and into the squeaky-clean corridor. "Hey! Which one of you fuckers did this!?" No reply. "I'm talking to you!"

Footsteps hurried from around the corner revealing a man in an obvious brown toupee and mismatched clothes. "What's going on?"

"Someone thought it would be hilarious to—just look in there! My bathwater!"

The man rushed into the bathroom and Theresa began to follow him when she realized who did it: **Gabby.**
It had to be her. After all, it was a possibility she was a tyrant who abused Lucy and manipulated her people. The woman loved to play games and had it out for Theresa from day one.

Theresa hustled across the complex to Gabby's office and found it empty. Huffing, she headed toward the leader's room. She turned a corner and saw the woman she sought coming up the stairs from level two.

"You!" Theresa cried.

Gabby slowed her pace as she climbed the last step. "Yes?"

"You really think I wouldn't figure this out!?"

She looked Theresa up and down. "Figure what out?"

"Don't play dumb with me." She held her wrists up. "The red? The tub? I know you fucking did it."

Gabby raised her hands. "You're going to need to calm down and tell me what happened."

"What happened is you want to torment me and blame it on someone else. And you… you came in while I was sleeping and put dye and doll parts in with me!? How did you even know I was in there? That I was asleep?!" She stomped a step forward. "Huh!? How!?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Theresa, I was worried someone might act out against some of you, but I can assure you, we'll find them. I don't tolerate—"

"Shut the fuck up you dick-hungry bitch!"

"Theresa! You can't speak to me like that. I'm trying to help you."

She shook her head, simpering. "No, Gareth won't believe that. He knows better, he can see right through people. And so can I."

"You're right, he does know you. And he did said you're impulsive and have a temper."

*Of course he did.*

Her brow quirked. "And you knew you could use that against me. Oh, I have you all figured out. You won't get away with this."

She chewed her lip. "He didn't mention how paranoid you are. Have you had a history of personality disorders?"

The tension burst from Theresa's body and she shoved Gabby by the shoulders, sending her stumbling toward the stairs.

Gabby skirted away from the steps and backed up. "I'm not going to fight you!"

"Don't you dare pretend like you're the bigger person!" Theresa took a swing and Gabby's face, but the other woman dodged it.

*I can. I can still do it. I can hurt her. I can kill her.*

"Whoa! What's going on!?" Albert's voice rang as he bolted between the two.

*The fuck did he come from?*
Theresa stopped and oriented to him. "What's going on? She played a *hilarious* prank on me and has the audacity to deny it!"

His brow furrowed. "You sure it was her?"

"She's just upset," Gabby chimed in. "And I'm the easiest one to blame. We're going to find who did that to you and punish them. I promise."

Theresa swiveled around Albert toward Gabby when he hurried to block her path and said, "Theresa, we can't do this."

She looked back and forth between the two, envisioning smashing in the woman's plastic head with her fist.

"Theresa?" Albert echoed.

Theresa nodded, exhaling the breath she had unknowingly been holding. "Fine. You're right. Not right now."

* * *

The meeting on the bathtub incident utterly bored Theresa. Questioning other Sipseans felt pointless because she knew who did it. Yet she sat by inside the expansive assembly room and listened to the ruse, too tired to make another fuss. Afterwards, she, Alex, and Gareth remained in the room while Martin, Albert, and Cynthia had to attend to their chores.

"You know I believe you," Gareth assured Theresa, placing his hand on a black fold-up chair beside him.

"Thank you," Theresa replied, wrapping her arms around Alex from the side and resting her head on his shoulder. Him against her—paired with the razor stashed in her pocket—had allowed her head to begin clearing.

"Man, that bitch could hurt her," Alex said. "She could hurt any of us. Gareth, we gotta do somethin'. I'm really starting to think what Lucy said was true."

"So am I," Gareth agreed. "But—"

"No, no more of your games with her."

"Alex, it still might not have been her."

Theresa jerked her head up. "It was!"

Gareth stepped forward. "I do think it was her, alright? And she *could* hurt any of us. I've been worried about you two, which Lucy said I should be."

She lowered her head back onto Alex's shoulder and mumbled, "We have to kill Gabby."

"If we want to stay here," he began, whispering, "then yes, yes we do."

"I think Lucy's the key," Alex whispered. "But she's squeamish as hell, you think she'd wanna help cap her?"

"Oh, she will when I convince her. She's vulnerable and easily controlled. No doubt I can get her to do exactly what I want."

* * *
"Like slip somethin' in her drink? How'd we make that look natural?"

"It shouldn't be so clean," Theresa commented.

"How would we have her go out messy then?" Gareth asked.

She shook her head. "I—I don't know, I don't care, I just want her gone. I'm tired of being on the bottom here. Being the newcomers, the oh-so-scary cannibals. We don't deserve this bullshit. We deserve a place like this more than these people do."

"Well, if we want to take this place, we'll still have to put up with a lot of them. Takes a village to run it."

Theresa opened her mouth to reply when a knock on the doorframe averted her attention. Kaylee slunk through the doorway, arms folded and glancing between the three. An amount of comfort settled in Theresa's chest at the sight.

"Haven't seen you around much," Gareth said, swaggering forward a few feet. "I wonder why that is."

"This ain't a good time, Kay," Alex warned.

Kaylee dropped her arms to her sides. "I heard about what happened, and whoever did that did it to all of us. We all did the same things, we've all been attacked just the same."

Theresa lifted her head and let go of Alex. "I don't want your sympathy."

"Well too bad, Theresa, because you have it whether you like it or not."

"Why don't you run along back to your room?" Gareth suggested. "Seems like you've set up camp in there."

Kaylee shook her head and straightened. "No, not anymore. I'm not letting you drag my name through the mud because your feelings are still hurt. I made a mistake, we all do. They'll get over it. And you should too." She pulled down at her long sleeves and recrossed her arms.

Long sleeves... is she?

A pit formed in Theresa's stomach. It was likely Kaylee never stopped self-injuring, but the thought of her doing it because of their treatment made her unable to meet the women's eyes.

"Then why the hiding?" Gareth asked.

"I'm not doing this right now. Goodbye." Kaylee turned around and departed through the doorway.

Gareth sighed and raised a hand to his hip. "You know, she is just—"

"I have to take a shower," Theresa declared, wanting to rid her mind of Kaylee. She peered down at her pink and red-stained arms. "I have to get this off, but I don't want to go back there."

"Cynthia can go with you," Alex said, rubbing her upper arm.

She frowned. "What? Where are you going?"

"Well, your shower's got a 'no boys allowed' policy. And I have to go up top since they think I'm a master gardener 'cause I let it slip I used to grow my own weed."
Her heart sunk. She had wanted to cling to him like a security blanket. "Okay."

"Uh, yeah," Gareth began. "Cynthia's busy in inventory for another half hour."

Theresa felt her limbs go heavy. "I'll just… go to my room and wait."

* * *

Once again, the women's showers were empty.

*Lucky us.*

"Don't look at the tub," Cynthia said, setting a change of clothes on the bathroom counter.

"Trust me, I'm not," Theresa assured her, detecting a note of lavender remaining in the air.

*Did they clean it out yet?*

If Cynthia weren't with her, Theresa knew nothing would stop her from grabbing the nearest blunt object and smashing the tub to pieces.

Cynthia stood by while Theresa showered. The water stream rinsed away the rest of the red dye and sent it down the drain, reminding her of the blood seeping into the grate in the killing floor's trough. Drying herself and changing into her fresh set of underwear, her eyes narrowed at the clothes Cynthia had left on the counter.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have picked such girly ones," Cynthia said.

Theresa shook her head, picking up the flowy, pink top and maroon pants. "No, I like girly. I just went for all the practical clothes out of habit when they let us pick."

"I went for the fun stuff right away. See?" She swayed her hips, making her yellow dress sashay.

She smiled and pulled the shirt over her head. "Too cute. You know, I've missed girl talk. I mean, I —"

"Sometimes I worry you're just usin' me as a replacement for Mary or Kaylee."

Theresa almost stumbled out of her pants leg. "I—what?"

"I don't know, you never liked me before."

"I always liked you."

"No, not really. You nothing'd me. Now…"

Her cheeks went red. "You're not a *replacement*."

She waved her hands. "Nevermind, just forget I said anything."

Theresa fastened her pants. "Yeah, no, I can't do that. You're so *welcome* for comforting you."

Cynthia scowled. "Would you still have if Kay was still your friend or if Mary wasn't dead?"

Theresa gulped. Would she have? "*Yes,*" she replied, though unsure it was true. "No, you know what? Now I want to be alone."
Cynthia stepped forward. "No, Theresa, I'm sorry." She reached for the other woman's shoulder.

She pulled away. "Please leave me alone." She hurried on her slippers and marched out the door.

Her face throbbed hot as she walked down the halls, eventually finding herself in the room she first met Gabby. She perched on the wrap-around sofa and buried her face in her hands. Low whines escaped her throat as the entire day forced its way out, tears moistening her palms and breath hitching. If she continued, she would bawl her eyes out until she couldn't breathe.

Footsteps approached the doorway and Theresa lifted her head, expecting Cynthia. Instead, Martin strolled in holding a small bottle.

_Oh god, no. Not now._

Theresa sat up straight, ready to tell him to get lost when he said, "Saw you come in here. You look like you need this." He shook the bottle.

"Hey, this is the first drink I'll have since that night with Al and Al." He crossed the room and sat on the coffee table across from her. "Oh, come on, I don't wanna drink alone."

"I'm not in the mood for..." Her eyes focused on the bottle. "...raspberry schnapps?"

"Don't judge, this queer-ass drink's all I could get."

Though the idea was appealing, she replied, "I don't want to get drunk."

"You don't have to, a sip's all it would take for me to officially not be drinkin' alone. And I hadn't even opened it yet, so it ain't contaminated by my icky Martin germs."

She sighed and grabbed the bottle from his hand. "Oh, what the hell." Unscrewing the lid, the smell of the stuff made her stomach churn, but she downed a few gulps anyway.

Though she would have to tell Alex. One of their biggest fights had been when she secretly snuck off to drink after her mother's death.

He took the bottle back. "Can't imagine that's enough to wash away a bath of bloody doll parts."

A faint smile touched her lips. "Careful, Martin, you're making me think you might actually care."

"No, just don't wanna drink alone." He took a swig of it. "And I wanted to get details about the cat fight."

Her brow twitched. "No fur flew, but I called her a dick-hungry bitch."

His face lit up. "You did? Oh, you're my hero. What did her face look like?"

"Like if you took one of those Barbie heads and drew on sad eyebrows and a frown."

He laughed. "Oh, that makes my entire day." He took another sip. "You know, my theory is her snatch has teeth."

She grimaced. "On principle, I'm offended by how sexist that is, but you're probably right."
"I'm always right."

She shook her head and gazed at a framed picture of a nature scene behind him. "You know, it's the very idea…"

"Of what?"

She licked her lips, feeling her inhibitions loosen. "That I get treated like… after this morning. Those three people…"

"What?"

"I wasn't going to tell anyone else, but they didn't get away. I let them go."

"Seriously?"

She grabbed the bottle back from him and had another drink, the liquid burning her throat on the way down. "I—I don't know why I did. They were going to kill me. If I hadn't lied and shouted 'I'm pregnant,' they would have. They put me and Alex in a closet. Why didn't I kill them? I had the gun pointed at them and Alex had the razor against the other one's throat. Bam, bam, slice, and it would have been over. Easy."

He kept silent a moment. "I would've thought even Alex would've done in the one who was gonna cut you."

"Yeah, well, I think he was too shocked after I told them to leave. We haven't talked about it. I was going to, then I got distracted. I come back here and wake up with blood on my hands. The one time I didn't get blood on my hands and I'm treated like this. But it's just they… I mean, they had no defense. They had two knives on them and that was it. It just seemed… it put a bad taste in my mouth to do them in."

"Taste as bad as the schnapps?"

"Worse. And if we'd killed them, we would've had to drag their bodies outside and bury them or toss them in the woods. We've done worse, but there was a reason, there's always a reason." She looked down. "I keep telling myself it was because it'd take extra effort to get rid of them. God, I thought I was done with these questions."

He leaned forward. "Oh, come on, don't start down that path. You'll wind up somewhere you don't need to be. You know that better than most folks."

"I do. It's just it's the idea that sometimes people don't… don't have to die. That you can—"

"Oh, shut the hell up."

"Excuse me?"

"If they have to, they have to. Gabby has to now. Please tell me you still got enough gumption to agree with that."

She grit her teeth. "Are you kidding? Of course I do. We can only make it here if she dies."

"Well, then maybe you haven't gone too soft."

She again began to tell him to get out, though to her reluctance, she felt he was right to criticize her. At least someone would always give her an honest opinion. When she would repeat her words to
Alex, she knew he would sugarcoat his response. She had to admire his wish to spare her feelings, but sometimes she needed the bare bones truth.

"I have not gone soft."

"That mean you gonna tell the other three Bradies in our bunch? Or is it a special secret?"

She folded her hands. "I just want to forget the whole thing. And I'm not in the mood for the long spiel I'm sure Gareth will go on. Basically what you said except in many, many, many more words."

"No one wants a Gareth lecture. But I don't know, I'm not keen on secrets."

"If you want to tell him, fine. But right now it's not important."
Balmy night air mixed with heat from the fire pit and Gareth shed his jacket. Waiting for his people to arrive, he kept looking from the fire to the surreal sight of a fence beside him. They never had an outdoor fire at Terminus for recreational purposes. A burning flame outside always meant something dire and urgent. Of course, what Sipseans would dare bother the ‘scary cannibals’ having a campfire? Meeting there to discuss their next course of action was ideal since it was out of the way, yet public enough to avoid suspicion.

Alex approached from the bunker holding his hands in his pockets.

Gareth glanced at his wristwatch and read 8:54 PM. "Since when do you arrive early?"

Alex took a seat on the adjacent bench, firelight revealing a long face. "Didn't you hear? Hell froze over."

He waited for another remark or at least a show of amusement as his own joke, but Alex remained silent and stared into the pit.

Gareth leaned forward a smidgen. "How do you stand to wear hoodies year-round?"

"Could ask you the same about leather jackets," he retorted, vision never wavering from the flames.

Alright, what the hell?

He clasped his hands together. "What's the matter, Alex?"

After a few moments, he answered, "The cabin."

Gareth should have recognized the look of one of Alex's spirals of self-loathing and guilt. "Ah, right."

He shook his head. "You know, the whole damn thing was my fault. I didn't realize it until after those pricks took off though 'cause I was too busy havin' a meltdown in the closet like a fuckin' pu—moron."

"So, you—"

"Man, I was this close to havin' to stand by and watch her die again and not bein' able to do anything. Then today?"

"Come on, you couldn't have predicted that three people would show up for breakfast. Or that Gabby would dump Barbies in her bathwater."

He looked down and began picking at the bench's chipped blue paint. "Yeah, but I was stupid for goin' out there on my own without wakin' her up. You know that."

"I do. It wasn't smart and you did screw up, but it also wasn't very bright of Theresa to go out the window with nothing but a shaving razor."
Alex looked back up, crumbling a blue piece of paint in his hand. "She had just gotten outta the window before she could grab her gun."

"Should've tried to go with it."

"That's not the point, man. I—everytime I look at her I think about it. I don't how she's not furious at me. I am."

"You sure she's not mad?"

"Yeah, she lets you know if she's mad."

Gareth bowed his head and laughed. "That's true. You know, it's incredible how many relationship questions—and I don't just mean romantic—can be solved by telling the truth. Honesty, baby brother."

"Yeah, but—"

"Didn't she get really pissed when you didn't tell her about Gabby?"

"It'd be so selfish. Bringin' up my problems when she's—you know. The tub and the—just everything."

"You do tend to lie by omission."

He scoffed, sitting up straight. "We all tended to. We did it at Terminus and we're doin' it now."

"Sipsey's not a relationship." He nodded his head to Theresa making it across the field. "And there she is. Try to look at her."

Alex gulped and peered over his shoulder.

Déjà vu took Gareth back to high school when he urged Alex to speak to the redhead he had a crush on.

"Alex, she likes you. Go talk to her."

It was beyond him how Alex ever got anywhere with Theresa without having a stroke. How did they even get together? Had he ever even asked? How their first kiss happened? Their first "date?"

At their wedding reception, Alex said he 'suggested' their union and she agreed, but beyond that, Gareth had no idea the details, having been too preoccupied to want them.

Gareth knew the whole story of how his parents became betrothed. The two met in their college's Advanced Algebra class. Michael charmed Mary by raising his hand and giving witty answers to the professor's questions. Mary had been failing the class, so she asked Michael for his help and they quickly began a relationship. Their first kiss was on their first date after he dropped her off at her sorority house. And he asked her to marry him while they were visiting City Hall in Stone Mountain to pay an old parking ticket.

Yet Gareth knew none of those things about his own brother though he had lived side by side with him while it happened. His throat grew dry and he fought the urge to sink into himself—they had planning to do.

* * *

"You know those are mine?" Gareth asked, sitting on the side of his bed and watching Martin put
on the wrong pair of socks. "And that you weren't wearing socks?"

Martin sighed and started removing them. "Sorry, I don't much keep track of the whereabouts of socks." He smirked and dropped them into Gareth's lap. "Nah, just admit it: you don't want any lingerin' molecule of me left on you or your stuff."

He pulled the socks on and shook his head. "Every molecule of you would take bleach and sandpaper to get off."

He laughed and stood up. "Aw, you couldn't even get rid of me that easy."

True. The man was a leech, or a tick, stealing blood from his brain and sending it due south. Nevertheless, he figured it was better than talking to dead figments of his imagination.

"Still not sure why you picked Alex to go along," Martin commented, fastening his pants.

Gareth straightened his shirt collar. "He can hold his own. Don't worry about him."

He shrugged. "If you say so."

"I know so."

"Hey, no need to get your drawers in a wad." He strolled to the door.

Gareth softened his face. "Goodbye, Martin."

"See you." He pulled the door open and disappeared into the hall.

Gareth stood up and smoothed out his bedspread, matching its order to the rest of his muted room. A pair of loafers sat by his door and he slipped them on before heading out toward Alex's room.

In their mission of prying information from Lucy, Alex was the ideal candidate of the bunch. Theresa was too hostile, Martin was Martin, Cynthia's guilt showed through, and Albert insisted upon perpetuating teenage boy stereotypes by staring at Lucy's chest whenever it neared him. Gareth carried charisma which he could use to manipulate the woman, yet knew alone he could be too daunting. However, Alex's friendly demeanor won over many arrivals at Terminus. It had led Mike to comment Alex could have run a bed and breakfast before he realized the irony of his statement. Alex had feigned amusement, having never thought jokes of the sort were remotely funny.

Gareth tapped on Alex's door and he answered, and then glanced over his shoulder at the clock on his bedside. "You're two minutes late."

 Fucking Martin. Literally.

He held in a sigh. "Hell froze over."

Alex smiled and Gareth glimpsed behind him. White Christmas lights adorned the wall above his bed and sprawled half-way around the room. The pleasant glow shone on a fluffy, patterned comforter, and several tiny block animals added a few splashes of color. Theresa and Alex had taken to putting together a few kits of them in the break room, one a fox, and another an alligator.

"You become an interior decorator?" Gareth asked.

"Huh?" Alex again glanced behind himself. "Oh, no. Yeah, you said we were stayin' so we figured why not set up?"
"You know, that's an excellent idea. My room's still a bare-bones barracks."

Alex stepped past him and shut the door. "Should change that then. If the powers that be see you fillin' your space for a long stay…"

"Powers? Seems like there's just one. And I assumed she's been through our rooms already."

"Yeah, that's why I told Tess to keep the razor under her pillow if it ain't on her. Still, I think it bein' bare makes you look you got one foot out the door."

A memory flashed through his mind; Priscilla and the quarters at Terminus she never bothered to decorate because she had never intended to stay. Though her brain matter blown out of her head with her own gun gave the place quite the personality.

"Well, let's head out," Gareth said. "Lucy might be waiting if she didn't get too scared." He smoothed his shirt and began down the hall.

Alex followed him and they trekked toward the fourth floor room containing the emergency escape hatch. Lucy never specified why she wanted to meet there, but they agreed.

"That lemon shampoo didn't make you itchy too?" Alex asked as they climbed a u-shaped flight of stairs.

Gareth had no clue why his brother was bringing up shampoo of all things. "I never used it. Why?"

"Really? 'Cause it smells like you did. It almost knocked me over when I opened the door. It's weird 'cause Martin said it itched him too but it still comes off him in…" He slowed his pace a tad as they reached the fourth floor. "…in waves."

Gareth saw the pieces fall into place in Alex's eyes and changed the subject, "Who knows why the guy does what he does. So, you talk to Theresa yet?"

Alex scratched his cheek. "Oh, uh, yeah. I told her stuff and it helped a lot. And I'm more with it today, so I won't bother you."

They passed the infirmary and Gareth glanced in hoping to catch a bedraggled Kaylee, but saw it empty. "No, it's important I know my people's—your—state of mind. Especially now."

"Well, I feel a little better, so…" He gestured to the closed escape hatch room. "Here we are."

"Let's hope this isn't a trap," Gareth muttered and gave a few light knocks to the metal door.

The door squeaked ajar and Lucy poked her head through. "Oh, thank god," she said, heaving a sigh and pulling the door the rest of the way. "Come in."

Both of them eased through the doorway into the small, vacant room. The emergency exit hatch rested on the other side sealed behind a dense metal door.

Interior design on Gareth's mind, he said, "Anyone ever thought to add throw pillows in here?"

Lucy clicked the door shut behind her and turned to the two. "You always find something funny to say. It's not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, it's just… you seem like regular people. Not that I had an idea of
what you'd be like. But like, you know." She pulled off her cream-colored cardigan and placed it over her shoulder.

Gareth found his eyes drawn to the chest Albert was so fond of. It was indeed ample, and her full figure would have been a welcome sight at Terminus. Women of all shapes and sizes tasted better, but ones like Lucy provided more to go around.

"We're all just people tryin' to make somethin' worthwhile outta all this," Alex said.

Lucy nodded. "Yeah. Totally."

Gareth chewed his tongue to keep from sarcastically imitating her aloud.

"Guys," Lucy lowered her voice, "it was Gabby who had the idea to do that Theresa, but she—she made me do it."

Alex stomped forward a step. "You did that to her!?"

She backed up. "I—I had to. She—"

"You're supposed to be on our side."

Gareth moved beside him and held out his hand. "Alex."

Lucy folded her arms. "She… she said if I didn't, she'd di—oh god, she'd dig up Skylar and… cut him up and make me watch." Her eyes glistened. "She's done that sort of thing before, so I know she'd really do it. You have to understand."

Alex pursed his lips. "I do. I'm—I'm sorry."

"And I didn't, like, look when I did it, I swear. I had the dolls and the food coloring and peeked in just long enough to make sure it was her. Then I looked away and dumped them in."

"She have you follow Theresa?" Gareth asked. "How'd she know she was going to take a bath?"

"She's had the idea for a while. She knows Theresa likes baths so—"

"How's she know that?" Alex broke in.

"Don't know. Other eyes and ears must have told her. All I know is what I do for her, she keeps it that way on purpose. Well, anyway, she came to me yesterday and said she heard Theresa was going to take a bath, and to stand outside and wait because she might fall asleep. I was hoping I'd go in and find her awake, but she'd probably have choked me or something."

"Did Skylar know she put you through this?" Alex asked.

"No. No, and I didn't tell him to protect him. If he knew, he'd try to have stopped her and I—I didn't want him to get hurt. Then after he… he's been gone, I thought, why not?" She sniffled. "The only person left for her to hurt is me, I don't have to worry about keeping him safe. Just me. If I go out, I might as well go fighting. So I figured why not try? Why not cozy up to a family of cannibals? Oh, I'm—I'm sorry I didn't mean it like—"

"Don't worry about it," Gareth assured her.

"Hey, we wanna stay here hassle-free," Alex began, "and we need your help to do that. You gotta tell us everything. I'm sure she has other whippin' boys, but you've been the only one brave enough
to ask a family of cannibals to put a stop to it. You've done good."

A smile brightened her dark face. "Thank you. And I... I just knew anyone who's been here so long would be too enveloped in this place. Its status quo and stuff. You're still... you're new, you're not..."

"Spoiled?" Gareth suggested.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"What about Naz's husband?"

Her brow furrowed. "What about him?"

He rolled his eyes. "Come on, don't play coy."

"I overheard Gabby on the phone," Alex explained. "She said to 'give Naz's husband a sandwich.'"

Lucy's face dropped. "The vault."

Gareth's brow quirked up. "Vault?"

"Where gold and riches and stuff were supposed to be stored by the government. It's on the first floor."

"The big room for storage by the morgue?"

"Yeah. I've never been in because only a few people have a key, but Gabby never told me who."

He forced back a laugh. "Are you saying Naz's supposedly dead other half is in there?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. But I've always wondered why only a few people are allowed to get it when it's just a big boring storage room."

"So we open Pandora's vault, and then what? You think whatever or whoever's in there will wake everyone else up?"

"I hope so."

Little did Lucy know, Gabby's fate was to be lethal. Though he assumed her fragile state was unable to handle the idea yet.

Lucy let her arms fall to her sides. "Guys, I'm really tired. Are we done for now? Because I want to go to bed."

Gareth nodded. "For now. We'll talk more tomorrow."

"Yeah, thanks, Lucy," Alex said. "You have a good night's sleep."

"Thanks to you too. I'll try." She ducked her head down and hurried past them out the door.

Gareth gave two thumbs up and Alex smiled a tad, saying, "Tess ain't gonna be happy to know it was Lucy."

"Oh, you sure you want to—"

"Yes. Not after that very public fight." He paused. "Man, what if Lucy finds out about Cynthia and
"Skylar?"

"She won't. I swear, it's just our luck our golden ticket is also one we've fucked over."

"Didn't take us too long to do it, did we?"

"Technically, Cynthia did it."

"Anything any of us does gets on all our hands. You know that."

He raised his hand to his hip and sighed. "Yeah, I know. Well, I'll see you." He turned and began out into the hall.

Alex trailed him. "Where you goin'?"

Though Alex had likely figured it out, Gareth wasn't about to answer that Martin would be in his room waiting with a bottle of strawberry-flavored lubricant. "To catch up on 18th-century literature."

His face fell. "Right. I'll go wait for Tess to get back in about an hour."

The urge to sink into himself returned and something nagged at his gut—he still didn't know how Alex and Theresa decided to get married. And could he really be the kind of guy who ditches his lonely brother for a good lay?

Despite a certain organ telling him to forget sharing and caring with his brother, he said, "You know what? I've already read that one. And I've never heard the story of how you and Theresa decided to get hitched."

"Uh… why you wanna hear that?"

"Because I've never heard it before." They passed the infirmary for the second time and Gareth slowed down, searching for Kaylee. Again, he saw no one and breathed a sigh of disappointment.

"Sure, man, okay. Um, let's see… well, it was sorta late and we were in bed, but she had to go on night watch. After she got up, without thinkin', I just said, 'we should get married.'" A smile warmed his features. "Then she laughed and said we could have a honeymoon in the break room by shovelin' in sand and sprayin' that Hawaiian breeze deodorizer. I asked if that was a yes and she said 'yeah, duh.'"

Gareth pressed his hands to his chest. "Aw, my heart's fluttering."

Alex laughed. "Shut the fuck up, man."

"How about the first kiss?"

He laughed again and rubbed the back of his neck. "Oh, that was… I made a total jackass of myself." They reached the stairwell and Alex stopped. "Remember Priscilla's funeral?"

"I'll never forget it."

"Theresa and I were the only ones left in the church and we got to talkin' for a while. Then I was an idiot and kissed her. She jerked away and told me wasn't ready for that, but wanted to be."

"I had no idea something good ever happened in that room." He squinted. "Was it one of you who put that locket on Priscilla's marker?"
His jaw clenched and he nodded. "Yeah, I did. What ever happened to it?"

"Got tossed because it wasn't hers. I figured you might have done it." He rested his back against the wall. "I should've left it. It was just a—"

"Gareth, this can't be another Terminus."

*Been waiting for that one.*

"I don't think it has to be. They're self-sustaining and in an ideal location."

"And we couldn't have been self-sustainable like they are?"

*Been waiting for that one too.*

He raised a hand. "*No. And what's done is done.*"

"You know, hindsight is twenty-twenty and while I was there, it wasn't so bad. I could deal just fine. I mean, me and Tess fell in love there. But if I heard it was magically rebuilt and cleaned up, I couldn't step foot back in there. I never wanna see it again."

"It's funny, I miss it less and less too. It was ours, though, and I do miss that. Waking up every morning knowing you're in your home? Can't beat that. I feel like I'm renting a room here. Another reason why sprucing it up didn't occur to me."

Alex began to reply when clanging coming up the stairs revealed a wild-eyed Naz.

"Did you see a guy come up here!?” Naz asked, vision darting around behind them. "Sort of tall, auburn hair, mid-thirties?"

"No one I've seen," Gareth answered.

She slumped against the wall and put a hand to her forehead. "Oh god, I must be crazy."

Alex slid over to her. "What's wrong? Who'd you see?"

She hit her the back of her head against the wall. "I swear I saw him. My Paul…"

"Your husband?"

"I must have finally lost it." She pushed herself forward. "You know? Just forget I was here, that —" More stomping up the steps revealed a man with scraggly auburn hair and he pushed Naz aside, sending her to the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Pretty much a filler chapter with a cliffhanger, I know. BUT everything is reaaaalllllyyy not what it seems, I can tell you that. :D
Ain't No One's Bitch

Chapter Notes

Holy early update, Batman!

Martin sat alone in the small library by their quarters and toked on his e-cigarette. He awaited further news of Gareth's interview after his and Alex's "incident"—as Gabby called it—with Naz's husband, Paul. Gareth informed Martin and the others they were going to deem Naz's sighting a hallucination to keep them on Gabby's side.

Paul had rushed off so quickly the three of them had no time to catch up. Either he was caught and ushered back in secret, or escaped the place. Whichever one, his poor spouse had been hysterical over being called a crazy by the two who saw him with their own eyes. Now the woman would be labelled insane.

Again, Gareth was going at a glacial pace. Always so meticulous with his plans and schemes. Sure, they made sense, but they knew one of Sipsey's secrets and were still sitting on their hands.

Before Martin knew it, he had stashed his e-cigarette in his pocket and was heading down the hall to Theresa's room. Alex had been assigned yet again to sweep the machinery room, so he figured she may be home. He tapped on the door and received no answer, but continued knocking until it swung open.

Theresa stood clutching the robe she wore to her chest. "What!? What the fuck is so important that you have to pound on my door and wake me up!? Huh!?"

Whoops.

"It's like nine-thirty," he backtracked.

She smoothed her bedhead. "I have hardly been able to get to sleep lately because I keep waking up to things like three assholes outside ready to kill Alex and me, or my bathtub turned into a blood bath. I had just finally nodded off and I'm awoken to you assaulting my door. So what? What is it you want at this very moment in time?"

"Alright, I'm sorry you were asleep. I just never thought anyone under sixty would be asleep at nine-thirty. I came about the vault."

"What about it? Did something happen?" She leaned forward and glanced up and down the hall.

"No, that's the problem. Don't you think we should just open it up? Or at least tell everyone about it? I get Gareth's tryin' to be as careful as possible 'cause of how he kept royally fuckin' us up before, but this is gettin' ridiculous."

She exhaled, rubbing her forehead. "You want to discuss this now?"

"Wouldn't Alex have woken you up when he got back anyway?"

"Yeah, I… I guess."
"So, why don't we just open the thing? Swipe Gabby's keys?"

"Because Gareth says it's too risky."

"No, see, we already know Naz wasn't cool with havin' her guy locked up in there. A few folks here probably got someone held up in there too." She shrugged. "That all? Come on, I came here 'cause I know we both—"

"What? Agree on everything?"

"More often than not I think we're on the same wavelength."

"Truthfully, I would love it if we could open up the vault and let hell loose, but he *is* our leader and I trust him. Have you bothered to tell him any of this?"

"No."

"Then tell him. You're not still afraid of him, are you?"

He sneered. "I was never afraid of him."

"Then tell *him* you feel this way."

"He never listens to me, you know that. Your opinion might carry some weight."

"No, you tell him if you feel that way. He doesn't seem to hate you as much as he used to. Unless..." She looked him up and down. "Before Alex left he mentioned that he thought you two were..." She grimaced.

He began to deny it, then realized it might make her think he was in fact afraid of him. "He's not wrong."

She sighed and bowed her head. "Is that why you want me to go tell him to hurry up? Worried if you do it he won't suck your dick that night?"

Martin slammed his hand on the doorframe though she didn't flinch. "No."

"Then stop acting like his bitch and tell him."

He slid his hand down the frame and back to his side. "Big fuckin' mistake thinkin' you'd be remotely useful."

Her face softened. "You've always been brutally honest with me. I just thought I owed you the same."

A squeak of the tile floor alerted him to Lucy standing several yards down the hall. He turned and started after her. "Hey! I bet you can get the magic key to the vault."

"Martin!" Theresa called.

Lucy stood frozen as he approached her.

"You can weasel in where-the-fuck-ever and get the key. Come on, you have to want this shit to be over with."

She shifted. "Well, I—I—"
"Well, I—I,' come on, damnit, let's get this show on the road."

Theresa trotted up to them. "Quit it! You're going to scare her off!" She turned to Lucy. "Ignore him, he's on a macho head trip."

Lucy backed up. "Theresa, you don't have to defend me. Not after what I did to you."

"I'm only defending you because you're helping us, I don't like you at all, but you were forced, so I'm trying not to hold it against you. Trying."

"Well, thanks, but... I do agree with him."

Martin threw his hands up. "See? Even she gets it. That's gotta mean somethin'."

"That's why I already swiped what I think is the key."

He squinted at her. "Don't yank my chain."

She shook her head. "No, no, I thought Gareth would be here, but you two might be better."

Theresa scoffed. "That tiny thing is not a key to the vault."

"Maybe not, but I want to check." She turned and scurried off down the hall, Martin following her.

"No!" Theresa shouted and rushed after them.

"Ignore her," Martin said.

Theresa caught up to his side. "At least get a weapon!"

"I got my switchblade, Lucky Star."

"You named your knife?" Lucy asked as they turned a corner.

"You'll never be able to use a weapon correctly if you can't bond with it in some way. Get to know its quirks and personal—"

Theresa grabbed his upper arm and pulled him to a stop. "Come on, let's not do this now. If you want to prove you're not Gareth's bitch, then fuck him in the ass, don't do this shit."

He jerked his arm free. "I ain't his bitch!"

"This is my decision!" Lucy protested. "You can stay here if you want or come and help end this. I mean, I'm so tired but I can't sleep. I tried to earlier and I couldn't because I thought about how Alex said I was brave. Braver than anyone here because I came to get help. I want to be brave."

Theresa stepped toward the other woman. "There's bravery, and there's stupidity."

"Weren't you the one who was tryin' to knock Gabby out?" Martin asked. "Stupid or brave?"

"Fun and satisfying, but stupid."

"Don't matter, we're goin' with or without you. So, you gonna run tattle to daddy or help us?" He looked to Lucy. "Come on, sunshine."

As he ventured off with Lucy, he worried Theresa would tackle him. Though he could toss her off
of him like a frisbee and she knew that.

The two reached the stairwell down to the third floor when an assortment of footsteps and talking drew near.

Lucy halted at the base. "Oh god, um, you and I hanging out together will look suspicious, um… oh, kiss me."

*Did she just say…?*

Martin laughed. "What? No."

"No, it'll make sense. I'm desperate and sad and you're comforting me. Just—" She stood up on her toes, pulled him down by his neck, and began planting a series of kisses on his lips.

He couldn't help kissing back with the way her mouth nipped along his lips and licked the tip of his tongue. Either she was an incredible actress, or there was sincerity behind her actions. Her figure was easy on the eye, but it had been hard to notice when her abysmal personality blocked it. Although he had a thing for those he clashed with. The best sex he and his ex-wife ever had was after their divorce. But of course, the finest example was Gareth.

*Gareth.*

Regardless that she instigated it, macking on Lucy would piss Gareth off for sure. Straying was acceptable, but with Lucy, their fragile golden ticket? He would be livid.

Martin wrapped his arms around Lucy's waist and pulled her against him. She brushed her hands through his hair and then down his back, making him shudder. The gaggle of people made it around the corner and one woman giggled.

They separated and Martin did his best to appear modest in front of the four. "Sorry, y'all. I know P.D.A. is frowned upon."

"No," a bald man said. "We just worried you might be eating her."

His eye twitched. "Ha-ha, hilarious. You can go now."

The group muttered and whispered to each other before moving on. When they were out of sight, Martin leaned down and went for Lucy's mouth again.

She pushed him back. "What the hell? You're a jerk to me, I didn't actually want to do that."

His thrill high fell a tad. "Oh, well, I'm sorry I made fun of you. I didn't think you were really gonna help. Thank you for all this. It's—"

"Let's just go." She whirled around began back downstairs.

Martin pouted and followed her down to the first floor. They slunk to the large metal door sealing the "storage area" and Lucy searched for the lock.

"If Naz's husband was in here," Martin began, sliding his hand across the door, "the fuck did he get out?"

"I don't know," she replied. "This thing was designed to need four different combinations to get in, but they decommissioned that and now it just has a few deadbolts and needs a key." She held up the item. "Hopefully this one."
"And why are you so sure it's that tiny thing?"

"Just a hunch. And I always noticed the new lock system looked normal. Maybe she did that on purpose to make it seem, like, less fishy." She slid the key in the lock and wiggled it. The way her chest moved had Martin regretting not copping a feel when he had the chance.

He took out his switchblade and got into position when footsteps made him freeze. Theresa appeared from around the corner, having changed into an oversized t-shirt and cargo shorts.

"Well, look who decided to come play after all," Martin said.

Theresa held up her razor blade and moved way to his side. "I want to see it."

"Glad you came to your senses."

Lucy turned the lock until it clicked, then pulled back the three deadbolts. She pushed against the heavy door, but it only budged. "Can you help me out?"

Martin and Theresa both pushed against the metal and it screeched open to reveal a pitch black room, but the light from the hall reflected off what looked to be a metal bed frame.

"If anyone's in there," Martin began in a low voice, "my name's Moses." Scuttling alerted him and he raised his knife.

"We're not here to hurt you!" Theresa shouted.

"We wanna—" Martin started when he felt Lucy's hands press on his shoulder blades. A large figure burst from the room and heaved him back, causing him to drop his weapon, topple over, and land flat on Lucy who yelped. Not how he had hoped to get her crying out from beneath him.

"Hey!" Theresa shrieked before a blonde female figure darted out and shoved her aside, making her lose her balance.

"Son of a bitch!" Martin exclaimed while he grabbed up his knife and struggled to his feet, the two escapees bolting down the hall with Theresa chasing after them.

"Hey!" Theresa's voice echoed down the corridor. "We want to help you! Stop!"

Martin chugged after Theresa without bothering to see if Lucy trailed behind him. After getting half way across the third floor, he stopped to catch his breath.

"I thought I was in better shape," he muttered to himself.

Living at Sipsey, having plenty to eat, and not being out and about constantly must have already had its effects. His mind flashed to the beer gut that had just begun creeping up on him before the turn. It had been a recurring joke in their family that the men got beer bellies when they neared thirty.

The emergency exit.

The escapees would head there instead of to the large and obvious main exit if they were smart. Jogging up the final levels, he made his way toward the emergency exit room. Its door was wide open as was the hatch inside. He slid his pocketknife between his teeth then climbed up the ladder and through the narrow tunnel that led outside. Someone had told him how it was designed to seal out radiation, but he tuned out most the explanation since he didn't care.
He took his knife back in his hand and came out the other side. Though the complex was hard to make out under the moonless sky, he saw the front gate ajar and began toward it. His throat had dried into sandpaper and he licked through his mouth to try to moisten it. It struck him odd that the place was so bare until he remembered most Sipseans were inside after news of Naz's "hallucination." Upon reaching the gate, he slid through it and heard a commotion in a nearby clearing.

Theresa was grabbing at the blonde girl while the other escapee—who looked to be missing an arm—tried to pull Theresa back one-handed.

"—can't believe this!" Theresa cried. "You bitch!" She took a swing and the girl pushed her back.

A stranger becoming one of Theresa's mortal enemies within ten minutes must be a record. Martin assumed the previous one had been eleven minutes.

"Yo! Knock it off!" Martin warned as he caught up to them, ready to stab the strangers if need be. "What the fuck, Theresa!?"

She whipped around to him. "You idiot! It's Beth!"

He squinted in the dim light and saw the wide-eyed girl backing away was indeed Beth. Next to her stood who made him think he might be dreaming—Tyreese. Tyreese who had one arm and had been trapped in Sipsey's vault.

"Oh, merry fuckin' Christmas to me!" Martin beamed. "How you been, man?" A sharp sting pierced his neck and he raised his hand to find something stuck in his skin. "The fuck!?"

He turned away from the compound to the encroaching woodlands to see several more objects firing into Theresa, Tyreese, and Beth.
Southern Hospitality

Alex didn't care how it happened. How Martin and Lucy had urged Theresa to crack open the vault, how she and Martin had chased two people through Sipsey and beyond the gate. Or how Lucy arrived too late and found the front gate ajar and the four gone. He didn't even care that Gareth had at last confronted Gabby about the vault's existence. Nor did he care that the woman had been ousted and many of her people fell into dismay. Alex didn't care, he only wanted to find Theresa, then he would deal with the rest of the world.

"Theresa!" he yelled, standing a ways outside the complex following countless laps around the place.

Hours had passed with no sign. The knot in his stomach tightened with every minute and pins and needles hit his center whenever he thought of whatever danger or pain she might be in. His conclusion was the escaped two had taken Theresa and Martin somewhere. Yet how they got so out of range in such a hurry was beyond him.

Examining the dark wilderness, he caught a glimpse of Cynthia and Albert searching for clues many yards away and imagined it to be Theresa. Imagined finding her and all being right again—the same sweet reunion scenarios he played in his head after Terminus fell.

And he vowed they would again come true.

Alex spotted Gabby making her way to the sparse crowd inside the fence. They gathered around her as she neared and exclamations echoed throughout the landscape. He jogged toward the gate planning to demand she allow them weapons and a vehicle for searching. Gareth had chosen to feature himself as a prime player and approached Gabby through the crowd. Upon getting in hearing range, Alex attempted to push through the assembly when, despite himself, he paused to hear what he was telling her.

"This is exactly what you wanted to happen," Gareth accused Gabby, pointing at her stiffened face. "Get rid of Theresa and Martin, the loose cannons. I bet if it weren't for Lucy to back them up, you'd have a perfect cover story for this, wouldn't you?"

Gabby folded her arms, eyes darting around the crowd. "I have my reasons for having them in there. I'm not able to tell you what they—"

"I knew that place wasn't a storage area!" a booming male voice shouted.

Gabby sighed and looked back to Gareth. "I can't believe you think I'd be so stupid as to put Theresa and Martin in there. No cover story would've worked for—" She peered behind Gareth's shoulder at Naz making her way over. "Oh, Naz, I can tell you—all of you—everything if you'll just listen." She scratched her head.

Naz held her hands in her pockets and stopped beside Gareth. "You said I hallucinated when you know I didn't. Why, why did you do that?" Her voice shook. "You could've... we could've..."

Gareth raised his hand. "I know, and I'm sorry. I also she is very conniving, I was trying to get as much in her good graces as I could. Catch her off guard."

"Like I believed your bullshit," Gabby barked.

Alex began to yell his demand when Naz edged her way over to the other women. "I, um, I found
this outside the gate, I guess it was Theresa or Martin's..." She pulled a switchblade from her pocket and plummeted it into Gabby's chest—right through her heart.

Oh, shit.

Considerable time had passed since he had seen someone die. And while his usual course of action was to bury the horror, his despair over Theresa made the ugliness pale in comparison.

The mob erupted and Alex came close to being knocked over. He pushed back out through the people and came out the other side, then yelled for Gareth.

"Alex!" a familiar squeaky voice called. "It's over!"

He turned to see a chipper Lucy by his side and replied, "It ain't over! My wife and Martin are god knows where with who knows who. And you know what? You're gonna help us find 'em whether you like it or not. This is partly your fault."

She gulped. "Well, it's not, like, all my fault. They chose to go with me."

"Yeah, and don't think I ain't unbelievably pissed at Theresa for doin' somethin' so stupid and even more pissed at Martin 'cause he's always gotta go draggin' other people through the mud with him. But I don't care, I just wanna find 'em. Find her." He paused, spotting his brother breaking out of the crowd before looking back. "And you started this, so you help end it. We can all head out right now."

"Alex!" Gareth called, catching up to the two. "Where did you see Cynthia and Albert last?"

"Over there," Lucy answered for him, pointing to the gate behind her.

"We should get 'em then," Alex said, grabbing Lucy's wrist and starting off toward the exit.

"They're comin' with us."

Gareth trailed alongside them. "Alex, just stop and think for a minute."

He halted and Lucy tried to pull her wrist free, but he held her in place. "Gareth, I don't give a fuck about takin' this place! It can cave in for all I care. I just wanna find her. You can stay here and play your fuckin' political games. You know, no one would want you to lead anyway, you gotta know that. No one here really likes you that much. I'm not sayin' that to insult you, it's just how it is."

Gareth's jaw clenched. "That's not what I was going to say."

Alex sank into himself. "Oh. I'm sorry, man."

"I was going to say, let's gather our thoughts first, then we go find them."

"Gareth!" Albert's voice rang from by the gate. He, along with Cynthia raced toward them, throwing nervous glances at the dispersing crowd.

"What are we gonna do!?" Cynthia cried, raising her hand to her forehead. "I think I saw what happened over there and—"

"Sipsey can wait until we get our people back."

* * *
The last thing Theresa remembered was a sharp pain piercing her neck. Her head spun with the memory, trying to make sense of a bitter reunion with Beth and Tyreese leading to waking in a strange place.

"That's not Lucy!" a gravelly male voice broke through her confusion.

"I'm sorry, Mark," a shaky higher male voice responded. "You said small and blonde, so—"

"Dangit!"

Theresa opened her eyes and the blurry outline of a sunlit window came into view. Attempting to turn, the hardness beneath her signaled she was on the floor.

What? she tried to utter aloud.

Her vision zeroed in on a black pair of shoes above her, and further inspection revealed they belonged to an unconscious Martin.

She pulled her half asleep arm from beneath her and shook his shoe. "Martin, get—get up…"

"That one's awake," the higher-voiced man said.

Theresa pulled herself forward and continued shaking Martin's ankle. "Martin!" She turned her head to the side and spotted two blond men standing on the other side of steel bars. One appeared middle-aged and the other resembled the departed Skylar.

"Well, hey, there," the Skylar look-alike said. "Mark, ma—maybe we trade for them. They give us Lucy and we—"

"I'm not giving them back," Mark broke in. "I'm sorry I raised my voice, but you know we can't."

"Y—you… fuckers…" Theresa muttered, her eyes settling on an unconscious Beth and Tyreese in the corner by the bars. "Fuckers!" She pushed herself up and rattled Martin's ankle.

"Hey? M'am?" Mark said, stepping toward the bars.

"Martin, get up!" she urged, shaking him harder. He made a low noise. 

He'll kill me for this…

She leaned forward and smacked him across the face. Though it was something she had wanted to do many times before, there was no time to enjoy it.

Martin bolted up and almost collided with Theresa before she pulled back. "Hey!" he exclaimed before seeing Tyreese and Beth, and then the bars. "What is this? What is this shit!?" He staggered to his feet and Theresa grabbed onto him to help herself up.

"Now calm down, you two," Mark said as Theresa backed away a few feet. "M'am, tell me your name."

"I'm going to fucking kill you," Theresa replied.

"Alright, I'm going to effing kill you,' my name is Mark."
Martin dipped his hand into his pockets. "Where's my—where's my blade!?"

"Oh yes, that. We took that along with an odd-looking device and razor on your friend there."

Martin lurched for the bars and reached through, causing Mark and the other man to move back. "Come on!" he yelled. "Open the fuckin' door and take me like a man! Let's do this!"

Mark frowned and shook his head as if Martin were a disappointing test subject.

Tyreese began to come to beside Beth, but Theresa felt compelled to check out the window. While Martin continued to shout obscenities and shake the bars, she hopped up on the scraggly twin bed underneath the high window and peered out. Small town scenery including several colorful, quaint buildings and a small parking lot filled her vision. Then when she saw it; a red sedan with a West Virginia license plate.

"No…" she muttered over the continued commotion. "No." She whirled around. "Where are we!?"

"Yeah," Martin echoed. "What she said."

"Just outside Charleston, West Virginia," Mark replied, crossing his hands behind his back.

Theresa hopped off the bed. "No, no, no, let us go! We have a group! We're from—"

"Sipsey. We know."

"Then take us the fuck back!" Martin demanded.

"I can't do that. We're in the process of building something here. Better than that place. It's just… my daughter, Lucy, is there and—"

"That's your daughter?" Tyreese's voice broke in, having had propped himself up while Beth still slept. "Why'd you want her back?"

"I know she can be a problem," Mark said. "After what poor Paul said she did to him, I'm even more worried. Gabby was always letting her have her way after we got married and—"

"What are you talking about?" Theresa asked. "Gabby's the one in charge there. She's been treating Lucy like a slave."

Mark laughed. "Oh, my. My Lucy's a smart girl, been playing a game, I see. That's why I want her back. To save her from that part of herself. Once and for all."

This was not happening—it had to be a dream. Theresa began to pinch her wrist when she recalled she was wearing one of Alex's shirts, having thrown it on in a hurry to go after Lucy and Martin.

Alex.

It was daytime and she had been gone all night, meaning Alex had no idea where she was or if she were alive or dead.

She rushed over to the bars, panic rising in her throat. "I have to get back to my husband."

Mark's face fell. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't think you might be—"

"I have to get back!"
"Yeah, man," Martin started, "you took us away from our people. You can't do this shit!"

"We're really sorry," the other man spoke up. "We don't like sepera—"

Theresa pounded on the bars. "Let me out! Let me out! Let me out! Let me out! Let me out!"

* * *

Mark had the audacity to ask Theresa and Martin to be "calm" and use "polite language." While the two remained anything but, Beth and Tyreese had been taken out due to their "good attitude."

"We'd like to talk to you four together," Mark had said. "And I can assure you trying to act violently or trying to run won't be of any use. Our walls here are thick."

The man reeked of artificiality. A bland slab of bubblegum candy packaged in a mass-produced plastic wrapper. Theresa's stomach growled at the thought of candy. An earlier promise of lunch eventually had her and Martin agreeing to comply. Mark and the Skylar look-like—whose name she learned was Joseph—ushered them out of the cellar turned makeshift jail and through a well-decorated upscale home. Sipsey was nice, luxurious even, but the house was adorned with colorful rugs, paintings, and furniture boasting pallets from every shade of the rainbow. Its vividness nearly burned Theresa's eyes.

A round clock over the yellow-painted dining room table read 11:45 and Theresa's heart sank. Twelve hours—they'd been gone for more than twelve hours. She was supposed to have gone to sleep with Alex by her side, then awoken to another typical Sipsey day with more of Gareth's schemes. Instead, she had followed Martin and Lucy on a gut impulse.

Lucy. The woman was a liar and a manipulator. And there was no way to tell the rest of their group the truth.

Theresa balled her fists together as Mark and Joseph sat her and Martin down in the breakfast nook across from Beth and Tyreese. The rival two's faces no longer bore smudges of dirt, making their placid expressions all the more visible.

"Well, um," Joseph began, fidgeting, "I had brunch so I'm gonna go for my assignments. Is that okay, Mark?"

Mark chuckled. "Of course. Go on along."

Joseph gave an excited smile before turning the corner and going upstairs. Theresa pondered what assignment on the second floor had the moron grinning.

"It's lovely to have lunch together," a cheery older woman said, appearing from the fanciful kitchen area.

Doppelgangers came in twos that day, because she looked remarkably like Mary. She had long, reddish hair worn in a braid, and loose clothing including an ankle-length pale green skirt. Theresa dug her nails into her palm and tried to ignore it.

"If there's one thing I can't stand, it's mismatched meals. People eating here or there, whenever and wherever it suits them, oh, I just don't like it. Breakfast, brunch if you have it, lunch, and dinner should always be shared with other people."

"Absolutely," the woman agreed, then raised her hands to her cheeks. "Oh, where are my manners?
My name's Sarah."

None of the four hostages said a word, but Sarah smiled and headed back to the kitchen. Dishes and silverware clinked as she hummed a tune.

Theresa flexed her fingers on the table when Martin said, "Looks like you—" he stopped to clear his throat, his voice a tad hoarse. "—lost somethin', Ty."

"Just kept on bein' lucky," Tyreese replied without looking at him.

Mark scanned the four of them as if jotting down notes in his head. Theresa's eyes switched to Beth and she made a point to stare, burning red-hot energy into her until she looked back. Beth looked her up and down as Theresa licked through her mouth and then her lips, hoping to psych her out. No, she couldn't leap across the table and strangle either of them, but she could still remind them she the predator. Letting go the three at the cabin aside, she was a butcher and those two knew it for a fact. Might as well remind them.

Sarah reappeared carrying a tray full of five steaming mugs with tea strings and began setting them out for everyone. Upon closer examination, Theresa noticed her eyes were almost the same shade of blue as Mary's.

Stop looking like her!

Theresa imagined throwing the piping hot beverage in her face to burn away the woman's resemblance.

Sarah headed back to the kitchen and Mark pulled on his cup's tea string, saying, "I understand there's some animosity between you. Tyreese and Beth versus Theresa and Martin. I do know—"

"Tell us about Lucy," Theresa interrupted.

"In time. Now, everyone who comes here is the same at first. Hostile, resistant, disbelieving, eager to escape. But in time you'll realize the gift of this place. Not just that it has lights and running water, but the kind of love and community people in the old world could only dream of." He smiled, illustrating oddly symmetrical wrinkles across his face.

"You know," Martin began, tapping his nails on a mug that read '#1 Teacher,' "this is the second time I've been abducted by a gang self-righteous assholes and force-fed a pile a bullshit. Second."

"Mine too," Beth said with a hint of venom.

Theresa quirked her brow. "Look who grew teeth."

"Don't," Tyreese warned.

Theresa met his hard stare for a moment before looking to Mark. "Your daughter tricked my people into thinking she was an innocent victim. Please let us go back. You separated me from my husband. His name is Alex, and I know he's in hell worried about me."

"Oh, I'm really sorry about that," Mark said. "Alex… what's he look like?" He raised his mug and took a cautious sip. "Next time we're around there we can keep an eye out."

"No! No, you're not bringing him here. You're letting us out."

"Keep them," Martin said, motioning to Beth and Tyreese. "The fuck you need us for? Look at 'em,
you can make him a metal arm with a hook he can gank biters with it. And she can take care of a bunch of kids or somethin'. Me and her?" He gestured to Theresa. "No, no, I don't play ball with strange groups and she's one of those chicks who can't function without her man."

Theresa whipped her head to him and glared, opening her mouth to argue when he gave her a wink. He was trying to haggle and her reaction gave it away.

*Damnit.*

"Nice try," Mark said. "It *was* a very creative argument, so I'll give you points for that."

"Just let us the fuck outta here," Martin griped.

He raised his hands. "Martin, there's no need to keep using harsh and vulgar language. It's not constructive and only spreads the flames of anger."

Martin folded his arms on the table and stared him dead-on. "How about you go ahead and open up your mouth so I can jam my cock down your throat and fuck it till you guzzle my hot jizz?"

Theresa stifled a smile and Beth's face contorted. It dawned on her that in Beth's brief time with them, Martin had been mostly dejected due to Gareth's humiliation of him. The thought of Beth experiencing Martin in all his crassness had Theresa suppressing another smile. At least she had Beth's discomfort to take solace in.

Mark clasped his hands together and let out a sigh. "Don't make me have to take away your dessert after dinner."

Was he kidding? Theresa studied his face for a sign of sarcasm but saw only sincerity. Though surely it was a joke.

"You can't keep people here," Tyreese interrupted, leaning forward in his chair. "You can't make 'em live how you want and where you want. It never works and it always falls apart. I know this. I've *lived* this."

It pained her to do so, but Theresa agreed, "We all have people we need to get back to. That's not something anyone just forgets about."
Gareth perched beside Alex on the back of the parked van by the side of the rural road. Dark circles marred Alex's under eyes and Gareth felt the weight of sleep deprivation as well. Neither he nor his brother, Cynthia, Albert, or Lucy had slept since the previous night's ordeal. Though Gareth had always taken longer to show the physical and mental signs of exhaustion and deemed his mind still sharp enough to function.

He patted Alex on the shoulder. "Theresa can make it through anything."

Alex gave a nod and kept his eyes on the ground. "I know, but I feel like we're goin' in circles. We don't got a clue where they might've gone. Or if they maybe got back to Sipsey by now."

"If so, they'll find us, you know that. You saying you wanna go back?"

"No, I couldn't go back if... maybe we could split up or... somethin'" He buried his head in his hands.

Although it pained him to do so, he knew he had to ask, "What do you want to do?"

He raised his head. "What? I don't know. I just know I don't... know." He glanced over his shoulder to the front seat. "Man, you think Albert and Cynthia are done with lunch yet? Sick of waiting."

"Don't know. But how much of yours did you eat?"

"Enough, mom." He began to smile before a flash of pain crossed his face. "I, um, I had enough."

Gareth started to reply when he spotted Lucy a few yards away kicking at the blooming spring grass beside the asphalt. "Hang on." He got up and made his way over to her. She turned as he approached and folded her arms. "What are you kicking at?" he asked, focusing on the fresh turn of dirt by her feet.

Lucy looked down. "Huh? Oh, nothing, just a piece of quartz. I'm ready to go."

He looked her over. "Why'd you bury it?"

She edged back. "I—I don't like quartz. Let's go." She began past him when he held his arm out in front of her.

"Try that again."

"Hey," Alex called, hurrying over to the two. "What y'all's hold up?"

Gareth lowered his arm. "Lucy's bothered by quartz." He stepped over to the patch and unearthed a dart with a red end. "Why were you covering this?" He knelt down, picked it up, and dusted it off. Lucy remained silent.

"Hey!" Alex barked. "Answer the question."

She hugged herself tighter. "I—I don't know, I was just... it bugged me and—"
Gareth slid in front of her and held up the item between his left hand's ring and pinky finger. "These are tranquilizer darts, why were you covering them?"

Alex reeled forward and grabbed her by the shoulders, making her yelp. "What did you do to her!?"

"Whoa, Alex!" Gareth held up his free hand. "Dial it down a notch. Don't make assumptions." Alex complied and released her. "Lucy, what are these about?"

"What the hell is going on!?!" Albert demanded as he and Cynthia came jogging up from the van.

"Get that rope," Gareth ordered. "Tie her hands and feet."

"What!?!" Lucy cried.

"Okay then, talk. You're on our side. If you're keeping something from us, we're going to find out one way or another."

"I—I, oh god, okay, it's my dad. He's still out there I think. And—and he takes people sometimes and uses those to knock them out. I guess they threw it out the window as they went by. I just..." She sniffled. "Didn't want to have to see him again. I got away from him and—"

"He took Theresa and Martin?"

"Maybe. He must want me back and he and his have been around here."

"And how, how long were you going to sit on this, huh?!"

"I—I'm sorry. It didn't cross my mind because he hadn't been here in so, so, so long."

"Tell us where he's held up and I just might not do something unpleasant."

"I don't know where he is. They move around."

He raised the syringe and analyzed the needle. "Wrong answer."

"No! I swear they do!"

Alex unsheathed his revolver and pressed it against Lucy's neck. "Wrong answer again." She froze at the touch of the gun and her eyes grew wide.

"Alex!" Gareth exclaimed. "Keep it dialed down. She can't tell us where they are if she's dead."

He removed the weapon from her neck but kept it pointed at her. "Just know I can do it."

Her chin trembled. "I'm still on your side. I'm sorry, I would've come around and told you eventually, I swear. You don't want to do anything... unpleasant though. We're allies, remember?"

Albert and Cynthia stepped beside Gareth, Albert saying, "Yeah, but we are the crazy people-eaters, you know."

"So, you're a liar," Gareth said. "A liar who's going to lead us to them. And no, before you start, I don't care if you 'don't know' where they are. You know your dad and you can find him." He cocked his head to the side. "Cynthia, Albert, tie her hands."

She frowned as Cynthia and Albert started toward the van. "But I'm not—"
"Can't have you running off."

"We just need to get outta here already," Alex said. "Been wastin' our time when you could've told us this in the first place."

Lucy pursed her lips until she broke out laughing. "Oh my god, you're so stupid!"

The girl must have gone mental, Gareth figured. Fear did that.

"Fooled you," she declared in a sing-song voice, arching her eyebrows. "So, did I lay it on too thick? Dumb, blonde bimbo? I worried it was a little over the top, but you bought it so I guess not." She cackled and raised her hands to her mouth.

Her maniacal laughter pierced his ears, sending a flush of heat throughout his body. Much like Bob's laughter when he declared their group stupid for failing to check him for bites.

_No. Not happening._

"Oh, come on, don't look so surprised," Lucy continued through her laughing fit. "You really think someone as dumb as who I was playing could survive in this day and age? Please." She rolled her eyes. "I'm not Gabby's bitch, you morons. I was playing _her_. She wasn't into you or Alex either. Why would she be?"

The ridiculous woman had fooled them. For why and what purpose Gareth didn't know, all he knew is the slice of humiliation burned like acid. He drew his fist back and clocked her across the cheek as hard as he could. She squeaked, staggered back and Alex pressed the gun against her neck again. Cynthia and Albert returned and held her arms behind her back.

"No, no!" she cried, a small smirk remaining on her face. "If you even bruise me up, my dad will never give Martin and Theresa back!"

Gareth recalled the dart in his other hand and slid the needle down her cheek, leaving a stripe of oozing blood. She squeaked again. "I wasn't going to negotiate with him," he said, bringing the point back. "I was going to mow him and his down and take my people back."

Lucy forced a smile. "There's more of them than there are of you, and you know Sipsey doesn't give a shit about you, they won't help you sick fuckers. You're too big for your britches, Gareth. I know it, Gabby the moron bitch knew it, and even your brother and dumb and dumber behind me know it."

Alex shoved the gun against her neck and she pressed her eyes shut. " Shut up."

"We're going to kill you, Lucy," Gareth said. "After you find your dad and we kill him in front of you, you'll die. But we'll make it quick for him and you _if_ you comply."

"You won't kill him!" she spat. "He has way too many people."

"You keep givin' the wrong answers," Cynthia interjected, she and Albert twisting the girl's arm until her face crumpled.

Gareth traced the needle just above the surface of Lucy's other cheek. "Why don't I pummel you, Alex pummels you, and dumb and dumber pummel you until you give the _right_ answer?"

* * *
The surplus of information Theresa learned made her head ache. It was too much to absorb at once.

She, Martin, Beth, and Tyreese—however the hell he ended up in Sipsey of all places—had been abducted and taken to the outlying area of Charleston, West Virginia, and Lucy was some kind of evil mastermind behind Sipsey. But worst of all was Alex being unaware if his love was alive or dead. He would be hurting and it tore at Theresa's chest, unable to tell him she was okay and Lucy was the enemy.

Her hands clenched the shirt of his she wore and she inhaled his lingering scent. Mark and a chipper male and female guard led her and the three other captives through the neighborhood streets. Walls lined the considerable section of Charleston's suburbs and sealed in the community, she learned. Apparently, their new society hinged on holding their citizens prisoner.

The stretch of homes were painted in the same candy colors as the house's inside, a surreal sight against the desolate background that lay beyond their walls. People dressed in casual and equally colorful clothes grinned and waved at them as they walked by. Theresa was ready to punch their faces in.

Pouring bleach down Mark's throat was her plan if she could get around to it before she escaped. Though there was also the matter of Beth and Tyreese whom she had a feeling she and Martin might have to conspire with to escape. After that, she was unsure what to do. Getting back to Alex and her people took priority over everything, even her hatred of the members of Rick's posse.

"You three could use a change of clothes," Mark said, strolling in front of the group. "Something better than those depressing things you have on now."

Theresa would take drab over an orange blazer and forest green pants like dear Mark's any day.

"No," Theresa protested, gripping the hem of her shirt. "I'm not changing out of Alex's shirt."

"Oh, we won't take it from you. You can sleep in it at night until we can get a hold of him."

"He's not coming here!"

Although, if he and the others learned the truth about Lucy, they would burn the earth beneath their feet to get to them. She hoped she would escape before that happened.

"Well, you know," Martin began, "you gave Bethie a wash, but she still looks like she's been workin' in them Appalachian coal mines." He reached for her face and Tyreese grabbed his wrist.

The group came to a sharp halt and the two guards at last stopped smiling.

"Don't," Tyreese said to Martin through clenched teeth.

"Ah-ah," Mark warned, waving his finger. "We don't have any of that here. You can put those violent impulses to bed."

Martin's conceited expression mixed with one of pain as his wrist quaked in Tyreese's grip.

Beth stepped to her friend's side. "Tyreese, it's okay."

He held on a moment longer before letting go. "Be glad we ain't alone, man."

Martin flexed his freed wrist. "Aw, you gonna leave me half-dead again? I'm terrified, quarterback"
"Martin," Theresa began with a sigh, "put your goddamned dick away." He met her stare and clenched his jaw, then took a step back.

For once, he listens. Martin wasn't a total moron, surely he had to know furthering the animosity between them would hurt their chances of escape.

"Goodness," Mark said with a grim face. "I can tell Martin and Tyreese have a troublesome past, but..." He looked Theresa and Martin across. "May I ask if you two were once... involved?"

Theresa recoiled. "Ew, god no."

"Jesus Christ, no," Martin echoed.

Mark raised his hands. "Alright then, my apologies. Well, I'm sure you're probably wondering about our situation here. Continue walking with me." He began off again and the six followed. "I like to think we're good Samaritans and that all of this is a gift. The outbreak, the mayhem, the fall of civilization. It's not the end, it's a new beginning. Finally, we're able to do what we've always wanted to do: build a place where the only thing we need is to love one another."

Theresa's meager brunch rolled in her stomach.

"It's a shame most of had to die for this to happen," he continued, throwing a smile toward the blue sky. "But when you're here, you can allow it all to wash away. All the pain you've experienced, the pain you've caused. It's finally over. I don't believe in any religion we used to hold, only what I see in front of me. And what I see is a new beginning. We're going to at last end it all."

"Wow," Martin said. "I mean, wow. What I see in front of me is you fuckers are gonna die. Y'all don't get it yet, but you will."

Mark stopped and the others followed suit. "I'm so sorry, Martin. I can't imagine the amount of pain that's made you this way."

Martin glared daggers at him, a look so vicious it almost scared even Theresa.

Mark stepped toward Tyreese. "And you, I can see it in your eyes. The appendage you've lost pales in comparison to what else you have. But don't you see? You've been given a second chance. That's why you're still here. You're strong."

"Don't ever act like you know," Tyreese shot back. "You don't know"

"What happens to the ones who aren't strong enough?" Beth asked. "I don't buy what you're sellin'."

"Hopefully, you won't have to find out," Mark replied, glancing away. "At least not for a while."

Theresa's eyes flitted to the blade the male guard held in his holster. Perhaps she could grab it and take him out. Tyreese and Beth could hold off the others while she and Martin made a run for it.

"You have such a maternal look about you," the male guard said to her, a warm smile brightening the most blemish-free face she had seen since the turn. "Beautiful."

She squinted at him, noting creases of settled foundation by his nose. "I'm going to rip your larynx out."


Beth lurched forward, yanking the guard's knife from his holster and taking a swing at him. He
dodged it, knocked it from Beth's hand, and restrained her.

"Don't you touch her!" Tyreese yelled and shoved the guard back, freeing Beth. Martin took the opportunity, pushed the female guard, and bolted for the back fence.

"You can't run from our open arms!" Mark yelled as Martin hurried away.

Get me out of here!

Theresa clocked Mark in the jaw and he faltered to the side. She cracked a slight smile as she shook her stinging fist and dashed across the pavement behind Martin toward the back wall. Wailing made her glance over her shoulder to see the two guards weeping over the injured Mark, and Beth and Tyreese nowhere in sight.

A familiar sharp sting then struck the back of her shoulder and she swore, pulling out the syringe and chucking it aside.

No, no, no, no...

If she could will away the drug's imminent effects, she and Martin could get over the fence and he could maybe drag her away. Her swift feet turned the corner around a baby blue house to two female residents holding a lethargic Martin in place. They spouted some nonsense about it being 'okay' and to 'let it go.'

"Get off him!" Theresa screamed as she barreled forward.

"It's okay, Theresa," the smaller of the two women assured her. "Your friend won't be harmed."

"He's not my—" She stumbled over a garden hose, a wave of drowsiness overcoming her. The rest was a blur.

Chapter End Notes

FYI, Theresa and Martin's relationship is 100% platonic and always will be, but couple jokes are always hilarious so I had to.

The Samaritans are inspired by the Jasmine arc in late season four of Angel (I binge watched it last year). It's such an amazing concept and inspired me so much I had to try a similar idea in this story. I thought something like it would be very interesting for the Walking Dead world. Whatcha think, readers?
Alex sat on the pavement against the side of the windowless van, examining the blood that stained his knuckles—Lucy's blood. He did indeed pummel her as Gareth had said to, not as hard as he could, but enough to give her a bloody nose. It sated his anger in the moment but ultimately fell flat as it always did.

"So," Albert began, climbing out of the van's ajar doors and stopping beside Alex, "looks like our best bet is West Virginia."

"Need somethin' more specific than that," Alex replied without looking up. "You get a shot on her?"

"Oh, uh, no."

"You should."

"Well, I figured that you—"

He met Albert's eyes. "Man, you gotta do these things. What if it was Cynthia missing? You knock her upside the head then?"

"Alex, I—"

"No, don't avoid this stuff. You gotta get your hands dirty."

"They're plenty dirty."

"I mean don't stand off and let other people do the hard shit and hope you don't have to."

He put his hand on the vehicle. "Did I do something to piss you off?"

"N—no, no, you didn't." He looked back down. "I just—"

"I was at Terminus too."

"Yeah, I know you were, man." He rose to his feet. "But even Cynthia took a shot at Lucy. And it presents a united front, you know. Shows we got no weak links."

Albert nodded. "Gareth tell you that?"

"No, but it's what he's thinkin'. Can just about always tell what he's thinkin'." He circled around Albert and slipped back inside the van.

Lucy sat inside bound and gagged, her face beginning to swell and turn black and blue after an hour of interrogation by fists and blades. Yet the words she used to slice at them were harsher—especially toward Alex. Though it was fine with him. She could insult his grammar, his artistic ability, and accuse him of being unable to please Theresa in bed, fine. The woman's opinion mattered less than a fly he swatted at.

But when her first words when Gareth slipped her gag out were, "You know, Theresa's such a dumb bitch," Alex's blood began to steam.

"Oh, Lucy," Gareth started, crouching by her side, "forgive me, but... I know you are, but what is
"Let me have at her with the needle again," Cynthia requested.

"No, I should do it," Albert said, climbing back into the vehicle.

"Oh, yay, Albert!" Lucy fake cheered. "Look who reached between his legs and found a pair."

Alex felt bad for Albert considering his apparent crush on Lucy. Theresa was—to Alex's mild annoyance—the first woman he knew Albert had affections for. Who was fourteen years older and tied down. Beth might have been a suitable match if she hadn't been lied to and tricked by their group. And Lucy, who turned out to be yet another enemy. The enemy who had his former interest, Beth, and the infamous Tyreese, locked up a few floors beneath where they slept.

Albert trudged over and sat on his knees before Lucy. "Not impressed with your wit."

"Thought you'd at least want something to hit me over," Lucy said.

"Already have a reason." He struck her across her cut cheek and her head jerked to the side.

She looked back to him and moved her jaw. "Even Cynthia hit better than that."

Gareth gripped Martin's switchblade by his feet and leaned in to Lucy's ear. "You've told some good info so far. Running away with Skylar from your dad, looking for your impressionable mother-in-law who after a miraculous reunion felt so bad about replacing your aging mother that she let you do whatever you want. Family politics." He scoffed. "You'd think this sort of thing wouldn't spill over into things as serious as running an underground community, not anymore, but you and your family have stayed just as pathetic. So, what's he doing with Martin and Theresa?"

"Beth told me lots about you, Albert," she deflected. "I mean, she and Tyreese told me about Terminus when I'd put all the pieces together, but—"

He leaned back. "You know about Terminus?"

"The 'sanctuary,' the thugs, the traincars full of meals? Yep, all of it. I thought it was incredible."

She shifted, trying to move her legs. "My freak out when I overheard it was good, right?"

"Excellent." Gareth sighed.

"I don't judge, I promise. It blew my mind, but I'm not sitting here thinking bad of you for it."

"Thanks. What's your dad's intentions?"

She stared Albert dead-on. "I know you had it bad for Beth. And you'd been looking at my rack too, hilarious. Beth also told me she could tell you liked Theresa." Her voice rose upon Theresa's name as if she were tossing it at Alex. "I mean, I don't get why her. She's already started to age on her face and it's not gracefully. She's clearly trying to hold onto the youth she's rapidly losing by choosing him." He gestured her head toward Alex. "I know six years isn't a huge difference, but..."

Alex gulped and grit his teeth, trying to place how she knew their ages when he recalled the information sheets they filled out at Sipsey.

Albert formed a fist and pushed out his middle knuckle. "I never tried this before." He hit her square in the nose and she let out a strained breath.

"I like pain," she said, a smile mixing with contorted features. "It's good. Hey, Alex?"
Alex flicked off a piece of dried blood from his fingernail. "Yes, honey?"

She laughed. "You know what else Beth told me? That one night when she was with you guys in some old house, she woke up and found Albert with his ear pressed against the wall of the room you and Theresa were in. What, oh, what could he have been listening to?"

Albert turned to him and mouthed, "I didn't," but Alex kept his expression straight.

"Lucy," Gareth began, holding up the blade, "I doubt Beth would never have told you that if it happened. Unless she's a construction worker and she's been fooling us, too."

"How much did you get off to that, Albert?" Lucy continued. "You'd probably done it countless times. No matter how discreet they were, you'd find them. Wishing so much it was you dicking her, making her moan so, so, so whorishly loud. Beth told me she was noisy."

Alex grit his teeth harder and kept his eyes on his hands.

"Shut her up, please," Gareth ordered.

Albert punched her a few more times, rougher and sloppier than before. "What's your dad's plan!?"

Lucy hacked. "Alex, how many times you think he's gotten off thinking about your wife? You really think it was an innocent schoolboy crush? There's no accounting for his taste, but have you ever really thought about what the guy next door is thinking about your girl? And after hearing that live show, it's amazing his hand didn't freeze in a claw form."

Alex's cheeks burned hot and his hand twitched toward the revolver in his holster.

Cynthia edged over and slapped her. "Where are they!?"

"I know you don't want to believe me, Alex!" Lucy spat. "You all thought Martin was the pervert, but no, it's sweet little Albert. Beth went looking for Albert and found him by your room's door. I know this because she said you kept saying 'that's my girl,' and Theresa was saying some what I'm sure is nonsense about you having such a good, big cock."

Alex squeezed his eyes shut. No, Beth must have overheard them and said Albert was there. But why would Beth lie? Even with a knife to her throat?

Albert began striking her again. "Shut up! Shut up!"

"Albert!" Gareth yelled and pulled him off her.

"And she said she saw a bulge in his pants!" she choked out. "And she thinks they might have been undone!"

That was it. Alex pulled the revolver from his pocket, sprang forward, pressed it to her temple, and pulled the trigger. It clicked. He did a double take and saw the safety was on. The van had gone dead quiet as all eyes were planted on him.

Lucy broke the silence and burst out laughing. Alex set the gun down and scrambled out of the van. Heaving through breaths, he clenched his fists to quell their shaking and turned the corner around the vehicle. He slogged along the side of the road and waited for Gareth to come give him a piece of his mind. If he hadn't been lucky, he would have just ruined their chances of getting Theresa and Martin back.
"Alex!" Albert called. Alex continued moving and fought back the moisture forming in his eyes. Albert caught up to him and said, "Hey, listen, I told Gareth I'd talk to you. And I'm—I never meant for any—"

"No." He refused to look back at him. "We don't even acknowledge what she says. Not a word."

"Okay, but what she said, I heard things, but I never—I didn't go out of my way to—"

Images of Albert listening in on him and Theresa forced their way through and Alex halted. He whipped around and punched Albert across the jaw. Albert stumbled back and clutched his face. They both froze for a moment while Alex flexed his hand and his eyes grew wide. "Oh... Albert, god I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

He shook his head. "No, it's okay."

"No, it's not, man. I'm sorry." He reached for his face but Albert backed away.

He had truly fucked up this time—twice in a row. Maybe it was best Theresa wasn't there, she'd be disappointed in him.

A walker's snarls further down the road diverted their attention. Alex took off toward it, unsure how he would kill it, but knowing he wanted to.

"No, wait!" Albert called, taking the knife from his belt and jogging after him. Alex grabbed the knife from his hand and Albert spun in front of him, reclaiming the blade. "No, I need to get my hands dirty, remember?"

Alex shrugged. "Yeah, 'course. Go for it, kid."

He lunged forward, drove the blade through the skeletal creature's head and it slumped to the pavement. Flicking gore from the knife, he turned back to Alex. "Just listen, please?" Alex nodded. "I didn't go pressing my ear to the wall, but we were all in close quarters without Terminus's thick walls so we probably all heard things. But I never sought it out, I promise. I wasn't up next to the room when Beth found me that one time, I was going down the hall. I do admit though I... sometimes I'd... I'd listen in on purpose, but just when you guys were talking."

He scratched the back of his neck. "Because?"

"It just sounded nice. I wished I had someone to lie there with and play word association games until we fell asleep."

"Cynthia not like those?"

"No, not a friend, like a girlfriend." He frowned. "Can you believe I actually thought for a hot minute that Beth and I... but I knew it was never going to happen."

His shoulders slouched. "I'm sorry, man. That must've been rough. So... what are you gonna do if we get to see her again?"

"I haven't thought about it. Been trying not to." He rubbed at his injured jaw. "I won't tell Gareth what you did."

"The red mark on your face will."

"Well, it's dark in the van and I don't think it was hard enough to bruise."
"What? Yeah, it was."

"I didn't mean you hit soft, just that..." He sighed. "I don't think any of them saw us but if not, I won't tell."

* * *

Awaking on a frilly blue and white bed, Martin was officially pissed. Tyreese and Beth's urgent voices filled the bright bedroom as he groaned and sat up, recognizing an unconscious Theresa beside him. The rival two froze from their place by the barred window and gawked at him.

"How long was I out?" Martin asked, setting his feet on the flowered rug covering the floor.

"About an hour," Tyreese replied.

He made his way around the bed and shook Theresa. "Hey, get up. Come on, Theresa." He flicked his fingers on her cheek a few times and her eyes flitted open.

"Where are we?" she mumbled.

The woman must have had a lower tolerance for substances than he did as his grogginess was already fading. "Disneyland. Come on." He looked to Tyreese and Beth, who stood watching him like a pair of hawks. "You wanna take a picture?" He narrowed his eyes. "They not shoot you up, too?"

Beth shook her head. "No, just had a group of 'em drag us in here."

Martin flicked Theresa's face again and she made a displeased noise. "Come on," he urged. "My momma guzzled downers like this for breakfast. Get up, woman!"

Theresa sat up, rubbing the back of her disheveled head of hair and studied the room. "Where are they?"

"Out there," Tyreese answered. "Outside the door listenin' in, probably."

Martin rushed over to them and peered out the window at the city streets. "You seen a gate anywhere?"

"No," Beth replied, edging back.

Martin had half a mind to trash everything in the room at that point. Not to mention clock the two who had left him bruised. Of all the people to get stuck with...

Theresa staggered over to the window. "We can break the glass and use it as a weapon. Grab a pillowcase or something."

Beth hurried to the bed, pulled off a yellow pillowcase, and held it out. Theresa reached for it when Martin took and wrapped it around his fist.

"I can break glass," Theresa bit.

"I know you can," he replied, drawing his fist back and striking the window. It remained intact and he hit it again with more force. "What the fuck is wrong with this!?" He pounded on it.

"Ugh, it might be bullet-proof," Theresa said. "Look how thick."
"God damnit!" Martin threw the case to the floor and beat on the glass with his hands, causing them to throb from the repeated blows.

"Cussin' at it ain't gonna get it to break!" Beth protested.

The door opened before he could retort and Joseph stepped in holding what looked to be an actual AK-47.

For people so into loving one another, they had ample firepower.

"I won't use this, my friends," Joseph spoke. "Not if you prove to me you're—"

"Where's the big jackass in chief?" Theresa demanded.

"Mark is... healing after you what put him through. He forgives you, though I am having trouble. But in time, I will." He looked behind them. "Were you trying to break the glass?"

"Yeah," Martin said, taking a step forth. "Thought I'd shove a piece of it through your jugular."

"Well, it's bullet-proof, so it's too strong for you to crack. And until you calm down enough to be spoken to in a rational manner, you'll remain in here."

"We ain't children!" Tyreese yelled.

Martin flexed the fingers of his aching hand, picturing it wrapped around a shard of glass, cutting his own flesh, but piercing Joseph's neck in the process. Then he thought of something else that might cut. "Hey, man," he called. "You related to Skylar?"

Joseph nodded. "I'm his brother."

He laughed. "Well, Sky's dead. Stone cold and put in the ground." He paused, dying to say it was one of his own that did the deed but opted to air on the safe side. "Saw his body myself, all torn up by a biter. Your bro the dumbest look on his face."

Joseph lowered his gun a tad. "Oh... oh my, that's..."

"Yeah, a look just like that."

"Martin!" Theresa exclaimed. "You know he's the one with the gun in this situation, right!?"

"No, no," Joseph assured them. "Attempts to ruffle my feathers won't work. If you're being truthful about my brother."

"Yep," Martin said. "He did have a dumb look on his face."

"Nonetheless, there are changes of clothes in those drawers." He gestured the weapon to the dresser across from the bed. "Putting on something brighter will do you good. The first step to metamorphosis."

Jesus. Martin thought Tyreese and Beth's do-good attitude was irritating and stupid as hell, but these people were the biggest morons he'd met in the entire course the apocalypse. Even more than the group he had a stint with who were incompetent with simple handguns.

Joseph bowed his head and backed away, shutting the door behind him.

"There's four of us," Theresa said. "We can break through the door."
Beth crossed her arms. "They'll be more of 'em out there with plenty of bullets."

"She's right," Tyreese agreed, peeping back out the window. "I think we gotta do what they say for now. Just a little while."

Theresa scowled. "As in bend over?"

"We just make 'em think we're not on the edge of tryin' to escape. Not bendin' over, just agreeing enough to get by. We'll find a way out after we get an idea of what their soft spots are."

Martin tuned out their conversation and strolled over to the dresser. He pulled open the top drawer and flipped through the clothing, finding nothing but tacky colors. Anger bubbled from beneath his skin. No, he wasn't going to be those people's bitch either.

Come to think of it, the drawer was at just the right elevation and he no bathroom break had been allotted since their awful brunch. He began unbuckling his pants while the other three chattered away.

Theresa then turned and practically shrieked, "Goddamnit, Martin!" She bolted over and slammed the drawer shut.

"What?" he argued. "They didn't give me a piss break!"

"Please, please, don't make this more difficult for us. Please."

He refastened his fly. "Why, just 'cause you asked me to nicely? You do remember we ain't friends, right?"

She sighed. "I know how insulting this is, okay? Especially with them behind us, but please just do some quality acting in the meantime. I'll... I'll owe you another one ontop of the one I never paid you."

"What? What one?"

"When you gave me amaretto for my hot chocolate at Terminus?"

Damn, he had forgotten about that. She did owe him one, didn't she? Two to loiter over her head would be incredible. Not that he really thought she'd pay up unless it was something she'd do anyway. Though the thought was still delectable.

"Three. I get two for this."

"Fine, whatever. Just... be good."

He looked over to Tyreese and cleared his throat. "So... before this turns into a locker room, I gotta know how your fabulous self wound up at Sipsey."

"Yeah," Theresa echoed. "How did the world get so small?"

Tyreese took a moment before beginning, "We'd made it to Richmond. I got—got bit inside a house and started..." He focused on Martin. "Don't know where they came from, but some folks showed up... Naz was one of 'em."

Martin smirked. "Gotta love that Arabian princess."

"I tried to explain I wasn't alone but they didn't listen. She and some other guy held me down, took
my arm off, and I passed out. Woke up at that place."

"So why'd they put you two in there?" Theresa asked.

"I overheard Gabby talkin'," Beth said. "To Lucy. They're not as smart as they think they are. They talk pretty loud." She pursed her lips. "We both found out accidentally. Amazin', right? Lucy's... she said we were like her dolls. She ain't right in the head. And when she told us about Kaylee's friends gettin' here? Ugh, she made us tell her everything." She clutched her wrist.

"Even your group's part?"

"Of course. I'm not out to villainize y'all."
"You got lucky. Lucky you left the safety on," Gareth said, one hand on the steering wheel directing the van to West Virginia. Lucy had coughed up information indicating the center of the state's significance before passing out.

Alex gave a nod from beside him, his head resting against the window. "I know."

"And you also know better than that. I also thought you knew how not to leave the safety on." He bit his tongue to dissuade the rest of lecture trying to come out. Though Alex had made an enormous blunder, Gareth was hesitant to make him feel even worse about it.

"I know how the safety works. And you don't have to tell me I fucked up." He rubbed at a smudge on the glass. "I know I did."

"Just... get some sleep so you'll be able to think clearer. You might as well be a walker right now and that makes you vulnerable, makes all of us vulnerable."

"I know the effects of sleep dep—yeah, I'll—I'll try."

Nearly half an hour went by, the desolate and littered mountain roads turning rougher and more remote. Gareth imagined the sprinkling of winter snow on the hills and recalled stories of people trapped in freezing temperatures resorting to cannibalism. Some of whom ate the meat raw due to a lack of supplies for a proper fire.

Raw and frozen...

Even they had never had to consume raw or cold meat. A chill ran down his spine despite the muggy morning air rushing in through the cracked window to his left. He clicked the window control and sealed it.

Glancing in the rear view mirror, his adrenaline rose at a black vehicle in the distance—one of Sipsey's cars.

"How the hell...?" he muttered, tapping the lightly snoring Alex's shoulder and calling to a dozed-off Cynthia and Albert in the back, "We have company." He slowed the vehicle to a halt and watched as the other car did the same several yards behind. "Cynthia, you stay and watch Sleeping Beauty." He popped open the door, climbed out of the car, and took hold of his rifle, Alex and Albert trailing him.

Albert scratched at a red mark on his face and Gareth narrowed his eyes, trying to recall where it came from. The flurry of activity when they restrained Lucy in the van might be the reason, but it still struck him as odd.

The black sedan doors swung open and Kaylee emerged from the driver's seat, followed by Naz from the passenger's.

"Oh, fantastic," Gareth said with a smile, lifting his weapon at Kaylee. The two women froze and raised their hands. "Been hoping I'd get this opportunity one day."

"Gareth, wait," Alex said, catching up to him. "You can't just—"

"I think I can." He wrapped his index finger around the trigger.
"We—we've been following you for a while," Naz stammered. "Just out of sight because she was… anxious about confronting you. I'm just here to find Paul."

"And who are you after, Kaylee, hm?" Gareth asked, taking another step forward.

Kaylee backed up. "T—Theresa."

"Yeah, I don't think she wants to see you."

"Well, she's going to. I can't sit on my ass back there while she's out there in danger. Not again."

"What about Beth?" Albert added.

She shook her head. "No, I'm not after her."

"Please hear us out," Naz urged. "We're two more able-bodied people."

"Naz, I have no problem with you," Gareth said. "You're welcome to come along. But her…" He looked Kaylee across.

Alex leaned up and whispered in his ear, "Come on, man, we can't just mow her down, we don't do shit like that."

Alex the irritating conscience strikes again.

For the group's sake, he figured he could stash his feelings for later.

Gareth pressed his lips together and focused on the disheveled Kaylee. "Alright then, how about this? Beth dies and you won't do anything about it." She opened her mouth to speak when Gareth added, "You show us you really do believe 'we first, always.' You don't do a damn thing when I kill her." He paused, knowing he had to ask his people, yet wishing he could void it. "Alex? Albert?"

The two gave a collective, "Yeah."

"Fine, okay," Kaylee agreed. "Can you put the fire away?"

Gareth gave a sardonic chuckle. "Oh, right. My bad." He lowered the weapon.

Kaylee and Naz put their hands down and relief spread across their faces. "Wait," Kaylee said, looking to the van. "Where's Cynthia and Lucy?"

* * *

"I had a feeling," Naz said, watching Kaylee look over the unconscious and battered Lucy in the back of the van. "But I don't regret what I did."

"Nor should you," Gareth agreed, leaning against the outside of the opened back doors.

Kaylee brushed aside a lock of Lucy's hair and analyzed the spots of blood seeping from her ear. "All of you did this to her?"

"Yes," Albert answered, perched with his legs hanging out the back of the vehicle.

"So can we get goin' now?" Alex asked, inching toward the doors.

Gareth lifted himself from the van and took his rifle from beside him. "Yeah, you two ladies get
back in your car."

"No," Naz said. "I want to be here when she wakes up."

"I've hit her plenty for both of us," Alex said. "Don't worry, she's gonna keep payin' for what she
did to Paul until she dies and we get him back."

"Lucy said she fudged with his insulin," Gareth interjected. "To get him to go into a coma because
he found out the grand secret. I can't imagine how they've kept a type one diabetic alive in—"

"He wasn't a type one," Naz corrected.

"Didn't think so." He pondered what an overweight diabetic might taste like.

"God… they… told me died and didn't even let me see him. Not that I really wanted to but… how
stupid was I? Though I guess his sugar intake's been lowered so he's not… I don't even know what
he's going to be like, you know. He's been in there so long."

"I'd think if you loved him, you wouldn't care," Gareth said.

"I don't care."

"Good," Alex said. "Cause if you wanna bail when someone's at their worst, then you're—"

"A piece of shit," Cynthia mumbled from the back.

Alex shrugged. "Yeah. Guess so."

Naz shifted. "Did you know Theresa at her worst?"

He nodded. "And at mine."

"Same for all of us, actually," Gareth said, again taking a gander at Albert's bruise. "Forged in fire,
like they say."

"You know, I admire you guys," Naz said, climbing out of the van. "Being able to stick together so
well. I don't know if I could do that with anyone from Sipsey."

Gareth patted her on the shoulder. "Good to know, now let's get going." He turned to a hunched
over Kaylee. "Undele."

* * *

Theresa smirked, imagining the shiner Sarah said Mark had on his face. Mary's look-alike sat
across from her on a park bench, going on about the place's traditions. The picturesque community
still struck Theresa as surreal. As did the insulting blue and white dress she had been forced to
wear. Not that she disliked dresses, but being made to wear something or face imprisonment was
beyond degrading. Though she refused to let go of Alex's shirt and held bunching it in her lap.

While she tuned out Sarah's grating, chipper voice, she kept an eye on Martin who sat on the other
side of the small, floral park across from the man with the thick foundation. Martin had been made
to wear a yellow shirt and green khakis much to his chagrin. If circumstances were different,
Theresa would laugh at such a thing, yet her teammate's degradation only added to her fury.

The colorful dressing of Tyreese and Beth though had her holding back a chuckle as she glimpsed
them opposite the park with their own escorts.
"Theresa?" Sarah spoke. "Theresa, are you listening?"

Theresa turned her vision back. "Hanging on every word."

She smiled and clasped her hands over her long skirt. "We want you to be open with us and tell us what hardships you've endured. We want to know you."

She quirked her brow and leaned forward. "Alright… I was the Easter Bunny before the turn. Then once everything went to hell, my egg supply dried up and I lost all my fur and my floppy ears and my cotton tail. It's been a nightmare."

"Oh my, very funny. A good sense of humor is a fantastic thing to have in what can be such horrid world."

She sighed. "You don't want to know my real history. Trust me."

"I don't care what it is, there's nothing that cannot be forgiven."

She scoffed. "Oh, no. No, no, no, there's plenty." Her jaw clenched, recalling the three at the shack. She should never have let them go and shown them mercy of all things. But the people in front of her? Easy. Every last one of them she could kill, even the children if she had to.

"Do you think you deserve forgiveness, Theresa?"

"I don't care."

"No, you do."

She scowled. "No one would forgive me for who I've hurt or killed, and I'm okay with that. It's not my problem. My problem is getting out this disgusting fucking candyland and back to my people."

Sarah nodded. "Mm-hm. So you'd kill for them?"

"I have and I will again." She cocked her head. "Would you? For your brainwashed drones?"

"I don't have to."

"You always have t—" She paused and leaned back. "No, I see what you're doing. Trying to get me to bear my soul. Nice try."

A woman sobbing broke through their exchange and Theresa turned to see an elderly woman on the sidewalk before an antique shop. She then threw her arms around a street lamp and wailed.

"I thought you people were all happy," Theresa remarked.

Sarah's face fell and she stood. "Oh, dear. She's let it consume her again."

A crowd of two men and two women gathered around the distressed woman and one man pushed her to the ground. The group started kicking her as she lay on her side while shouting nonsense about 'letting go of pain."

"What the…" Theresa muttered. Her face twitched and she looked to Sarah. "Is that what you're going to do to us!?"

"Only if we must. Through pain we relinquish pain."
She averted her gaze to Martin standing beside his escort watching the sight. Beth and Tyreese had also fixed their attention as their chaperons looked on.

* Holy shit...

* * *

Theresa sat on one of two twin beds with her head in her hands. A small blueish room was allotted for her and Martin in a nearby barred and guarded one-story home. Fantastic. They expected her to share room and board with Martin. Though at least they hadn't been paired with Beth and Tyreese as one man initially suggested.

"You have fun bendin' over?" Martin asked, standing beside the bed that was to be his. Theresa exhaled a sharp breath against her palms and stayed silent. "Cause now it looks daddy's gonna give us the belt if we don't smile and eat all our peas and carrots."

Theresa looked up, not intending to, but asking, "Did your dad—"

"No." He waved her off. "Just the verbal whiplashes." He folded his arms. "So we better be good."

"Yeah, bending over was a good idea. Thank you, Tyreese." She rolled her eyes and buried her head in her hands again.

"Don't get lethargic on me now."

"I'm not."

"You still be able to pull the trigger when the time comes?"

She raised her head, keeping her fingers on her cheeks. "Of course."

"Just gotta make sure now."

"That—those three at the shack were a fluke. I wish I could see them again so I could take care of them. I'll never make the mistake of letting someone go again, trust me."

"Good to know."

A knock on the door sounded and Beth nudged the door open. "They said I could come talk to you."

"Then talk, sugar," Martin said.

"Not to you."

He laughed. "And why would that be?"

"Martin," Theresa began, standing up, "just go so we can get whatever she wants over with."

He threw Theresa a look. "Yes, your majesty." He passed Beth and brushed against her shoulder as he exited.

"It's like having a little child," Theresa muttered.

Beth slunk in and pushed shut the door behind her. "About Kaylee—"
"No, no." Theresa raised her hands. "We're not discussing that."

"Just hear me out."

"I said, no."

"She talked about you a lot. More than anyone."

She clapped her hands together. "Well, she should've stuck around then."

"It was never 'cause of you. She left 'cause of Gareth. She never wanted to leave you... or anyone else really. Just him. You were her friend."

"Don't tell me who my friends are."

"She was, I swear."

Theresa stepped forward, hoping to intimidate Beth, but she stayed still. "You can go now." Beth gave a nod and began to turn. Yet once again, Theresa's mouth worked quicker than her brain, "Think you could forgive me?"

**Damnit.**

Beth furrowed her brow. "What?"

"For sizzling your friend over an open fire? For fooling you?"

Beth glanced down. "At some point, I have to."

She shook her head and laughed. "No, no, see, you're full of shit too. So are all of these clown people. You wouldn't bat an eye if your ringleader decided to hack me up into little bits."

"Yes, I would mind."

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not."

"Damnit, Beth! I was going to eat—okay, eat—your sister and her husband. Not even sweet little you will forgive that."

"Maybe if I didn't know you, but I do."

Theresa grabbed Beth by her shoulders and shook her. "You don't know me!"

"Get your hands off!" She pushed Theresa back. "Why do you want me to hate you so bad?"

She brushed aside the hair that had fallen in her eyes. "Because that's what people do, you stupid bitch! Stop pretending for fuck's sake."

She tightened her lips and shook her head. "No, not all of us. Not you either 'cause I know you're not... not like other people I've met. Who didn't care about no one but themselves. You do care. I care. That's what makes us alike."

She huffed. "We are not alike..."

But weren't they? Theresa freed three people who would have killed her and Alex. A classic show
of weakness born from ignorance. Something Beth—or Tyreese who didn't have the guts to finish Martin off—would do. Because they were soft, living in a world that no longer existed. Theresa didn't. No matter whom she let live or what Beth said, nothing had changed. In fact, she could beat Beth to death right then and there to show her they're not anything alike.

Balling up her first, Martin then swung open the door, making Theresa growl. "What's goin' on, kitties?" he asked.

Theresa gulped. "Just talking things out so we can get out of here sooner."

"Yeah? 'Cause it sounded like you needed to 'put your fucking dick away.'"

_Touché._

"Hey, lollipop," Martin said to Beth. "Sarah said she wants to see you."

Beth spun around and glared at him. "Yeah, my name is Beth."
When the sun set over the horizon it hit Theresa like a ton of bricks—she was lost and alone. Separated from her people and from the man she loved.

Her heart ached over the pain Alex must be feeling as she sat in a lawn chair on the back patio of an upscale home. Colored Christmas lights and vines of jasmine adorned the area of the party celebrating an already bountiful crop. Putting their all-vegetarian cuisine on her stomach only caused it to struggle. Mark had informed her the barbiturate's effects still lingered in her system and might cause an upset stomach. The leader made a brief appearance at the party wearing a smear of makeup to conceal his bruise before slipping away. Theresa pondered his scarcity.

Martin waded through the ecstatic crowd and took a seat beside Theresa. "You know they don't allow alcohol in this place? 'Cause it's 'false happiness.'" He made a face.

"No swearing and no booze, huh?" she replied. "They've outlawed half your personality."

He shook his head. "Mm-hm."

She edged closer to him and whispered, "They're going to keep pressing about who we are. What should our story be?"

"The real one," he murmured back.

"Even these people won't accept that. Sipsey only tolerates it because we sugar-coated it."

"Nah, they're fine with any damn thing. See that dude?" He pointed to a pudgy man chatting with a young woman by the French doors.

Theresa nodded. "Yeah?"

"He'd been part of a group who raped any vulnerable women they came across."

Her heart skipped a beat. "What?"

"Yep, mister make-up told me. Said that the guy's freed of his 'burdens' now or some shit."

Theresa swallowed, forcing down the violent nausea in her gut. No, that tore it. They had to escape.

"We have to get out of here," she declared. "Tonight."

"I don't think we got enough—"

"I'm not staying here with animals like that." Her voice shook.

He sighed. "Ah, damnit. I shouldn't have told you that."

"No, no, you should have. Now I really know who these people are." She stood up. "I'm going to find Tyreese and Beth. Stay here and look inconspicuous."

He narrowed his eyes. "Okay."

She passed through the group and tried to avoid setting sights on the man Martin named, but her
eyes traveled there anyway and locked with his. He looked her up and down with an upturn of his lip before returning to his conversation. A squeak escaped Theresa's lips and she bunched the top of her dress up to her neck. Hurrying indoors, she instead searched for somewhere to be alone. Public displays of distress were punished after all.

An ajar linen closet rested at the end of a long corridor and she glided inside. Though she fought to keep her dinner down, she lost the battle and hurled onto a towel folded on the shelf. She sunk to the floor and wiped her mouth with a groan. Tears dampened her eyes and she hugged herself tighter to force them back, trying to forget the man's smarmy look.

Instead, she imagined Alex holding her and drawling, "It's alright, princess." Then Mary stroking her hair, assuring her the dark times were over and they were safe. And for the first time in ages, she thought of her mother—bringing her a cup of iced 7-UP like she had when she had the stomach flu as a child. Or her sister, always drowning Theresa's problems with her own relationship drama. Even her father giving her his typical awkward pat of the shoulder sounded nice.

Yet there was no one to comfort her.

Her chin trembled and tears spilled forth that she didn't bother to wipe away.

The door creaked open and she flinched.

"I knew I shouldn't've told you that," Martin said.

She straightened her back and dried her face. "No, thank you for telling me. I don't want to be kept in the dark about anything."

"So... I take it you didn't look for the other two?"

She stood up, making her head spin a tad. "No, but I don't want to wait for them to get in-sync with us. It'd be easier to get two of us out than four anyway."

"We don't even know what route to take yet."

"Then—then we'll figure it out now." She started for the hallway but Martin placed his hand on the doorknobs.

"Hey, no impulse control is what got us here in the first place. Cool it."

"Cool it? After what you told me? No, no, I changed my mind, I'm not going play them!"

"Shhh!" He gestured toward his side, then pushed his way into the closet and shut the door. "They see you teary-eyed you might get a beating, remember that?"

She nodded and hugged herself again. "Yeah, I—I know."

Martin sighed and his voice softened. "Listen, we'll see if Ty and Lollipop got any new info. She said she was gonna chat up some folks about the fences in this place, who guards 'em and etcetera, so we might have a leg up already. And if we can get past without 'em, we will. I'd rather it be without, but we'll have to see."

"I don't want to wait that long."

"Well, you might have to." He pressed his ear against the door for a moment. "I don't hear 'em no more." He pulled the door open and stepped out. "Coast's clear."
Theresa followed and rubbed her face. "Does it look I was crying?"

He analyzed her. "Nah, I think you're good. I saw the other two out back after you took off, we should meet up."

She didn't want to go back out to the patio where the man was, therefore she planned to stay by Martin's left so he would be unable to see her.

As if he had read her mind, Martin added, "Keep by me so that fucker don't see you. Can't have you gettin' upset again."

Whether he meant it out of concern for her or to avoid a dangerous display of blubbering, she was unsure. But she decided to not take offense.

She bit her tongue and followed Martin down the hall. Passing a restroom, she caught a glimpse of the man with the make-up standing before a mirror, his face looking to be marred with red sores. Her footsteps halted and he pushed the door shut in a hurry.

Martin stopped beside her. "What?"

Theresa wrapped her hand around the door handle and pushed it open.

"No!" the man cried, averting his face. "You weren't supposed to see this."

"See what?" Martin asked.

The man turned around and revealed his scarred face. "It's unsettling. I have to keep it covered."

"What?" Theresa asked. "Because it's unsettling?"

"My rosacea, yes. It's hard to look at, distracting, ugly. I keep it covered with makeup so everyone will stay in high spirits."

"They... they make you cover your face?"

"Mark says I have to, so I do. It's good for everyone, but hard to find something that's not too old to use and to keep it touched up throughout the day. But I'm not complaining," He smiled.

"Yeah," Martin chimed-in. "I get it. One of y'all said you were gonna find Tyreese a prosthetic arm A.S.A.P. 'cause a man with no arm is 'unsettling,' too."

He nodded.

"And having rapists walk around isn't?" Theresa accused.

"Once you become like us—"

"No, I don't want to hear it," she said, throwing her hands up. "I'm done."

* * *

"Tell me a story," Theresa requested, clutching her knees to her chest at the end of her twin bed. Beth and Tyreese's attempts had proved fruitless, further sending her downward.

Martin lay sprawled on his bed. "About?"
"Anything. I just don't want to think about the present. There's nothing we can do now but stay here and pretend to sleep in this place."

"You gonna stay awake all night?"

"Are you actually going to sleep here?"

"Might fall asleep even if I don't want to. Tends to happen with me."

"Just tell me a story."

He sat up. "About what?"

She rubbed the hem of the shirt of Alex's she wore. "You said you were married once, right?"

He half-smiled. "And why'd you wanna hear a story about a dead man's troubles?"

"Well, the stories that survive through the ages are about dead people in some mythical world, so why not? And be honored, first time I've asked to hear the male version of a break-up story."

He laughed. "Okay..." He paused, tapping his fingers on the edge of the bed.

"Since when do you need to think before talking about yourself?"

"Never had any of y'all ask before."

That created a dip in her gut. "Not even Gareth or... Gina?" She bit her tongue to avoid chastising him for cuckolding Greg. Though her own record was not untarnished—in college, she slept with a rival's boyfriend to get back at her.

"Eh, things like 'you're from Savannah, right?' Nothin' that elaborate. Except when Gare asked me about my past for loggin' purposes, and you about the guy I fed to a walker."

"Don't you mean 'biter'?"

"Ah, you're all a bad influence on me."

"So tell me about your wife, what was her name?"

"Anne."

"With an 'E' or without?"

"With."

"Can I assume she had painted-on eyebrows?"

He cracked up. "Yes, for a little while. You're good."

"So?"

"I met her through my cousin, Louis. My parents really liked her and pushed her on me 'cause they were pissed I was twenty-four and not hitched yet. Neither was my sister, but they were always easier on her 'cause of her schizophrenia. Anne was okay, she was kinda fun at first and we decided to get married after five months." He sighed. "Then..."

"Marriage ruined everything?"
"Uh-huh. Moved in together and things just fell apart. It was when we stopped constantly fighting that I knew somethin' was really wrong. Which was she was out there fuckin' other guys. So I figured I should too."

She laughed a bit and brought her legs down. "God, how long had you been married by then?"

"Like six months. Yeah, that's when I ran into this dude I knew in high school that I used to trade handjobs with. Then had him over at my house all weekend while she was away 'visiting her sister,' which wasn't her sister let me tell you."

"Please tell me she walked on you with another guy."

"No, that would've been much sweeter, but she just found my internet history. There was lesbian porn on there too but she didn't care and thought I was just queer and that was my problem. Not even the best part though."

She grimaced. "Oh god, what?"

"We decided we could fix shit by havin' a kid."

"Jesus christ, what a disaster."

"Yeah, fuckin' tell me about it. Awkward, unsatisfying missionary three times a week to create a baby bandaid and she and I were both still screwin' around on each other."

"How could it ever be unsatisfying for a guy?"

"Oh, trust me, honey, it can. Anyway, she wasn't gettin' knocked up so we decided fuck this and then she turned up pregnant. I didn't think it was mine, but I went down there when she'd had the kid and it was black." Theresa burst out laughing and buried her face in her hand. "Yeah, that old lifetime is pretty hilarious, ain't it?"

"Yeah," she agreed, giggling. "Yeah, it is, sorry."

"No, no, don't be sorry. It is hysterical. And with my luck, Anne's baby daddy was probably Tyreese."

If Theresa didn't know any better, she'd think Martin was trying to cheer her up.

* * *

Theresa sat at the breakfast table running on two hours of unintended sleep, the previous night's laughter a distant memory. It was then she really began to miss Alex. Both falling asleep and waking without him was an experience she had long forgotten.

"Nice prosthetic," Martin said as Tyreese and Beth seated themselves at the table.

Tyreese's prosthetic was mediocre at best; a sheath of wood with a pair of clippers on the end covered by his long-sleeved shirt. Having no arm was better than that embarrassing thing.

"Isn't it, though?" Sarah beamed, spooning a helping of sugar into her glass of tea.

"I didn't want one," Tyreese said, scrutinizing the contraption.

Martin took a sip from his mug of tea. "Shame they didn't give you one with a knife on it like this one dude said he wanted for a hand he lost."
Tyreese squinted. "What dude?"

"I don't know. I don't remember his name. He hung around a camp I was at outside of Atlanta a little after the turn and my momma bummed some oxies off him."

"Merle?" Beth asked, eyes narrowed.

He leaned back in his seat. "Yeah, yeah, that was it."

Tyreese let out a half-amused laugh and rubbed his temple. "Good lord, this world is too damn small. Never thought I'd hear that bastard's name again."

"Who was he to you?" Martin asked.

"Daryl's brother," Beth replied.

"Yeah, I don't remember which one that was."

She scowled. "Yes, you do."

"No, Gare's the one with the perfect memory." He leaned forward. "Oh, wait, I do remember one: Carol, who killed Gareth and Alex's mom."

"Oh, dear..." Sarah said. "Such sadness."

"Cool it," Theresa whispered to Martin, much to her displeasure. She'd love nothing more than watch him tear into her.

"Well, this is still inspiring," Sarah proclaimed. Martin shut his eyes and his face twitched. "That you can even sit at the same table. I know it's hard, but—"

"Alright, you want to know?" Theresa interrupted. "Really know us? Fine... I'm a cannibal." She almost choked on the word, as if what they'd done could be summed up in a mere three syllables. "And so is Martin and so is my husband, and his brother, and so was their dead mother." She looked to Beth. "And so is she because we lied and told her it was deer."

Sarah focused on Theresa and nodded.

What?

"Did you hear what I just said?" she asked Sarah.

"Yes."

"Then you don't get it. We'd lure unsuspecting people to our home and if they didn't agree with our diet, we'd cut them up and eat them. Now do you understand?"

"I do. And you can be forgiven."

"Stop saying that!" she shrieked, bolting up.

"Cool it! Remember?" Martin warned.

Sarah clasped her hands together. "We all have a cross to bear. Some are heavier than others, but they're understandable all the same."
"No," Tyreese spoke up. "See, y'all can't go around forcin' forgiveness on people. It ain't somethin' you can choose for them, it's their decision and theirs alone."
"If you don't sleep, I might have to knock you out myself," Gareth said, lying beside Alex in the back of the van.

Alex lay on his side with his back turned. "Not like I haven't been trying. What about you? You're not superhuman."

He held back a yawn. "I will once you do."

He sighed. "Gareth—"

"That's non-negotiable."

"Puttin' pressure on me to do it makes it impossible. You know I have performance anxiety."

"Really? Because I heard the same things Albert and Beth did late at night."

"I'm sorry about that."

He waved him off. "It's alright, nothing's worse than that video we found of mom and dad."

He was silent a few moments before replying. "God... why'd you have to bring that up?"

"So we'd be even. And now you've been totally disciplined for what you did, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Alright, how about this: will you agree to sleep if I leave?"

"Yeah."

Gareth sat up. "Okay, I'll go see who's the one still awake." His muscles groaned as he edged out of the van.

Moonlight shone through the trees above the two vehicles they stashed off-road as he traipsed to the sedan. Pulling open the back door, Cynthia appeared to jerk awake. "Where'd Albert go?" he asked.

"In the front seat at of the van," Cynthia replied, furrowing her brow.

"When?"

She gave a weary smile. "Since around ten minutes ago 'cause he said knowin' Lucy was tied up in the trunk weirded him out. Heh, you're tired, Gareth, and it's showin'."

Weirded him out? Of all the things he had done and seen, that 'weirded him out?'

"Okay, well, move over because I promised Alex I'd keep away so he doesn't get sleep performance anxiety."

She scooted to the side and allowed him a place. Settling in and shutting the door, he breathed a
sigh of relief and anticipated sleep.

"Albert wasn't creepin' on Alex and Theresa," Cynthia said.

Gareth kept his eyes closed. "He's a teenager."

"Well... he didn't go outta his way." She rested her head against the seat and let out a hum. Gareth hoped she would remain quiet, but just when he was beginning to doze off, her voice came again, "I did, though."

His eyes fluttered open, unable to recall what they had been speaking of. "Did what?"

"Listened to 'em."

*What possessed me to try to sleep next to Cynthia?*

"I mean," she continued, "to them together. I could've pulled a pillow over my ears, but I didn't."

*Cynthia the deviant.*

"And what are you trying to tell me?"

"Oh, nothin' like I'm into Alex or T—I just... listened 'cause they sounded so passionate and... it was nice. 'Cause they love each other so much it made me sorta wish I... and since the—you know, I haven't..."

*Houston, we have a come-on.*

"Good to know," he replied, hoping to stave her off.

She let out a huff. *Gareth.*

He opened his eyes all the way and turned to see her sitting on her knees. "Yes?"

"You know what's funny?"

"Hm?"

"No one's mentioned Martin. Not really, it's all about how we need to find Theresa."

"You know we're after him too."

"But if he... wasn't here, you'd..."

He placed his hands over his stomach. "What are you trying to get me to say?"

"You wouldn't be tied down."

He cracked up. "I'm not tied down by *Martin.*"

"Well, good." She inched closer, giving him bedroom eyes. "So..."

The obvious come on seemed sudden, but Cynthia had never been easy to predict. As he began to let her down easy, she leaned in and he nudged her away.

Her eyes squeezed shut and she clenched her fists as he said, "Cynthia, nothing's changed since when—"
"Again," she croaked, opening her eyes. "Turned down again by the same guy. Why? Why'd you rather have someone like Martin instead of me?"

"Martin's looking for a good time, something easy, you..."

She smiled and raised an eyebrow. "I could be good for a good time. I can prove it to you. No strings. Just fun." Her hand massaged his thigh.

A desperate girl in the back seat of a car. He had to admit he pitied her, being turned down was never easy, and twice by the same person was even worse.

"You don't have to prove anything to me," he said, guiding her hand off his leg.

"Don't be a good guy! Just... right—right here all icky and in the backseat. Meaningless."

"If that's what you wanted, you'd have hooked-up with Martin when he was salivating over you. Because that's the type of person he is, but you are not." A squeak escaped her lips and she buried her face in the seat. He slid toward her. "What you're after isn't here. Really, if I could choose, I'd make it different, but you have to accept what you're given and make the best of it."

She let out a snort. "Break-up lines on someone you were never even with."

"Is there a non-cliché way to say it? If so, do tell."

She laughed a little and raised her face, wiping away a tear. "No, it's—I guess you're right. I just... I'm only human... I think, and I get that special kinda lonely."

"So, why not Albert? You know, I've always wanted to ask, why not him?"

She sat back on her knees. "If I could choose? I'd choose to love him like that, but I can't. He's my friend, can't make it anything more. We've tried and it was... it felt wrong."

He nodded and raised his finger. "So you do get it."

"But—but how'd you know it'd feel wrong? You haven't even tried it."

"Fair point."

Yet there was nothing there and it bothered him. Cynthia was beautiful, no doubt about it. He assumed she had been the first crush of many boys in her 3rd-grade class. Long red hair, cat eyes, svelte figure, pouty lips, and as Martin so eloquently put it, perky tits. And her Deep South drawl dripped from her lips like honey. Martin did have a similar twang, but what dripped from his lips was more salty than sweet.

"Could you at least give it a try before you say it's not there?" she pressed.

Gareth took a deep breath and contemplated. "If we don't find anything, will you let it go?" She nodded.

Tip-toeing around her like a China doll had been his primary tactic, but he got the feeling she was tired of it. Who wouldn't be? He resigned to what might be an explosion of tears and they shared a kiss. Cynthia's lips were soft and gentle against his as if she worried she would break him. Nothing like Martin's eager and slobbery tongue.

She pulled away and ran her fingertips across her mouth. "Well?"
He licked his lips and prepared for a possible breakdown. "You're a good kisser."

She slouched and folded her arms. "I hate you."

"No, you'd hate me if this went any further."

* And all you'd be is my ball and chain. *

Gareth stretched and slogged over to the trunk of the sedan. He tapped on the trunk and heard Lucy thump in return. Figuring she was ready to talk in exchange for food and water, he clutched the latch and opened the trunk. "Rise and shine, big chemistry test at school today. Hope you studied enough—" He froze at the sight of Lucy's bound walker snarling at him. "She's... she..."

"What's wrong?" Albert started to his side.

"She's dead!" he yelled, alerting the rest of his people in the vicinity. "Why is she dead!? God damnit!" He slammed his hands on the top of the trunk. Lucy's walker wriggled.

"What are you talkin' about?" Alex asked, catching up to him from the van along with Cynthia. They peered into the trunk to Lucy's glazed-over eyes. "The fuck's she dead for!?" he exclaimed.

"Oh no..." Cynthia mewed.

Gareth rubbed his forehead. "I don't know, I don't know... Kaylee." He marched to the van. "Oh, Kay-lee!" Kaylee and Naz emerged from the side doors. "You said her wounds were non-fatal!"

"What?" Kaylee questioned, her face dropping. "They—I thought they were."

"Unless she's playing another role, you misdiagnosed."

She and Naz rushed over to the trunk. "Oh..." Kaylee uttered.

Gareth caught up to her. "Why is she dead? You said she was fine."

She scanned the corpse. "Must have been internal bleeding. I told you to go easy on her if you wanted to keep her alive."

"You said she would be okay."

She spun around. "I don't have X-ray vision, Gareth! I can't see if someone's organs are bleeding."

"She was our only lead!" Naz cried.

"Central West Virginia," Cynthia said. "It's better than nothin'."

Gareth tuned out the others laments and stared down at the walker. Somehow, the soulless creature managed to retain a smidgen of Lucy's smugness. As if she had won.

* Spoiled little bitch. *

He pondered how long she had been dead. Seven hours maybe? Still suitable for consumption. And didn't she deserve it?

Gareth's vision flitted to Naz. "You admire us, huh?"
Naz turned to him. "I—what?"

He pulled Martin's switchblade from his pocket. "How much will you admire us when we have Lucy's ample thigh for breakfast, hm? We've had a freshly-dead walker before, once it's cooked, it's safe to eat."

"Gareth, no," Cynthia protested.

*Says my ball and chain.*

Naz stayed silent.

He stepped over to her. "Well? You want to join the club of fire-forged friends? This is how we forged it." He brandished the knife before her face. She gawked at the blade and slid back.

"She's a walker and she's been dead hours," Albert said. "She'll taste terrible."

"Not about what she tastes like."

"Until we don't have to anymore," Kaylee said. "And we don't have to. Come on, we're already wasting time standing here."

*Where are my Rottweilers when I need them?* he thought of Theresa and Martin.

"We're cannibals, not savages," Albert added. "We don't do it for anything other than to survive. You promised us that."

He switched from Naz's paled face to his people on the verge of the worst look they could give him—disappointment. Fear was tolerable, they had to fear him sometimes, but to be disappointed? It hurt.

Gareth honed in on Alex, waiting for an ethical stance, but he stood still with his arms crossed. Alex then noticed his brother's stare and said, "I just wanna find Tess. Whatever gets us to her faster is what I want."

Gareth dropped the blade to his side. "Okay, but we're taking her pretty corpse to her dad."

"Fine with me," Alex said, starting back toward the van.

"Whatever gets us on the road," Cynthia said.

"I'm—I'm okay with—with that," Naz stammered.

"Oh, wow," Gareth began, "okay, see, you're helpful, but your opinion means nothing and has no effect on what we do."

"It does to me," Kaylee said.

"Always making friends outside of school, Kay."

* * *

"Martin, knock it off," Theresa said, filing into their assigned house's kitchen alongside Tyreese. "Don't know what you're saying, but we need to stop. Officially."

Martin turned from his place beside Beth who was washing dishes. "Alright then," he said. "I'm
officially sorry... Beth. That short for Elizabeth? Bethany?"

Beth tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with a damp hand. "Bethany." She dried her hands on her dress and oriented to the three.

"Their walls are secure," Tyreese said with a long face. "Very secure. Gates too. Talked to Jack and —"

"Who's Jack?" Martin asked.

"Guy with the make-up. They know folks get here wantin' out and they're prepared for it."

"We'll find something," Theresa assured them. "There's always a chink in the armor."

Tyreese scratched his freshly-shaven face—excessive facial hair having been deemed 'intimidating' by the Samaritans. "Woodbury had a fence too, was able to climb over it but it wasn't guarded like this. Anyone ever get away at Terminus?"

"Once," Theresa replied, surprised by his quizzical tone rather than judgmental. "Back in the early days, two people got away and we never saw them again. After that, we decided to put the tear gas to use." She rubbed her temple. "Terminus's fences weren't as big and tall and they weren't manned like this. What about that prison? That must've had some impressive shielding. How'd it get overrun again?"

"A tank," Beth answered, glancing down. "Plowed through the fence."

"That's not too realistic a goal," Martin commented. "Terminus and your prison were capped from outside attacks."

Beth's face perked up. "They have a gas tank, we can take it out."

"It's not by the fence."

"It could be a diversion. Ignite it from long range and they'll all rush to put it out. Bam, we got our exit."

_Damnit, that's actually not a bad idea._

However, Theresa had to argue, "And how'd you propose we do that? They haven't given us a bow and arrow that can shoot grenades."

She shrugged. "I don't know, but it's an idea we can work with."

"Or we could come up with a noise maker," Martin suggested. "If only we knew if there was any good-sized hordes around to come huff, puff, and blow the house down."

"Well, hello there," Mark's grating voice interrupted, entering through the archway with his trademark manufactured smile. "Let me guess, conspiring to escape?" The group remained silent. "Sorry, sorry, I know you won't tell me." He narrowed his eyes, friendly affect wavering for the first time. "But if it involves trying to bust a hole through the fence, know we're prepared for that."

"Oh, shucks," Theresa mocked. "You totally guessed it."

He chuckled. "When people get here, they plan all kinds of escapes. So sad, but they always come around, and so will you. It's fate that you're here. Enemies coming together."
"You brought us here," Martin countered. "Not fate. And I thought you didn't believe that bullsh—nonsense."

"In God? No, no, not per se, but I believe in the forces of nature. Martin, Tyreese, may I speak with the both of you?"

"And leave us women in the kitchen?" Theresa said.

He chuckled again. "Oh, no, no, I didn't mean it that way. Beth dear, once you're done with the dishes, you and Theresa may do whatever you like. The library is full of entertainment." He held his hand out. "Gentlemen?"

Never trust someone who uses the word 'gentlemen' seriously.

Martin and Tyreese frowned and started toward Mark who led them out of the kitchen and outdoors.

"I wonder if he made them friendship bracelets," Theresa said, smirking at her own joke.

Beth continued on the dishes. "I have to say that I never meant to upset you, sayin' what I did." She again brushed a lock of her hair aside. The Samaritans had insisted she wear it down. Theresa thought such long hair impractical, though Alex had suggested she grow hers out.

"I'm not talking about that." Theresa traced the room's yellow and red wallpaper pattern with her eyes. "That's over. All that matters is getting out of this shit hole." She took a step toward Beth. "You going back to your group after this?"

She nodded, furiously scrubbing a blue cup. "Haven't seen my sister in... I don't even remember. Can hardly remember what she looks like. Or Judith." She paused and met her eyes. "Will you let me go? Let us go?"

"Will you let us go?"

"Of course, but I asked you the question first."

She took a deep breath. "I'm not without some... integrity. If I weren't, me and mine might as well be half-feral tribal cannibals hopping around a campfire with war paint on our faces."

She broke a small smile. "So is that a yes?"

"You'd never agree to getting out together if I said you're dead the second we get over the fence."

Beth pursed her lips. "Do you... nevermind."

"Do I...?"

"It don't matter." She placed the last plate in the dish drain.

"Tell me."

"I know you don't... never... agreed with everything Gareth's done. Least out in the wild. How do you deal with that?"

Theresa raised her eyebrows. "You talking about Rick? How he was happy to let us roast? Twice?"

"Yeah."
She scratched her head. "Gareth saved my life. Had the guts to do what needed to be done. And at the end of the day, he's still the one who keeps me alive. You can't spend so much time with someone and not love them for that, even when you don't like them or their methods."

She nodded. "Yeah. Rick has problems, I've seen darkness in him. I mean, once he... oh, I don't know if I should be sayin', but we had a flu outbreak at the prison and Tyreese lost his girlfriend. Someone there killed her before the fever got her and burned her to stop the infection from spreadin'. Tyreese lost it on Rick, wantin' him to find whoever did it and Rick went wild on him too. Went overboard. I didn't see it, but I saw Tyreese's bruised face after."

Theresa's eyes grew wide. "Who burned her?"

She raised her hands. "No, I already said too much, blabberin' his business."

"One of yours did it, right? Rick do it?"

"No."

"Then who? Anyone I know?"

"It's not important."

Theresa puckered her lips. "Hm, I'm going to have to figure this one out."

"I shouldn't have said anything... but at least we're talkin' and not yellin'."

"Mm-hm." She had to learn how to be civil at Terminus despite abhorring it. Gareth had pulled her aside numerous times telling her to 'put on a happy face for them.' "Wonder how Martin and Tyreese's friendship bracelets are doing."

Chapter End Notes

I'm contemplating adding the Saviors which I had thoroughly decided against BUT... meeting Negan has changed my mind big time. I think he'd like Theresa. :D
“How much sleep you get last night?” Alex asked Cynthia, sitting beside her in the back of the moving van.

Cynthia shrugged and fiddled with her hands. “I don’t know. Enough.”

“So did I. Actually feel bad about it, man.”

“Why?” Albert asked from her side.

Alex glanced away to avoid the bruise he created on Albert’s face. The more the mark darkened as the day went on, the sharper his pangs of guilt grew. “’Cause I feel like I should’ve been up worryin’ about her.”

“You’re a walker on no sleep, though,” Cynthia said. “Don’t feel so bad.”

“Yeah. Least I’m not able to kill our only lead now.”

“You did kill her,” Gareth chimed in from the front seat. He sat alone, Alex having avoided the passenger’s seat in hopes of dodging his brother's mood. “Kaylee took a look and we could see the blood pooling in her stomach. Where you’d hit her the most.”

Alex leaned forward. “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“You didn’t ask. I’m surprised though because I didn’t think you could hit that hard.”

_Do you wanna be my friend or not? Make up your mind, asshole._

“Guys!” Gareth shouted, slowing the vehicle. “Get your weapons out! We have company!”

Alex grabbed his revolver and peered through the windshield. A roadblock of several vehicles lay ahead accompanied by about twenty people. “Oh, shit... t—turn around!”

“You don’t think they’ll follow us!?” Gareth shot back. “Next route this way would take us six hours. You read the map.” He stopped the vehicle. "Besides, there has to be a reason why they haven’t opened fire." The rest grabbed their weapons and filed out of the car.

Alex's heart pounded and he clutched his weapon as a lifeline. After all, he knew he was still a coward. Pummeling a woman until her insides bled and punching a guy meant nothing. The former was bound and the latter would never have hit him back.

A balding dirty-blond man and scantily clad woman stood at the forefront of the rival group—the only ones without ample firepower.

“Put your heat away,” the man began, “your—”

The woman held her hand up. “Hang on, Preston.”

Alex’s vision focused on her and knew was dreaming because she looked remarkably like Gina. She had the same kinky hair, big eyes, thick, defined eyebrows, and confident posturing as Gina. The same Gina he saw swarmed by walkers at Terminus.

“Gina,” Preston started, throwing her a look, “we—”
“Gina?” Gareth asked, eyes growing wide.

“Oh my god!” Cynthia cried.

"Gina!?" Albert exclaimed.

“Oh… shit,” Gina responded, looking the group over as Kaylee and Naz emerged from the sedan. “I—I looked for you assholes after Terminus!” Her eyes narrowed at Naz.

“Gina!” Kaylee beamed, then turned to Naz. “That’s—that’s Gina. We knew her at—a while back.”

Alex felt a smidgen of relief. “How the hell—”

“We can get to that,” Gina interrupted, her voice faltering. “Problem is, we’re supposed to be—”

“Taking your shit,” Preston finished.

“Yeah, I assumed as much,” Gareth said, tapping his fingers on his rifle.

Gina rubbed her temple. “Any um, any more clowns in those clown cars?”

“No, but we’re short two. Theresa and Martin.”

She laughed. “You’re kiddin’ me. Those two are still alive? And stuck together? Uh-oh.”

“G,” Preston grumbled. “We done with memory lane?”

She raised her hand. “Hang a sec. Where y’all headed to get ‘em?”

“We don’t know. All we got out of our lead before she croaked was ‘central West Virginia.’”

“Hm. Someone set up there or somethin’?”

“What Lucy made it sound like. You familiar with the area?”

“Not me, but—wait, Lucy?” She looked over her shoulder. “Gus, didn’t Mark say he had a daughter named Lucy he wanted us to ‘keep a lookout for’ ‘cause she was so sadly ‘lost?’”

“Something like that,” a weather-worn man toward the back of the group replied.

“Our Lucy had run away from her dad,” Alex said, hope rising. “Didn’t say his name though.”

“No shit, huh?” Gina replied. “Mark said she was blonde, kinda chubby—”

“That was her,” Gareth confirmed. “And… yeah, well, her walker’s in our trunk.”

She cracked up. “Oh, so we can deliver him his little girl, guys. Didn’t say he wouldn’t accept her in walkin’ dead form.”

“So you know her dad. Where is he?”

Alex pressed his lips together.

Please know, please, please, please…

“Down by Roanoke. If she said West Virginia, she was lyin’ like a bitch. Or that’s where they used
“to hang. Don’t know, never really cared.”

“Well, we have a little bit of a situation here. What are we going to do about this, then?”

She took a deep breath. “I can still trust you, right?”

“With your life.”

She again narrowed her eyes at Naz. “Alright, then who’s she?”

“Who, Naz? Found her right after Theresa and Martin were taken. She thinks her husband was grabbed by the same people.”

Alex supposed telling them about Sipsey would be a bad idea. Underground bunker sealed by a foot-thick door or not, trouble was trouble.

“Yeah, Mark’s folks do that. They try and brainwash ’em and make ‘em part of their happy little utopia. It’s bullshit, but that ain’t our concern with ’em.”

**Brainwash? Oh, god... Tess...**

“What is your concern?” Albert asked.

“It’s spring and they’re gonna have some harvest ready. Promised us half of it last winter.”

“And they just hand it over?” Cynthia asked.

Gina nodded. “If they don’t want one of their heads bashed in by the boss they do.” She sighed. “Yeah, but I don’t know about this. The hell you pickin’ up strays for and not um... well, these dudes know a share of where we came from. Unless you’re savin’ her for a midnight snack.”

“The more people we have with us, the better,” Gareth answered. “And we don’t need to, not right now.”

“So, you’re stocked? Where’d you get it? Kinda barren out here, right guys?” A number of people behind her nodded and mumbled agreements.

“Got lucky.”

“Gina,” Preston said, leaning over and whispering in her ear. She nodded along.

Alex gulped as he watched the exchange. No way would Gina rob her own people, let alone kill them...

The two separated and Gina said, “Alright, how about this: we won’t take your supplies and leave you here. You tag along with us and I’m sure they’ll give us back yours if we include it in our haul. They sure as hell don’t want a repeat of last time. Catch is, I don’t think I can trust you no more if you’re pickin’ up special needs kids. You leave the stray here or it’s a no-go.”

“What!” Naz cried.

“I don’t know you, honey.” She looked back to Gareth and her former group. “I know you, Gareth, and I know Alex, Cynthia, Kay, Albert, not Naz, whatever kinda name that is. You still willing to do what it takes? Leave her. Not askin’ you to kill her ‘cause yeah, you don’t have to. We don’t kill unless we have to neither. We’re just askin’ you leave her.”
“Deal,” Gareth agreed without pause.

“No!” Naz screamed. “Please don’t leave me here! Please!” She held up her pistol and pointed it at Alex. “You promised!”

Alex’s gut sunk. Naz was someone looking to reunite with her spouse just as he was. He had said to her they’d get him back and he wanted to help her. Thinking one’s love was dead to find out he had been imprisoned in a vault, then have him slip through your fingers, was a pain Alex could only imagine.

He avoided her eyes. “I never promised.”

Whatever gets me to Tess…

Naz spun around to Kaylee. "Do something!"

“I—I can’t,” Kaylee stuttered. "I can’t do anything. I'm sorry."

“Put it down,” Gareth ordered Naz. “Won’t ask twice. You can keep your knife, just give me the gun.”

“You fucking bastard!” Naz lamented. “Liar!” She set her vision on the rival group. “He’s ly—"

Gareth fired a shot at her feet and she jumped back. “I just wasted a bullet to warn you, so know the next one won’t be wasted.”

Naz glared daggers at him before dropping the gun on the pavement, her hands shaking.

“Go stand in the ditch.” He motioned to the side of the road. “Naz, this isn’t personal. It’s just our people come before yours. You’d do the same if you were us, don’t say you wouldn’t.”

She ignored him and slogged over to the ditch, squeezing her eyes shut as her chin trembled. “I’ll kill you for this.”

“Good luck with that,” Preston said.

“When are you headed there?” Gareth asked.

“Tomorrow,” Preston replied with a sneer.

Alex stepped forward. “No, no, we can’t waste another day. If they try to… what, brainwash folks there? I don't know what they’re doin' to her.”

“Take it or leave it,” Gina said. “It ain’t my decision when we go.”

“Whose is it?” Kaylee asked.

Her brow quirked up. “Negan.”


She breathed a laugh as if taking offense. “This crew here's his and we're called The Saviors. And we’re a lot bigger than what you see in front of you, honey.”

* * *
The group assisted The Saviors in moving several miles down the road and abandoning a tearful Naz. Alex did his best to forget her and focus on getting Theresa back while Gareth and The Saviors talked tactics. From what Alex heard, Gareth was already getting on the nerves of a few of them.

Alex perched beside Gina in the back of the van where she chatted with Albert and Cynthia. He soaked up her image like a sponge, still unsure he wasn't dreaming. “You gotta tell me how you did it,” he urged Gina. “I saw you swarmed, man.”

“You know I’m a cockroach,” she replied. “An H-bomb couldn’t put me down.”

“Really, I wanna know.”

“Is it hard to believe I killed my way out?”

“No, just thought anyone else who got out would’ve found us.”

“You know I’m a shit tracker. I chased footprints to some church and it looked like it’d burned a few days before. Didn’t know if y’all were barbecue in there or not and didn’t feel like findin’ your bodies. Then I thought I’d tag along behind Rick the prick’s crew and lost ‘em somewhere in North Carolina. Wasn’t like little old me could do anything to ‘em anyway, so I just let it go. That’s when the Saviors found me—Negan found me.” Her face lit up. “Saved my fine ass.”

“Who are they?” Cynthia asked. “Really?”

“New world order.”

_Oh, great._

Nothing about the crowd or the way they revered their unseen leader sat well with him. But they gave them a shot at getting Theresa back which mattered far more than his uncertainty.

“You could join us,” she continued. “Negan will… y’all are strong, you can make with us. I can’t imagine Gareth lettin’ go of his alpha status, but the things you do to survive… swallowin’ your pride’s one.”

Gina or no Gina, there was no way he wanted to shack up with her new family.

“But for now, how you and Theresa been?” she asked Alex. “Still adorable together? How you always called her ‘Tess’ made me puke rainbows.”

Alex laughed. “Yeah, still adorable.”

“And how’s Martin been? He still hot to trot ‘cause—” she looked around and raised her voice, “—none of these dudes got a dick worth sittin’ on!” One of the older men threw her a sarcastic look and raised his middle finger. She laughed. “Don’t worry, we just messin’.”

“I missed you, Gina,” Albert said with a smile.

“I missed you assholes too.” She sighed. “Seriously, how is Martin?”

“The same, I guess,” Cynthia answered. “I think he’s okay stuck with Theresa ‘cause they don’t wanna kill each other as much anymore.”

Gina raised her eyebrows. “Oh, wow. I sure missed a lot. On the subject of Martin, I gotta say there’s some things I regret. I think about Greg every damn day, screwin’ around on him. I think I
could’ve loved the guy if we’d had more time. Big macho asshole turned into a teddy bear when I was around. And how I missed Rick and shot Mike? I don’t let myself lose sleep over those things, but it should’ve been different.”

“We all got crosses to bear,” Cynthia said, slinking over to her and patting her shoulder.

“Yes,” she agreed, rubbing Cynthia’s hand. “Hey, I’m sorry I called you airhead the redhead.”

She frowned. “You did?”

“Behind your back.” She turned to Alex. “And I called you flower power. I’m sorry, man.”

Alex nodded. “Heh, yeah, I knew about that. And it’s cool.”

“Nah, it’s my bad. I missed y’all and I’m a damn hypocrite anyway. I thought I was made of iron, but I was cryin’ myself to sleep every night for weeks until The Saviors found me.”

“I can’t imagine,” Albert said. “So… um, did you ever call me anything?”

Gina pursed her lips. “Little boy blue balls.”


“So, what do you think?” She grabbed a nearby supply bag, bunched it up, and stuck it under her shirt. “When I see Martin, I wear this and say we got a caramel baby bakin’. Greg had had a vasectomy, so…”

“Oh, that’s cruel, Gina,” Albert said.

“Please do,” Gareth chimed in, approaching from around the corner. “I’d kill to see his reaction.”

* * *

“You must have been wondering about Paul,” Mark said, leading Martin and Tyreese into a small office building.

“No, not really,” Martin replied.

“Spent time in a vault together,” Tyreese said. “I can’t say he hadn’t crossed my mind.”

Mark stopped in a tight corridor before a window curtained from within the room. “Well, he's been recuperating. He's full of so much hate and anger. Saddens me.”

Tyreese sighed. “Yeah, that daughter of yours is a pain in the ass.” Mark raised his eyebrows. “I mean, a pain.”

Martin was dying to mention his dalliance with Lucy. Surely, telling Mark of the partial he got while Frenching his daughter would get under his skin. However, the decision to be ‘agreeable’ hindered him. He gnashed his teeth together.

“Well,” Mark began, putting his hands behind his back, “she has her problems, but once she gets here, all can be well again.”

“What were you sayin’ about Paul?” Tyreese asked, glancing at the covered window.

“He’s in containment. He was so rabid when we got him here we had no choice but to—”
“Beat him senseless in there?” Martin asked.

“Force out the hatred. And no, he’s in another building.”

“He was locked up in a vault, he don’t need to be beat!” Tyreese snapped. "What'd you think he was gonna do after bein' in there so long? Have a tea party with y'all?"

Martin suppressed a laugh, “You’re gonna get beat if you don’t cool it.”

He threw him a look. “You’d hate that, huh?”

Mark nodded along. “See, this is why I brought you two here. Tyreese, you’re not a malicious man by heart. You have so much promise. Hate Martin for what he did and is if you want, but you allowed him to live and not even you would cheer if lightning struck him dead right now.” Tyreese remained silent.

“Ty’s been in love with my fine a—self since we first met,” Martin said. “Just don’t know it yet.”

“See, Martin, you have such a vibrant personality, you could have a positive effect on people if you just—”

Martin tuned him out, imagining what Theresa mentioned about pouring bleach down the man’s throat. Days after the turn in Savannah, he’d seen a group of teenage boys in the city pouring drain cleaner down a walker’s throat to see what would happen. The undead gagged on it and spewed blood that splattered on the boys’ faces. Their offended reaction had Martin snickering at them from his place in a hotel room above.

“—sunny disposition,” Mark finished.

Martin nodded. “Yeah, just what I was thinkin’.”

“You didn’t hear a word I said, did you?”

“Course I did, glued to every syllable.”

“Listen, we get to see Paul or what?” Tyreese asked.

Mark’s vision hung on Martin. “Not today. But please, wait right here.” He offered a smile and proceeded to exit around the archway at the hall's end.

Awkward silence encircled the two as Martin stared at Tyreese’s pitiful prosthetic arm.

“So,” Martin started, “what happened to your beanie?”

“What happened to your hat?” Tyreese asked back.

“Touché.”

He began to cross his arm with his prosthetic before bringing them back to his side. “You playin’ Theresa or did you finally make a friend?”

Martin had to do a double-take. “Huh?”

“Just curious. You had her laughin’ at somethin’ in y’all’s room last night. Walls are thin.”

“Theresa’s a bitch. Was just tryin’ to make her remotely bearable.”
“Nah, see, out there in the wild, you get close to folks you never thought you would. Ones you’d
never have thought twice could be your friend in the old days.” Martin stayed quiet and awaited
Mark’s return. “Hey, you gave me very unsolicited life advice, now I’m givin’ it to you. Was just
surprised you seemed so offended about Gareth and Alex’s mother.”

A few moments passed before he replied, “She was an alright chick. Had that whole Martha
Stewart shit goin’ on, but she’d tear your eyes out if you pissed her off. Heh, guess she was sorta
like Theresa.” He raised his index finger. “Oh, Alex married his mother. Now it all makes sense.”

Mark reappeared with one woman and three men by his side—including the man who frightened
Theresa.

“What’s Captain McRapey doin’ here?” Martin asked.

Mark frowned. “That’s not a constructive thing to say.” He stepped over to the door and pushed it
open. “Out of the four of you, Martin, you need the most attention. We allow you to experience
this place first before we decide how intense your rebuilding has to be. Sadly, yours will have to be
intense.”

A lump formed his throat. “What?”

“The hell you mean?” Tyreese asked, scanning the four behind him.

One of the men sprang forward and shoved Martin into the room. Tyreese was yelling as he was
pushed away and the other four followed Martin inside, shutting the door behind them.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Martin warned, noting the room’s only fixture was a small twin bed.

“You’ll be a new man,” the ‘reformed rapist’ told him, swinging and hitting him in the gut.

Martin shook off the pain and threw a punch at him, sending him back. Yet the other three pushed
him to the floor and began kicking him.

* * *

Martin lay on the meager bed and stared at the grey ceiling above while his body throbbed in pain.
A sharpness punctured his chest with each inhale and he took shallow breaths to try to deter the
pain, but with little success. The four had assaulted everything but his groin—thank the fucking
lord he no longer believed in—and his face.

“They can’t leave any visible and upsetting marks,” they had said.

He had been in his fair share of brawls before. It had always been invigorating to get his hands
dirty and leave whatever asshole was coming at him with a few bruises to match his own. Even
when he lost, beaten senseless by Tyreese, and the embarrassment of a choking by sweet little
Beth, it wasn’t humiliating. They did it for a reason he understood. Yet this time, all he could do
was lie there for hours and listen to four morons drone on about their new way of life as he felt his
rib crack. Powerless and at the mercy of strangers.

Attempting to sit up, he felt a dampness down his legs and on the groin he was so grateful they left
alone. It was urine. Anger shot a rush of energy through his body and he sat up all the way with a
groan. Those people would die for what they did. Every one of them. Regardless of if they had laid
a finger on him or not, he’d kill them all himself.

He flinched when the door opened, expecting another Samaritan, but to his relief seeing Theresa.
Theresa gasped and sped to his side. “They told me they beat you! Where did they…” She looked him over.

“Did it where—where you can’t see,” he uttered.

She knelt down and lifted his shirt. “Oh my god… Martin.”

A mix of purple and black covered most of his stomach, a few bruises matching the shape of shoeprint. Theresa further pushed up his shirt and her eyes bugged out.

He avoided the sight of his battered skin and tried to take even shallower breaths. His voice came out just above a whisper, “Gonna sh—show me what it is you do to Alex that makes him whimper like a baby?”

“What?” She leaned in. “What’d you say?”

He figured it not the optimal time for jokes. “It's—it was nothing.”

She leaned back. “They said I could take you back to the room, but they won’t even give you aspirin because they want you to ‘go through the pain.’ They’re going to fucking pay for this.” She pulled his shirt down. “You think you can walk?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, try to so we can—” She grimaced and glanced at his midsection. “We’ll um, have to change your clothes.” Her face reddened and she put her arms around his shoulders to help him up.

He bit his tongue to avoid whining from the knives in his chest and shockwave of pain in his legs. But it was no use, they gave out and he stumbled to the floor with Theresa still holding onto him.

A strained sound escaped his throat despite himself and he resigned to going limp. “I gotta… stay here a little longer.”

“Okay.”

He waited for her to lay him against the bed, but her hand remained resting on his arm while she ran her nails between his shoulder blades with the other. Her touch mixed calming shivers with the aches of his injuries. Inhibitions slipped away and he laid his cheek against her skin and the yellow spaghetti strap from the dress she had been forced into.

“They…” he breathed out. “They made me fucking piss myself, Theresa. They… that was…” He squeezed his eyes shut, trying so hard not to admit it. “Humiliating.”

She grazed his spine with her fingertips. “I know.”

Martin supposed Theresa did know.
Alex is so sweet, how come I never **liked** him? Cynthia thought, watching Alex pick at his fingernails. A habit Theresa said drove her crazy.

A few questionable Saviors filled the rest of the van while they trekked off en masse to their following destination. Albert sat beside her doing a crossword puzzle gifted by Gina.

**How come I could never fall in love with you?**

No, she always had to like the difficult ones.

*Gareth.*

Gareth was so gorgeous, funny—when the humor wasn't dark—and more intelligent than she thought herself. She fantasized about him running his hands through her hair and nipping at her lips. His soft voice in her ear saying he loved her, and his eyes filled with adoration, seeing her as a woman rather than a fragile little lamb.

Yeah, right.

What he needed was not her, but an even bigger jackass than himself, Martin. Who to Cynthia's deep regret, she found her eyes wandering to despite her initial disinterest. He was certainly attractive and her cheeks warmed the day she saw him half-naked rinsing off by a creek bed, revealing a tattoo on his chest. And he was at least a decent enough guy that he stopped pursuing her when she rejected him. Several times throughout their lives in the wild, she considered seeking him out and letting him take her.

**Bad idea,** a voice in her head had always stopped her.

While her mind was in such a place, she had also wondered what such attractive egotistical jerks were like in bed together. She was uncertain what all sex between two men entailed...

**Ugh, I'm the perv. Jeez, Cynthia.**

Her situation ate away at her and she needed help. Albert was her best friend and the first choice, but her dilemma was something she wanted another female for. Theresa was both unavailable and mad at her. Besides, she pictured her advice going something like, "**What!? You still like Gareth!? He's emotionally unavailable and married to the job! And what!? You considered Martin? He's even worse! What's wrong with you!?**"

The woman could be so judgmental, but she had found someone worthwhile with no trouble. She didn't know what it was like to be that special kind of lonely.

Kaylee was a girl, but after what she did, approaching her about boy advice seemed awkward. That and Cynthia had no recollection of Kaylee being interested in anyone. No mentioned boyfriends—or girlfriends—pre-turn, no one at Terminus she liked. No one.

*Gina...* Gina would give blunt advice for sure. However, she would no doubt go off into obscene territory. Cynthia thought her worse than a jock sometimes.
No one wanted to hear that Greg was 'uncut and au natural,' Gina.

Alex!

Alex knew Gareth better than anyone. He was a he and she felt it might be weird, but it was the best she would get.

She slunk over beside the spot where Alex sat picking at his nails. It was then she realized their lack of privacy.

"Yeah?" Alex asked her, bringing his hands down. "Cynth'? Did you need somethin'?"

"Um..." she stuttered, noticing she had been staring at him. Her gaze darted around the ten Saviors. "It was nothin'. Nevermind."

* * *

"We'll head out tomorrow," Gina told the group inside a small department store, pulling off her fingerless gloves and shaking them out.

Dusk had settled and Cynthia sat alone on a bench in the raided shop. Saviors went about their business and Cynthia noted Albert chatting with Alex from across the room.

Why are they suddenly so friendly?

"I think Negan will like you," a female Savior said, tucking a strand of her black hair behind her ear and peeling open a candy bar. "Mm-mm-good." She looked Cynthia up and down and took a large bite of the candy.

Cynthia stiffened and forced a polite smile.

"Hey, Jan," Gina called, making her way over to the two. "Go stuff your fat face outside."

Jan shrugged and took another bite, then strolled toward the exit.

"Ignore her," Gina said, taking a seat beside Cynthia. "She likes to freak out new people. Bitch thinks she's hot shit 'cause of all the points she's been rakin' in lately."

Cynthia squinted. "Points?"

"How we earn our dues."

"That sounds awful."

"Hey, don't knock it 'til you try it."

She smiled. "You said that at Terminus, too."

She scratched the back of her head. "Yeah, but I gotta admit I like a points system better than munchin' on people. We move around a bunch and gotta crack some eggs to make our omelet, but we're stronger 'cause of it. Terminus was gonna go up in smoke one way or another. What would we have done once we ate every livin' person left in Georgia?"

"Yeah... I guess. It was home, though."
"It was a place of nightmares. Ones we had done to us and ones we made ourselves, but like I said, I ain't dwellin' on it." She removed her canteen from her belt and took a swig. "You seem a little more stable than the last time I saw you. Thought all this would make you a basket case."

She bit her tongue to avoid cursing her out. "W—well, I'm not a helpless little... I'm... Gareth was the one that went off the rails. Obsessed with punishin' someone—anyone—for what Rick's folks did that he stopped listenin' to us. I heard him talkin' into a tape recorder like it was a message for his mom or somethin'."

Gina's eyes widened. "Oh, shit. Well yeah, I can see it. He gets so lost in Gareth-land sometimes he forgets where he really is. Gets too damn big for his britches."

She giggled. "Yeah."

Gareth passed through the front door and started toward them. Cynthia suppressed a smile as he approached. "No offense, Gina," he began as he stopped before the two, "but I'm parched and not sure I want to share slobber with your new friends just yet." He held out his three-fingered hand.

Cynthia fought the urge to take his hand and entwine her fingers with his.

"You seem damn proud of those stumps," Gina said, focusing on his digits. "And how do you know I ain't been sharin' it with every Tom, Dick, and Harry?"

Look at me, look at me, look at me... why isn't he looking at me?

"Shows I survived. And because you're territorial about your possessions. Remember your coffee mug? I thought you were going to skin Chuck when you found him drinking his daily chamomile out of it."

She handed the canteen to him and he took a long drink. "Gotta love the taste of Virginia creeks." He licked his lips handed it back to Gina. "Eight tomorrow morning?"

Cynthia held back a whine. His lips... she would give anything to kiss them again.

Gina nodded. "On the dot."

"Right. Don't be tardy, you crazy kids. Big, big, big day." He waved himself off, throwing a quick glance at Cynthia before heading back outside.

Cynthia slouched and her face crumpled. "Why am I so in love with him? He's such a dick."

Gina's eyebrows shot up. "You're what?"

"Yeah, I always have been. It just took until we got out in the wild that to realize it. He don't want me though. Told me himself."

"Oh, girl... that's not..."

"Ugh, Martin. He got back hookin' up with him again. Said it's 'cause it's all no strings. Meanin' I'd be a high-maintenance ball and chain."

She laughed. "Oh, shit? Really? Well, you know, Martin's fun for a roll in the hay, but that's all. Gareth's an idiot for not wantin' you. Somethin' seriously wrong with him if he turned you down."

Cynthia smiled. "Thanks. I mean, don't he gotta miss havin' a girl?"
"I... don't think it works like that. But you'd think he'd be tired of Martin."

"You weren't."

She frowned. "Rather not get into my own issues."

"Sorry." She fiddled with her hands. "I hate him."

"Gareth or Martin?"

"Both."

"Hey, know if I was into girls, I'd be scissorin' you until you got cut in half."

Cynthia blushed and half-smiled. "Um, thanks."

* * *

Cynthia stood in the center of the Terminus's butchery room, her arms crossed and skin itching from the gruesome sights.

Why am I in here? she wondered.

Gareth appeared from behind a slab of hanging meat, filling her with relief. He swiped a bit of blood from a liver resting in a metal tray and licked it off his finger.

"Ew, that's blood," she remarked. "Why'd you do that?"

Gareth removed his finger with a pop. "Still want to kiss me?"

She grinned "Of course. God, yes!" She bounced over and threw her arms around him. Their mouths came together in a passionate kiss, her tongue taking in the blood's irony tang.

He pulled away and held up a piece of raw thigh meat. "Lucy. Did her in as a walker. She'll be on our menu tonight." He raised a finger to his lips. "Shhh, don't tell everyone else or they'll get mad because, oh bloo bloo, we're not monsters!" He cackled.

She forced a laugh. "Well, we're not. Monsters can't love like this." She wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Or fuck like this." He ripped her dress down the center and rendered her stark naked. She giggled and he reached between her legs, making her gasp and buck against his touch. He spun her around and pushed her against the slab of meat.

She paused. "Oh, no. I don't wanna do it against the—"

"Human corpse? Human meat? God, Cynthia, you're still so afraid to say it. Even Alex is steadier around it." He took a few steps back.

"Why? Why do we have to do this here?" She crossed her arms over her breasts.

He scoffed. "You don't get it. Never have."

"I stayed with you and helped this happen! I ate it, I understood. I still do. Why's it such a big deal I don't wanna live in it?"
"If you want me, you have to live where I do. I have to be somewhere you and everyone else has the luxury of not spending all their time—on the killing floor. All day, every day, it's where I operate. You live out in the courtyard with your sunflowers and 'hello m'am.' I'm here stuck in the real world. You want in? Come to the real world with me."

"This ain't the real world and you know it. And you do come outta here sometimes. Or you do since we've been outta Terminus, I've seen it. You loved your mom, and you love your brother and you care about us. Not just as soldiers to keep alive 'cause it increases our chances of survivin', but as your family."

He rolled his eyes and sighed. "The hell with this. Martin's probably up for a roll in the hay. He bitches at me too, but it's fun to argue with him. With you, it's a damn drag."

*Tears welled up in her eyes as he tossed her torn clothes at her.*

* * *

She awoke with a jerk, sensations of her dream fresh in her body and mind. Her queasy stomach at the butchery room, her glee at Gareth's embrace, the arousal in her loins, and the crushing blow his cruel words.

It was a lie. Gareth had grown since their time away from Terminus. He spoke to Alex like a brother more often than an employee and listened when his people dissented. Stupid dream. Still, warmth claimed her eyes and spilled over her cheeks. At his darkest, the things he said in her dream could have easily come from his mouth in reality.

"Hey, mom?" Albert's voice came from beside her. "You have a bad dream?"

Her head whipped around, worried a Savior in the van heard what he called her. "T—Terminus," she whispered. "I was back. I... I'm so glad we're outta that place."

Albert nodded and put his arm around her. "Yeah, I know."

"You do?"

"Hindsight. It didn't seem so bad when we were there, but now? I never want to see it again."

"I know, I never thought I'd be havin' nightmares about it. I mean, other than the Occupiers. About what we did there. It was all normal then, now it's like a bad dream."

"Well, bad dreams end."

* * *

Theresa avoided the looks of the Samaritans as she helped Martin across the streets to their 'home.' Though she could feel their pitiful stares as she escorted her battered teammate. She grit her teeth hard enough to cause a headache to avoid going ballistic on the residents.

A sense of dread hit her gut. How were they going to escape with Martin in such a state? Bruises were one thing, but a rib on his left side was cracked. And with no pain relievers allowed—aspirin and disallowed in their house—he would be unable to move properly for days if not more than a week.

Theresa's blood boiled.
Though her anger subsided for awkwardness when she stood back-turned in the restroom while Martin struggled out of his pants to rinse off in the tub. She awaited some lewd joke, the situation was ripe for countless ones, but all that sounded was running water. It was then she actually wished he'd say something inappropriate to cut the tension.

Adding insult to injury, he had to change into more bright colors—because put on a happy face! Theresa then escorted him to his twin bed in their room and helped him down. He let out a groan of relief as he fell to the bed and shut his eyes.

You're my test run for having a toddler, you know, she wanted to joke, but the words refused to form on her lips.

"Do you need anything else?" she asked.

He gave a shake of his head. "No."

Funny, because when he had his sprained ankle, he tried to wrangle her and Alex into doing anything and everything he could for him.

It hurt her to see him like that, so un-Martin-like and degraded. Once she would have rejoiced in seeing him marred. She recalled how the gun felt in her hand when she pressed it to his temple, desperately wanting to pull the trigger for tipping off Carol and Tyreese.

Theresa moved to the doorframe and flicked off the top light. "Okay well, if you do, just yell for me."

"Sure thing."

She strode out the door and into the vibrant living room, its cheerful colors making her seethe. The front door opened and a solemn Beth and Tyreese entered.

"Hey," Tyreese began, shutting the door behind him, "they didn't let me—"

"Go fuck yourself," Theresa bit.

"You know I couldn't stop it."

"Even if you could, you wouldn't have. Twist and snap goes little Judith's neck. Almost. Could've happened."

"I ain't gonna hold grudges right now."

"Oh, right. You sorry sack of shit, someone torched your girlfriend and you took a day and decided, oh well, let's go out for coffee."

He squinted and looked to Beth. "Did you...?"

She frowned and shrugged. "I'm sorry, she pried it outta me."

Tyreese raised his arm to his hip. "Don't judge me on shit you know nothin' about. No, you know what? I don't care, stop tryin' to change the subject. We can't focus on our 'issues' right now, we have to—"

"I ate your sister's boyfriend too," Theresa interrupted. "You still want to forgive me, huh? He tasted so good, you have no idea. Scrumptious."
"Knock it the fuck off, Theresa!" Beth snapped. Theresa froze, unable to process what her words. "You actin' like this is gonna ruin our chances. We don't have to try and get out together, but we are 'cause it's the smart thing to do. You said yourself we all need to cool it. You don't get a pass to have a tantrum like a little child every time somethin' ticks you off. So suck it up like we are so we can get out of here."

Theresa's pulse beat in her ears and she glared back at Beth. Her quivering hands snatched up a metal lamp from the table beside her, yanking its cord from the wall socket, and lobbed it over Beth's head. Beth ducked and the thing crashed behind her.

"Don't!" Tyreese shouted, stepping in front of Beth.

"Then stop me!" Theresa fired back. "Hit me! Call me a bitch, a fucking monster! Do it, god damnit!"

"Why!? Why do want us to hate you so bad!?"

"Because it's what we do! I hate you, and you hate me back. There's no other way so stop acting there is! Stop act—" An ache in her throat inhibited her speech and heat pressed from behind her eyes.

Forgiveness was never a possibility, not anymore. She knew that, so why didn't she kill those three in the shack?

_Dumb, weak, spoiled girl._

Sipsey's luxuries had softened her. Perhaps she was better out in the wild. In the real world where it was impossible to forget how easy it was to lose everything. That was what the Samaritans' problem was—they were pampered, spoiled, and it made them delusional. Though what Tyreese and Beth's problem was, she had no idea. They'd been out in the real world too.

"Theresa," Martin's agitated voice broke through her racing thoughts.

She whirled around to him leaning against the doorway. "What are you doing up!?"

"Some crazy bitch was hollerin' and throwin' shit. Sorta interrupted my beauty sleep."

She sighed in relief—that was the Martin she knew. "I'm—I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"Eh, not like I can sleep with the whole blinding pain thing, so..."

Her face fell. "I don't know what to do about that. I'm powerless here."

"I don't blame you." He looked at Beth and Tyreese and shook his head. "Holy shit, my life's a joke." He staggered back to their room.

Beth peeked out the front window. "It's Sarah. Oh, um... we gotta get the lamp up or she'll know we were fightin'."

"If she's not coming because she heard us," Theresa said, grabbing up a shawl from the sofa and gathering pieces of the lamp with it.

"Where do we say it went if they ask?" Tyreese asked as Beth helped Theresa gather lightbulb shards.

Theresa hurried over to the sofa and shoved the shawl underneath it. "We'll say I was moving it and
dropped it or... Martin stumbled on it."

God, she had fucked up. If the powers that be found out, she could get the beating Martin had gotten.

Beth kicked at a few remaining pieces of glass to disperse them as a knock came from the door. The three attempted to look natural as Sarah came through. "Hello, you three," she beamed.

The sight of the woman with Mary's face was too much and Theresa stomped into the kitchen. She parked herself at the table, hands cupping the sides of her face.

"I understand your frustration, Theresa," Sarah called. Theresa slid her hands into her hair and tugged on it.

"You're not actually here to see Martin, are you?" Beth asked.

"Oh, no, no," Sarah answered. "He needs time to rest a night before we see him. I came to inform you we have a trade happening tomorrow and you'll be required to stay indoors."

"Why? What trade?" Tyreese asked.

"Just an exchange of goods with another group."

"Who you don't try to abduct and convert?"

"No, sadly they have not yet come to see our ways. Their leader is quite the fearsome man and we've had no choice but to bend to their requests."

"Why do we have to be out of the way?"

"You're all still... unstable and might think of using it as an opportunity." Theresa lifted her head and attuned her ears. "Two guards will be assigned to keep watch here."

"Great," Beth griped. "Prisoners in our own prison."

"I know this is hard, Beth. But it gets better, I promise."

Fearless leader? We might 'use it as an opportunity'?

Theresa wondered what it would take to get him to snap.

Chapter End Notes

50th chapter! Hooray! And I thought it was time to explore Cynthia's POV again since I haven't since chapter five. Ehehe, whoops.
"It's almost noon," Gareth said to his people, waiting among the caravan of Saviors parked a few miles outside Roanoke.

Gina checked her watch. "He'll be here, don't worry. Man's never tardy."

"So, this is where your loyalties lie now?"

She fiddled with the buttons on the watch. "Yep."

"Still, you'd do this for us," Kaylee remarked.

"'Cause we got history," Gina replied. "Which I never forgot. You seemed to have."

Kaylee folded her arms. "I'm making up for that."

"Mm-hm."

Gareth threw a snide look at Kaylee before asking Gina, "Even though I know the answer, I have to ask: if it were between us and this Negan..."

"I'd choose him," Gina answered. "Yeah, I'll come right out and say it. Just how it is now."

"That them?" Albert asked as a sedan arrived up across from the congregation.

Gina nodded. "All y'all stay here." She trekked off to the newly arrived vehicle.

Gareth tapped his fingers on his hips, anticipating the man who Gina chose over him. Though the sea of Saviors oriented to the vehicle and blocked his view.

Cynthia stepped to Gareth's side and he made a point to avoid her continued longing looks. "I don't like these people," she said. "Even though Gina said they have this policy against stuff like rape, I don't like 'em."

"Oh, I don't like them either," Gareth agreed. "They're just a means to an end. We were on a wild goose chase to West Virginia and we would have been S.O.L. if we hadn't come across them."

"Like they'll let us go when we get Theresa and Martin back?" Kaylee contended. "I have a pretty good feeling they won't."

"We already went over—oh wait..." He brought his fingers to his lips. "We didn't. I purposely excluded you from the conversation."

She scowled. "You're a child, you know that? So what did you go over without me? Like, what about Beth and Tyreese?"

Gareth sighed. God, he wished he could get his hands on those two... "Gina said asking for two more just so we can..."

'H ave toys to pay with.'
"...would be pushing it. And after we get ours back, I'll say we play on our own, and thank him. Gina's already paying with her 'points,' so if he's as 'reasonable' as she says he is, then that will be enough." He scanned the crowd of distracted Saviors before turning his back to them and lowering his voice. "Then we can look for Naz, kill her, then go back to Sipsey."

"You're just gonna kill her?" Kaylee whispered.

"If we want a future at Sipsey, sort of have to, hm? We already have two blemishes to our name there. Naz will be on our trail looking for her sweetie, so we find her on the way back and waste her. Say she got capped along the way."

"And that'll mark the second time one of theirs just happened to die while we're in the vicinity."

"Twice is a coincidence, three times is a pattern. And she'd be 'lost on the road,' not just happened to have been killed by a walker outside the fence. Have to admit, Cynthia, I'm amazed they bought that. Especially with how teary you were." Cynthia frowned.

The further he could push her away, the better.

"They'll think we ate her," Albert muttered.

Gareth gave Albert a pat on the back. "Then we'll bring back her uneaten walker. I really did want to give it to Mark though, damn. Gotta do what you gotta do though."

Heavy footsteps began toward him and he quieted.

"Excuse the fuck out of me," a male voice came from behind him. Gareth turned to Gina standing beside a middle-aged man with a graying beard and wearing a leather jacket.

The Saviors had parted in the middle and wore faces of reverence. Even Gina even wore one—something Gareth thought her incapable of.

Gareth donned a smile and inched up on his heels slightly to lessen their height difference. "My apologies, Negan. Gina fill you in?"

"That you're those fucking humanitarians she used to run a butcher shop with? That you have people in Roanoke? Yeah, told me a bunch of shit." He looked Gareth up and down. "You know, you'd be prettier than a few of my fucking wives if you shaved the fur off your face."


"What does it?" he added. "Virgin flesh give you a radiant glow?"

Cannibal jokes. Naturally.

"No, just genetics," Gareth replied. "And we haven't had to be humanitarians in a long time. So, since you haven't told us to fuck ourselves sideways, I assume—"

"Don't ever 'assume' what I'm going to fucking do. And I want a goddamn introduction first. You're Gareth, I know that. Anyone else want to say hello?" He glanced across the other four hunters.

And now he cares about proper manners, Gareth thought, biting his tongue and suppressing a grumble.

"Yeah, man, I'm—I'm Alex," Alex replied.
Negan stared at him as if scrutinizing his molecular structure. "Mm-hm. You're the one with the little wifey you want back. Right, man?"

Alex's jaw clenched. "Yeah."

_Damnit, learn how to hide how nervous you are._

"I'm Cynthia," Cynthia greeted, stepping forward.

Albert gave a wave. "Albert."

"I'm Kaylee."

Negan fake flinched at Kaylee. "Oh, shit, I didn't even see you there until just now. You're fucking miniature."

Gareth held back a laugh, a tad softening his disdain for the man. He could feel Kaylee's burning offense behind him and it felt _good._

Negan chuckled. "Alright, thank you for your pleasant introductions. Now as long as Gina here remembers who she's fucking loyal to, we'll have no problems. Pretty damn surprised she'd go so far just for old flames. But then again if they're stuck with those fucking Samaritans? Cheery fucks and their rainbow colors piss me off."

"So why not just mow 'em down and take their shit?" Alex asked. "You got the numbers."

"Because I'm a reasonable guy just like Gina told you. It's an old car salesman thing, those fucks got a deal of a lifetime."

Gareth figured the man might appreciate some fire thrown back. "That's funny. People assumed I was a car salesman before, or a lawyer, or politician. Among other life-sucking leeches of the old world. No offense."

He smiled. "None fucking taken. And all-fucking-right, we'll head out to Woodstock at twelve-forty."

* * *

"You still able to walk short distances by yourself?" Theresa asked Martin from his bedside.

"If I gotta, I can," Martin replied, lying on his side with his hands buried under the pillow. "Guess you're not keen on takin' me to the bathroom?"

She gave a weak nod. "We are royally boned."

"Yeah, bad time to get beat."

"They knew if they incapacitated one of us we'd be trapped here. I just wonder who's the group they have to trade with." She moved to the doorway. "Well, I'm going to see what Ebony and Ivory are jabbering about in there."

"Oh, that's a good one. I'd laugh if it didn't cause horrible agony."

She offered a tiny smile. "What about the salt and pepper shaker?"

"You're a comedic genius."
"Then you owe me hysterical laughter once your rib heals." He gave a thumbs up and Theresa exited into the kitchen, spotting the round clock on the wall reading 1:07 PM—just after when the rival group was scheduled to arrive.

"It's one," Theresa announced to Beth and Tyreese at the kitchen table. "They ought to be here by now. So, what are you—" A knock on the door interrupted her.

The three exchanged worried glances before Theresa crossed into the front room and answered it.

Their two male guards stood shoulder-to-shoulder, semi-automatics slung over their backs. "I'm sorry to inform you that you've been requested," the older one on the right said.

Her heart dropped. "What?"

Beth and Tyreese came around. "Why now?" Beth asked.

"The rival group," the guard on the left started, "they—"

Theresa breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, you don't mean a beating?"

He chuckled. "No, no. The group appeared beside your friends. If I can recall the names, let's see, Gareth, Alex—"

"Alex?" Her eyes widened. "He's—they're here?"

"Yes, along with Cynthia, Albert, Hayley, and Gina. They're requesting you and Martin along with our trade. Unfortunately, we have no choice but to oblige."

"It's Kaylee," Theresa corrected. "And how do I know this isn't some mind re-molding trick?"

"Well, you were never kind enough to tell us your friends' names."

She whirled around. "Martin, get out here! Now!"

"What about us?" Tyreese asked.

"You weren't mentioned," the younger escort replied.

Theresa did a double take. "Wait, did you say Gina?" she asked the men.

"Yes?"

She figured it was a misunderstanding. "You mean that was the name of their negotiator or—"

"What?" Martin interrupted as he slogged up from the hall. "What the hell is it?"

"Gareth's apparently with their trading buddies," Theresa replied. "They're asking for us back."

Martin scoffed. "Sure."

"They knew their names."

He squinted. "And why would your pals be with ours?"

She looked back to the guards. "Yeah, why?"

"Gina said she offered her points to get you back," the older guard replied. "I assumed she knew
"Yes. They're waiting right now."

"Wait, Gina? Did she sound like she was from Louisiana or...?"

"Sounded like it. Now please, come along, we have no choice but to hand you over and they're waiting."

Martin simpered at Tyreese and Beth. "Looks like you're on your own, salt and pepper."

Beth scratched the back of her neck. "Good luck, guys."

Tyreese clenched his one fist. "We said we'd get out together."

"They're not giving us a choice," Theresa replied with a shrug. "Sorry."

Almost in-sync with one another, the two guards took their weapons in hand and gestured outside. Theresa and Martin followed behind the two as they started off. Beth and Tyreese's stare burned into their backs with every step.

"I don't need to be held," Martin huffed as he refused Theresa's physical support.

Theresa gave a closed-mouth sigh in return as she noticed the dead quiet of the town. No one on the streets, no upbeat music playing out of a garage, no activity at all.

*They're terrified of these people.*

The four reached the front gate that led to the outskirts of town and edge of their stronghold. Several long-faced Samaritans stood peering out by the fence. Once outside, Theresa scanned the considerable crowd of armed people for her own. She spotted them toward the forefront of the convoy, Gareth standing before Alex, Cynthia, Albert, and Kaylee. Yet no sign of the fabled Gina.

Theresa smiled and stepped forward. "Al—"

"Shhh!" her guard silenced her. "No talking at this part. Stay still."

Her eyes locked with Alex's and his face filled with relief. For a moment, she felt everything was okay.

"I assume these are the two you wanted?" the man she assumed was their 'fearsome' leader shouted, clad in a leather jacket and domineering posture. He stood beside several others rummaging through crates and a nerve-wracked Mark.

"That's them," Gareth confirmed before narrowing his eyes at Martin. "Wait, what's wrong with him?" The Samaritans were quiet.

"Hey!" their leader shouted. "What the fuck is wrong with the guy? Looks like he's about to keel over."

Mark folded his hands in front of him. "He—he had to undergo a treatment."

"Oh, you did the thing where you beat his ass for a few hours to make him all rainbows and sunshine, huh?"
"It was necessary."

"Excuse me?" Gareth asked, raising his eyebrows. "Oh, now I'm in a bad mood. You bring me back one of mine *damaged*?"

"This is piss poor," a balding man announced from one of the crates. "No way this is half of their harvest with all the rain this spring."

*Sure isn't.*

Mark looked to the 'fearsome' leader and raised his hands. "Negan, I can explain."

*Weird name.*

Negan chuckled. "You stupid motherfucker. After last time, you're still trying to pull this shit?"

Theresa noticed the reflection in a nearby car's window of someone in a tree behind her with the glint of a rifle pointed outward. From what she judged, it was aimed at Negan. The sniper's finger flexed on the trigger as Negan appeared to be close to going homicidal on Mark. And Theresa wasn't about to prevent that.

She licked a dry tongue across her lips and yelled, "Negan! Sniper in the tree above me!"

Negan averted his attention to the oak behind her before skirting aside as a bullet hit the crate next to him. Those armed in his group drew their weapons and Theresa saw the sniper's reflection retreat.

He boasted unamused laughter. "You stupid, stupid, *stupid* motherfuckers. I have been more than patient with you assholes. And now? You give me shit as a harvest and try to fucking take me out? You want our protection or not? Huh? How do you think you fucking pussies haven't been raided and torn apart yet? It's because of my *kindness*."

Mark shook his head and gestured to the sniper's tree. "N—no, no, I didn't order that!"

"I think it's time you say hi to Lucille."

The color drained from Mark's face and his mouth gaped open. Cries of dissent erupted from the community's fences.

"What about Lucy?" Gareth chimed in with a smirk. "Shouldn't he see his daughter one last time?"

*Yes!* They discovered who the real enemy was at Sipsey and took her out.

"You have her?" Mark asked with hope in his eyes.

"That *would* be poetic," Negan replied. "Mauled by your own dead daughter."

"No," he mouthed. "She's not a—I don't believe you!"

"You should, saw the ugly skank myself. But no, no, that'd take too long and I'm not in the mood for more of your fucking blubbering. Lucille's been itching for action lately." He held a hand out. "And she had *dibs*."

Theresa was dying to know who Lucille was and why she would do the killing. A man moved through the crowd carrying a barbed wire-wrapped baseball bat, revealing Lucille as an *it*. 
"Oh, shit," Martin muttered.

The Samaritans pleaded for him to show mercy.

"I told you if you crossed me again, bossman gets it!" Negan yelled at the crowd and took Lucille in his hands. "And I'm a man of my fucking word."

Theresa leaned forward, holding her breath as she recalled the bats the butchers used at Terminus. Negan's intention clearly wasn't to knock Mark out before his demise.

"Kneel."

Mark complied and sniffled.

Gareth stood wearing a face of disappointment which threw Theresa for a loop before figuring he wanted to show off a dead Lucy to daddy.

*Whines like a bitch when he doesn't get what he wants.*

The rest of her people looked on the edge of their seats. Theresa hoped Alex would return her gaze for reassurance, but stayed focused on the two leaders. Then at last, she spotted Gina standing to the side of her former group—and by god it *was* the Gina she knew at Terminus.

*Oh my god...*

But seeing ghosts would have to wait.

"I don't care if she's turned," Mark uttered, fists balled. "I want to see Lucy one last time."

Negan looked Lucille across. "One question before we begin, is, I mean *was*, your brat's full name Lucille?" Mark gave a nod. "Oh, this is too fucking good. Looks you'll have to say your goodbyes to this Lucille." He raised the bat above his head.

The Samaritans protests were deafening as Negan brought the bat down on Mark's head, sending an all too familiar crack through the area. Theresa spent little time on the killing floor at Terminus, but the sounds of skulls cracking were tattooed on her brain.

Both guards next to her and Martin were crying out and the one next to her's grip loosened around his rifle. Theresa contemplated grabbing it from him.

"Why aren't you fucking smiling Mark!?!" Negan exclaimed. "Beat out the hate! Come on, *love me!*" He brought Lucille down again and Mark collapsed onto his hands and knees. "Oh, I'm sorry, I meant why aren't you *judging* smiling. Didn't mean to offend with my unconstructive nasty words."

The man was a maniac. A pit formed in Theresa's gut at what he might do to her and her people, but the corners of her mouth twitched up as he continued his assault and mocked the Samaritans' values. She had hoped to pour bleach down Mark's throat herself, but Negan's way worked just fine.

Her eyes flitted between the gruesome sight and the distraught Samaritan next to her, waiting for the moment to steal his gun. At the end of Negan's rampage, Mark's head was reduced bloody heap on the ground. Negan casually flicked brain and blood matter from Lucille.

*Jesus...*
The trembling Samaritan next to Martin fired his weapon and missed considerably, hitting one of Negan's men in the calf instead.

Martin struck him in the jaw and snatched the rifle away before firing a round into the guard's skull. "Duck!" he shouted at Theresa and she complied before Martin unloaded into the opposite guard's neck.

Theresa retrieved his own rifle before he even reached the ground. Her ears rung from the shots and more erupted from both sides, but most Samaritans were fleeing back inside their compound.

*Spoiled and pampered.*

"Do you see ours?" Theresa asked Martin as they darted behind the base of the sniper's former tree.

"No, but I got somethin' to do first," he replied. "We're both the proud owners of AR-15's. Better make good use of 'em." He shuffled off toward the gate.

"Where are you going!?"

"Somethin' I gotta finish!"

"You're going to get yourself killed! Martin!"

She made a split second decision to go after him. Alex and the rest were able-bodied—Martin needed her help.

"Tess!" Alex's called as he came out of the crowd alongside Gareth and Cynthia.

She halted upon seeing him and forced away her desire to fall into his arms. "Alex... M—Martin went off to—"

Cynthia beamed. "Hey! Theres—"

"You two go cover him," Gareth ordered, nodding to Theresa and Alex. "We need to find Albert."

Theresa and Alex obeyed and sped into the Samaritan's complex. "Who are those people!?" she asked through her quick breaths.

"We met 'em on the road," Alex responded. "They're called The Saviors and Gina's alive and with 'em. She vouched to get y'all back."

Before Theresa could reply, Sarah sprung out from behind a neon yellow shed and shoved Theresa to the ground. Her firearm clattered to the pavement.

"You bitch!" Sarah screamed and punched Theresa in the face, sending a sharp sting throughout her cheek. "You ruined everything!"

Theresa growled and drove her fist into Sarah's neck, causing her to gasp. "Oh, get fucked!"

"Hey!" Alex heaved Sarah off his wife, pressed his revolver against her assailant's temple and fired. A warm spray of blood moistened the side of Theresa's face as Sarah collapsed. "Sorry," he said as Theresa wiped her face on her bare wrist and stood up. "Where's uh, where's Martin going?"

She retrieved her rifle and shook off the pain. "To find the bastards who beat him. There were four. I doubt he's heading anywhere specific, just looking. Come on." She took off again and Alex kept up beside her.
"What happened to Beth and Tyreese?"

"Either back in the house they gave us or making a run for it."

"Gareth wanted—"

"To hell what Gareth wants."

They turned a corner and trampled over a bright green lawn to find Martin by its garage standing before a man's body.

"Martin!" Theresa called as she and Alex caught up to him.

"Man, we gotta go!" Alex exclaimed, glancing at the dead man lying in a pool of his own blood leaking from a hole in his neck.

Martin struggled through breaths and shook his head. "There's still three more."

"Yeah, I know," Theresa said. "But you're injured and we're at risk out—"

"Seriously!? These people are god damned cowards, hidin' in their houses. Like shootin' fish in a barrel."

"Their lives are ruined, their cult leader's dead. This place is too big to go looking in every house and we finally have a way out."

He looked at her for a second with misty eyes. "You said—"

"I know what I said, but we can't be stupid. I'm sorry I have to ask you to leave them alive, but think here."

He gulped and stared down at the man's body. "You owe me four now."

"I owe you four. Now come on."

Martin dragged his feet behind them as they hurried back to the gate without a Samaritan in sight. The Saviors appeared to have taken hits to two of their own, but no apparent fatalities.

Negan had remained by Mark's maimed corpse. "Anyone else!?" he bellowed. "You all just going to hide in your houses like little piggies? Fucking disgraceful. I've met some fucking cowards in my day, but you take the cake!"

Theresa searched the crowd for any of her own as Alex helped Martin remain steady. She spotted Kaylee jogging toward her from the sniper's tree when a shot rang and punctured the side of her waist.

Kaylee fell face first on the pavement to reveal Joseph standing several yards behind her holding a small pistol. He dropped the gun and held his arms out. "Do it! Kill me! My family's gone, not like I have nothing left!"

Theresa raised her semi-automatic and aimed for his neck instead of the head to doom him to walkerdom. Her finger pulled the trigger and the recoil made her balance falter. Joseph went down and Theresa breathed a small sigh of satisfaction before rushing to Kaylee's side. "Kaylee? Hey, Kaylee?"

The injured girl let out a groan against the concrete. Alex bolted to their side, rolled Kaylee on her
side, and put pressure on her bleeding wound.

No, no, no...

Kaylee couldn't die. Not after everything. Despite what she did, all Theresa saw was the lonely, sad girl she held in her arms the night she found her contemplating suicide.

She didn't die then and she wouldn't die now.

"Oh... help her!" Theresa jumped to her feet and looked to the crowd of Saviors. "She's still alive! We have to get her... Those supplies! Are there any medical?" She started toward the supply carts but Negan blocked her way.

"And why the fuck would I share with her?" he asked, staring her down. "Gina gave her points to get you two out, not to save the miniature girl."

Theresa squared her shoulders, forcing her vision away from the dreadful sight of Mark's body mere feet away. "I'm the one who saved your life over there. That sniper was aiming for you and you know it. Please."

She knew the ridiculousness of the situation—begging a man who just merrily bashed in another's head to save a stranger.

He took a moment, another moment while Kaylee bled out. "You're not the boss of the group, peach. Won't twig boy be mad?"

"He didn't save you a bullet in the brain. Just please help her."

He groaned a sigh. "Since I'm feeling like fucking Santa Claus today..." He gestured to Kaylee. "Steph! Take a look at that one." A tall brunette woman ran to Kaylee's side.

"And Martin," Theresa added.

Negan scoffed and raised his eyebrows. "Don't ask for much, huh?"

Theresa stood her ground despite every fiber of her being screaming at her to flee to safety.

Gareth appeared and grabbed her by the arm. "We don't want her saved!"

Chapter End Notes

So here goes my take on Negan and inclusion of the Saviors (!). I'm using comic knowledge to fill in the blanks of what's not been revealed on the show. So when S7 premieres it may be rendered null, but this whole fic is way outside canon so I do what I want. The basic storylines (including future ones) of those outside the Terminants are roughly the same as canon, with the alterations that you know of. Obviously, this all takes place pre-any contact between Rick's group and the Saviors.

And no no, Rick's group will still not be making an appearance other than perhaps a mention later on. Or maybe one character appearance? Don't know yet.
Alex's hands warmed with Kaylee's blood as he applied pressure to her wound. Steph analyzed her condition and said something Alex failed to hear over Gareth and Theresa's shouting match. He tried to tune the two out, wanting to avoid a conflict between his wife and brother.

Kaylee let out a weak whine. Blood seeped out from beneath Alex's hands and he pressed harder. It was impossible to find a smidgen of malice in his heart for the girl. In earnest, he never had any. Had he been hurt and angry? Yes. But he never had a desire to hurt her and see her hurt.

And it looked like neither had Theresa.

"It's peach's decision, hot stuff," Negan's voice broke through his thoughts.

Alex pressed his lips together. He didn't appreciate strange violent men giving his wife cute nicknames and flirty looks.

Gareth ignored the leader. "Theresa, please don't waste this favor on her. Get supplies!"

"Like he said, it's my decision!" Theresa countered. "I'm not letting her die. I don't care what she did. You don't know... you never made an attempt to know her!"

"What happened to this being a democracy? Voting on everything? You know what they convinced me not to do while you and Martin were gone? Something I know he and you would've agreed to."

Theresa huffed and turned to Negan. "If my friends and I voted on it—"

"No fucking way," Negan replied, pointing a dirtied Lucille at her. "I made up my mind, you get the request regardless of anyone else. Eye for an eye, not an eye for a damn vote."

"My hands are tied here," Theresa said to Gareth before stalking off to Kaylee and Alex.

"Big mistake!" Gareth yelled.

Theresa crouched down by Alex. "How is she?"

"We'll need to get her over to the van," Steph replied and stood up. "Preston! Someone else—I don't care who—get over here!" She glanced down. "Albert, you can let us take over now."

"I'm Alex," he corrected. "The youngest one is Albert."

"Whatever," she said as Preston and a younger man arrived. The latter nudged Alex aside and took his place covering Kaylee's wound. Steph and Preston then lifted Kaylee and headed back to one of their vehicles. Theresa started after them when Steph shouted, "Stay there! Don't get in our way and we'll work faster."

Alex wiped Kaylee's blood off on his pants when Theresa flung her arms around him and nearly toppled him over.

"Don't worry about her blood," she said, nuzzling his neck. "Hold me."

He gripped her tight, hands sticking to her back from the combined moisture of blood and sweat. Though none of it mattered, her warm body against his was all he had dreamed of the past three days.
Three days? Was that all? It seemed like weeks.

"I missed you so much, princess," he said, peering over her shoulder in search of Negan or Gareth but seeing neither. By the chance Negan could see them, Alex gave Theresa a kiss with an amount of tongue he would normally only use in private.

She returned the kiss in full before their slicked lips parted. "Where's um, where's Gina?"

"I don't know, um... Oh, there she is."

Theresa whirled around to Gina making her way past Mark's corpse.

Gina raised her hands. "I'm gonna request no hug—" Theresa tackled her into the same tight embrace she had Alex. "Damnit, girl..." She gave in and hugged her back.

"Thank you," Theresa said. "Without you..."

She pulled away. "It's no problem."

The two women exchanged laughs and kind words in opposition to their prickly relationship at Terminus. One that hit its breaking point when Theresa became a busybody over Gina's infidelity.

Alex recalled his wife's deep offense when he called her out on it.

Though time had healed many wounds.

* * *

Negan stated The Saviors were staying a few hours to collect 'whatever the fuck they needed.' Though Steph wished to treat Kaylee in town, her leader declared it pointless as they would be leaving soon and their makeshift outdoor establishment was suitable.

Alex held Theresa from behind while they watched from afar as Saviors operated on Kaylee. He filled her in on the happenings since they'd been apart—Gabby's death, Lucy coming clean, leaving Naz behind, and the fact they were in Roanoke instead of Charleston. A tactic used to confuse those who might escape. Yet none of it appeared to make an impression as Theresa gave only mere nods while her vision remained on Kaylee.

Martin and the other two injured Saviors rested on shoddy cots near Kaylee's. Alex started to express his sympathies to Martin when Theresa stopped him, saying it would only worsen things.

Gareth stood a ways away leaning against their van from Sipsey. His arms were crossed and his gaze vacant.

Alex knew he was pissed.

Ever since they were children, Gareth would throw a fit if displeased, and then go stoic and silent. Despite Alex agreeing with Theresa's decision to save Kaylee, he felt Gareth had received the very short end of a very long stick.

"Hey, I'm gonna go talk to Gareth," Alex said into Theresa's ear.

She made a light noise. "Okay."

He let go of her. "Sorry."
"No, it's fine, he's sulking so you need to." She turned to him. "Hey, what was the thing he had you vote on he thinks I would've agreed to?"

"Oh... that um, he wanted to have a lunch of Lucy's walker."

She gave a knowing nod. "And he thought I'd say yes?"

He furrowed his brow. "Wouldn't you have?"

She took a deep breath. "Walkers taste like shit. What did you say?"

"That I didn't care, I just wanted to find you." She smiled and squeezed his hand. He glanced to the van to see Gareth gone. "Where'd he go?"

"Probably to our house," Martin chimed in from his cot.

Theresa frowned. "Did you tell him where it was?"

"He asked, so yeah. Ain't like they're still gonna be there."

"Well, you want to see the place?" she asked Alex.

"Only if they have runnin' water."

"Albert and Cynthia didn't just go in to get away from Gareth's mood."

"Good, 'cause I'm ripe."

"I know, I've been pressed up against you."

He let out a low chuckle. "I still think I need to go alone. Just 'cause he's—"

"Yeah, you do. I want to stay with Kaylee anyway." She proceeded to give him directions to their former house that he repeated in order to remember them.

The streets of the neon-colored town were empty as he strolled through them. An eerie sight as he felt it had bustled with life hours before. Painting their society in clown colors and forcing their people into happiness was an interesting idea. And if the colors didn't represent such a twisted idea, Alex might have enjoyed their artistry.

Part of him began to feel bad for their leader's horrific death and their community's crumble, but those people abducted his wife and Martin, and beat the latter until his rib cracked. There was no doubt they would have assaulted Theresa too had they the time.

Their pain and loss wasn't his problem. They brought it on themselves.

Arriving at what he hoped was the correct address since he had forgotten the exact directions, he approached the impressive home's front door to see it ajar.

Gareth sat inside on the living room's crimson sofa, a leg resting on his knee. "Didn't think they'd be here," he said. "It was a long shot anyway." He glimpsed behind Alex. "Where's your angrier half?"

Alex suppressed a sigh. "I came alone."

"Of course, can't leave precious Kaylee's side."
"Listen man, I'm sorry. I really am." He glided to the rectangle coffee table and sat down across from Gareth.

He leaned forward. "Because of her, we have to stay with them until at least Kaylee's able to get up and walk. And I don't need your sympathy."

Something in Alex snapped loose. "Well too fucking bad, because you're getting it." Gareth's brow quirked up. "I'm sorry you've gotten nothin' you want lately. Not Sipsey, not to take a bite outta Lucy, not to show her walker to her daddy. And to have Negan and Tess shoot you down like that? And Gina bein' more loyal to him than you? And now Beth and Tyreese slippin' through your fingers?"

"I mean, you know I think at the end of the day, devoting that much time revenge is a waste, but that don't mean I'm not sorry you couldn't have it. Or that you've had to cow toe to Gabby and Lucy and now Negan. And none of us have given you any sort of support for what you've had to deal with lately. And we should've even though we might not agree."

His face relaxed and a warm smile spread across his face, a sight unseen since Sipsey. "Should've known I was due a sharing and caring moment with you."

"Yep."

He was silent a moment. "It's been insult to injury to insult to injury to kick in the groin."

"We'll figure this out, man. We've been in worse spots before."

"Yeah." He breathed a laugh. "And to top it off, Martin told me to go fuck myself sideways and never touch him again."

He fidgeted. "Really? Well, he seems so... out of himself maybe he's just in one of his classic moods. Or Gina's screwin' him up in the head."

"Yeah, maybe. Shame she didn't pretend to be having his 'caramel baby.'"

"Guess she figured he deserved a break." He fiddled with his hands. "Man, you know what I wanna do right now more than anything?"

"Hm?"

"Burn one."

Gareth cracked-up. "I actually wouldn't mind getting good and stoned. Think Theresa would join us?"

"Heh, I'd hope so."

He gave a dismissive wave. "You can go back to her now."

"No, she can take care of herself. I'm stayin' right here for as long as you are."

"You don't have to—"

"Yeah, I do. I should've been doin' it anyway. You don't deserve this. And I never got a chance to apologize for what I said back at Sipsey. I know you put us first."

"Except Kaylee?"
"Well, you don't consider her one of us."

He sighed. "You really think I should let bygones be bygones?"

"I'm didn't come here to tell you what to feel."

"Ah, going Switzerland, huh?"

"Yep. I have to."

"Actually, I was going to take a shower with that lovely running water. I'd sort of like to do that alone."

"Heh, yeah, okay. Well, I owe you one, alright?"

"Right."

* * *

"Fuckity fuck!" Negan's aggravating voice tore through the makeshift infirmary.

Alex let out a sharp sigh as he and Theresa sat on a crate of medical supplies by Kaylee.

Negan burst into the tent. "Looks like some asshole shot my sedan's tires out. Fucking fantastic! Now we're stuck in this rainbow puke-fest a little longer." His vision glossed over those congregated inside before stopping on Theresa, his tense face softening a tad.

"Please let me help," Martin said, swinging his legs off the cot. "I'm not an invalid."

"Martin," Theresa began, "you need your rest."

"Peach has a point," Negan agreed.

Alex held back a growl.

Steph moved from the two injured Saviors to Martin's side. "It'd take a load off my mind. He's a terrible, whiny patient. Just making sure the Chinese girl doesn't die is killing me."

Martin clenched the edge of the cot. "You're the fucking one whining. And she's Vietnamese."

Negan stepped forward and raised a brow at Steph. "What I tell you about being a racist, whiny, piece of shit, Steph?"

Steph's aging features stiffened. "I'm sorry, sir. You're—you're right. He needs to stay."

Sir?

And Alex thought Gareth had an ego.

"I want you to do your fucking job with a big stupid smile on your face," Negan ordered. Steph forced a smile and began to busy herself. He looked Martin up and down. "And you, I'm not wasting my supplies on some inbred redneck trash who goes and makes himself worse just to prove his fucking dick isn't limp."

Martin's eye twitched.

"Don't talk to him like that," Theresa barked. "He took down a guy who was aiming at your people,
"I can fight my own battles, Theresa," Martin protested.

"Whoa," Negan said. "Well sor-ry, peach, didn't know I was supposed to address you humanitarians like royalty."

The guy had the audacity to both mentally undress and demean her? Homicidal maniac or not, what kind of man would Alex be if he sat by and let him treat his wife like that?

Alex started to tell him off when Gina entered through the tent, a hand raised. "Let me chat with Martin, sir," she said. "Haven't gotten a chance to catch up yet."

"Oh? Shouldn't you be trying to rack up more points? Don't want to sleep in a garbage heap tonight, do you?"

"It can wait a few minutes. You know I'm good for it."

Negan threw his hands up. "Alright, knock your fucking self out." He exited the tent and passed over the now-cleaned spot he had bludgeoned Mark.

Gina slunk over to Martin sat down next to him, rubbing his shoulder. He nudged her away. "That's too hard, stop it."

"Aw, sorry. How about a little lighter?" She traced her hands up and down his back and he rolled his eyes.

Alex wasn't about to endure that though he thought Martin's peeved reaction odd. Regardless, he leaned in to Theresa and asked, "Can we go somewhere private to talk? Just for a few minutes."

Her eyes lingered on Kaylee. "Uh, sure. Like where?"

"Um..." They both rose to their feet. "We can see if our van's empty." She nodded and they began out under the oncoming dusk sky.

The couple found their van parked among the Saviors' vehicles with its back doors wide open. Settling inside, they shut the door behind them. Alex clicked on the overhead lights.

"Okay, you're scaring me," Theresa said. "What's this about?" Her tear-swollen eyes and red splotchy face became clear in the artificial light.

Alex had half a mind to omit what he needed to say, but pressed on. "Oh, no don't worry, nothin' real bad. Just some things I didn't wanna not say 'cause you wanna know about things even if it gets you upset."

"I do. So, what is it?"

"Well, Lucy... I almost ruined everything, or thought I might've. I mean, it's weird, she was leadin' us the wrong way anyway so it didn't matter in the end. Also weird 'cause if she hadn't pointed us that direction we wouldn't have run into The Saviors and—"

"You're rambling."

"Sorry. Lucy... when we had her tied up in here, she was hurlin' all kinds of insults and this and that. And she'd apparently gotten Beth to tell her everything about when she was with us. She said you know."
Beth'd said she heard us havin' sex one night in some house and saw Albert with his ear pressed to the wall of the room we were in."

Compared to Negan's sly glances, Albert's voyeurism was welcome.

Her face remained placid. "And you believed her?"

He gave a humorless laugh. "She quoted us."

"Oh."

"She was bein' such a fuckin' bitch that I got so mad, I grabbed by gun and pressed it to her head and pulled the trigger. Lucky me though 'cause I'd left the safety on."

Her brow furrowed. "Did you think I'd be mad? It sounds like something I'd do."

"About that, no not really, it's what I did after. I ran outta the car, Albert followed me, and I hit him."

"You... what?"

"What Lucy said, I don't know if it was true but I was so outta sorts, I hit him. I mean, Lucy said he'd had his pants undone while he was listenin' in on us. He swore he didn't, but Tess, I was so tired and I just wanted to find you and she... I still feel so bad for hittin' him. He didn't tell anyone 'cause no one saw from where we were. This is a damn good van for discreetness."

She buried her head in her hands. "Alex..."

He slouched. "I know. I'm so sorry."

She lifted her head. "I should talk to him."

"Uh, yeah, I really just wanted to put it behind us though."

"I know, but I need to. And you know I won't tell Gareth."

"I'm just... I'm sorry I disappointed you."

She scooted forward. "No, no, you didn't disappoint me. You know, if it'd been the other way around and it was like, Cynthia wanting an earful of you, I'd have probably pounded on her a little bit."

He smiled. "Yeah, I'm sure you would've."

"And I wasn't the best one to work with in there." She gestured toward the town. "When Martin and I were going to escape with Beth and Tyreese, they were cool as cucumbers next to us."

*You'd think we were unstable people.*

"God, I didn't have the heart to ask, what was... shakin' up with them like?"

"Ugh, I'd really rather not talk about it right now." She dug her hand into her pocket and pulled out a piece of jewelry. 'I'd rather give you this." She placed a gold locket and chain in his palm. "I found it in my pocket earlier. Guess someone forgot it."

He ran his thumb over its oval rim. "Remind you of somethin'?"
"I thought it looked like the one you put on Priscilla's marker. And that... that one day we can put a picture of our kid in it."

His head jerked up. Did she say what he thought she did?

"Our kid?"

"One day."

Alex wanted to jump for joy. She wanted kids! They decided at Terminus it would be awful to bring a child into that kind of life. Though he would be lying if he said he hadn't thought of it since finding Sipsey.

He recalled how the candlelight illuminated her face that night in the church and how breathtaking she had looked. And though the van's light revealed darker than usual under eyes, redness from tears, and a few blemishes on her chin, he thought her even more gorgeous than she had been that night.

Alex brushed his fingers across her cheek. "You're really beautiful, you know."

Theresa blushed bright red. "Oh hush, you."

After all that time, he could still make her blush.

They shared a tender kiss. He ran a hand up her arm and over the pink strap of the Samaritan's shirt she wore.

His mouth nipped at the sprinkling of freckles on her shoulder and the heat from her skin elicited a purr from his throat. "I missed these so much."

She hummed in return, sliding her hands up his shirt and running them through his chest hair. A shudder coursed through him. He hadn't intended kissing her shoulder to be an erotic act, but he wasn't about to protest.

When his lips trailed up to behind her ear, she squeaked and pulled back a little. "Hey." She giggled. "That tickles a little too much." Her hands grazed his stomach and he winced from her revenge tickle.

He laughed against her neck. "Sorry. We even now?"

She nodded. "Mm-hm. Let's lock the doors first."

"You really wanna——"

"Yes. Just... I have to get my mind off everything for a little while."

While she scurried around and locked the passenger's doors and him the back, he had half a mind to say, "How about we just stop using protection and whatever happens happens? Could get pregnant right away or six months from now. You never know."

Yet he knew it would be a mistake since she had said 'one day' for a reason. He swallowed the urge as she settled back against him.

Theresa began unbuckling his pants. "So... what were the quotes Lucy gave you?"

"Huh? Oh, that..." He whispered them in her ear while he pushed her shirt down.
"Mmm, sweet little Beth got to hear how it's done, huh?" She moved down to his open fly and began doing something incredible with her tongue, making Alex whimper. "Now you can tell people this hot chick gave you head in the back of a sleazy van."

He tried to tease her back but it only came out as more whimpering.

She moved back up to his mouth and swept her lips across his. "Hey, I love you."

He exhaled a dizzy breath. "I love you too."
Gareth kept his anger in check. Calm. Collected. In control. He wasn't about to throw another fit for The Saviors and their revered leader to see. Even worse, there was already suspicion placed on them for their good condition after having supposedly been on the road so long. And the longer they spent with The Saviors, the more their suspicion would grow.

Theresa had screwed them all. Although she and Martin had begun the whole thing, Gareth couldn't fault either of them for being kidnapped, and Martin looked to have suffered enough. But her? After everything, she had the audacity to give him attitude for his distaste at her decision to save the traitorous bitch, Kaylee.

Despite Alex's neutralizing effects, Gareth was unwilling to let go of the chip on his shoulder. As he watched The Saviors load up Kaylee and their two injured men, he had a fleeting thought of visiting Kaylee's bedside later and smothering her to death in her sleep. It would end the Kaylee problem once and for all and earn them a ticket away from The Saviors. Martin was in a bad state, but he was able to travel. An 'unfortunate complication' would also at last lay to rest Theresa's never-ending Kaylee love-hate crisis. And seeing Theresa lose something so dear after going against him...

The feeling caught in his throat. No. He could never cause his people such pain. To create the look in their eyes he saw for weeks during the Occupation? Hurting them the way they had been hurt after he had saved them from it? He promised never to harm them in that way and he planned to keep it so.

Yet it was apparent not all were as grateful for his rescue—Gina adored Negan as if he were a god. A pinch of jealousy tapped Gareth at her metamorphosis. He was her savior long before Negan.

Theresa glowered at Gareth as she shut the doors of the large SUV they loaded Kaylee into. Gareth bit his tongue and went to reopen the door when a rough hand grabbed his shoulder.

"We have to fucking talk, pretty boy," Negan said.

_Oh, this will be fun._

"Undele, assholes!" Negan shouted at his men packing up. "Do I have to get Lucille? Jesus fucking Christ."

"You ever considered trying the power of love?"

He chuckled. "Come on." He motioned to the back of the black sedan he arrived in and the two climbed inside.

Gareth placed his long legs on the shallow floor and anticipated an uncomfortable ride. He pulled the door shut behind him as the grey-haired male driver pulled the vehicle into gear.

Negan put his hands behind his head and sprawled out. "So, are you fucking stupid?"

_Uncomfortable on all fronts._
He further struggled to find a suitable position with Negan taking up most of the room. "Do I look like a slack-jawed yokel?"

"I hope not, but if you really think it's a great idea to ditch us and what we have to offer to go back out there? Then yeah, you are. Shit, the area around here is goddamn desolate these days."

The car rolled forward. "Believe me, I know. We were lucky to get what we did."

"Yeah... a little too lucky. You sure you've been on your sad little lonesome since your house got toasted?"

He stiffened. "A hundred percent."

His eyes narrowed. "See, because Gina noticed it too. You all look a lot better than she would've thought. Your luck is going to run out if you go back out by yourselves."

"We'll take our chances."

"Hm. Heard a new recruit say she went three weeks without seeing anyone around the Virginia borders. I just have a hard time believing you're stupid enough to turn down a sure-fire place to hang your hat. A chance at real civilization. The new world order, Gare-bear."

Gareth had sworn he was going to knock the teeth out of the next person who called him 'Gare-bear.' "Listen, no offense, but like I said, I'm not willing to bow down to someone else. I like what I have going."

Negan laughed as if it were the most ridiculous thing he ever heard. "Oh, you liked having Theresa tear your balls off and stuff them in her purse?"

"Yeah, she wouldn't have been able to do that if you hadn't let her."

"Hey, I decided it was her decision because she saved my ass. Not my problem it stirred the shit pot. I could be wrong, but me thinks Humpty fucking Dumpty might have had a big fall."

'And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty back together again.'

No. Don't you dare insinuate that I...

He focused on every breath, pushing the bubbling anger down with a hard swallow. "This is where we start to part ways, I swore I'd never hurt them to put them into line. Even if it means I lose a little standing."

Except for forcing Martin to induce vomiting.

At least not again.

However, he had seen none of Martin's past trauma and had nothing to compare it to.

Negan shook his finger. "And that's why you're out there by yourselves and I'm here. Why I have a working society and you don't. Why I have dozens of people groveling at my feet and five wives to fuck while your people use you as a worn-out doormat."

His heart beat in his ears. "I know Gina told you our story. We went through hell together and I promised I'd never be the one to hurt them like those men did. We're brutal, but never to each other. Tell me, would you break a promise like that, Negan?"
"I never make promises I know I can't keep."

* * *

It was late when they arrived at The Savior's outpost—a small retreat area with numerous motel rooms only those with enough points could afford. As long as the Hunters were there, they were expected to earn points like everyone else. Gareth tried to shrug off how demeaning it was, but when two Saviors ushered them into a clammy room with half a dozen dilapidated bunk beds and a few weak oil lamps, he almost boiled over. At least Negan allowed them the pickle chips and dried fruit they packed from Sipsey. Still, it was no feast.

The six of them prepared for a night's sleep when Gina burst through the door and declared she was joining them due to her lack of points. Thus making it impossible to talk tactics of escaping Negan's hold.

"Theresa, Martin," Gina said, raising a wad of clothing. "Negan said he was sick of those Samaritan's Skittle colors." She tossed a change of clothes on either of their bunks. "Last thing he's givin' for free."

The two changed into their neutral-shaded apparel and Gareth sat down on the remaining free bed. It let out a painful squeak in response.

"Look at us," Gina said, stretching. "Just like old times." She passed by Martin's bottom bunk and began up its ladder to the top. He didn't even bother to check out her backside—or front side—to Gareth's surprise. The guy seemed to have taken some vow of celibacy in the days he had been gone.

Gareth unlaced his boots and assessed his standings with his people. Theresa was pissed at him, Martin was also pissed at him for some reason, Cynthia was both pissed at and in love with him. He was only okay with Alex and Albert. Though the latter seldom caused trouble. The exception being telling him off for his obsession with Beth.

They put out the oil lamps as they had been told and settled onto the dingy beds. Gareth rolled over to turn off his light and found Cynthia on the bed beside him removing the bra from underneath her shirt.

Oh, for the love of—

Cynthia scowled at him and flung her bra down on the bed with a snap. "I'm not puttin' on a show to get your attention if that's what you think!"

Her voice echoed through the room and he rolled on his back to avoid the awkward stares on him. "Don't have to tell me twice."

* * *

Gareth awoke to a scrawny ray of sunlight peeking through the lone high window in the room. Turning over, he spotted a dressed Alex pulling his belt through his pants' loops.

"Since when are you awake early?" Gareth asked, sitting up.

Alex shook his head. "I couldn't sleep. Man, you slept in your clothes all night?"

He smoothed down his hair. "And with one eye open."
"Now I feel lazy."

"I at least took my shoes off."

Alex's bed creaked and Theresa propped herself on her elbows, planting her sleepy eyes on her spouse. "Alex, come back to bed."

Gareth didn't think she would pull something so low as to tug Alex away from him, but her voice was excessively needy. Grossly so.

Though the journey on the road had been dire, Gareth had enjoyed Alex without the growth known as Theresa attached to his side. Not that she was always bad company, but it was refreshing to communicate with Alex alone.

"Uh, I figured it was time to get up," Alex replied. "I was fixin' to wake you up anyway."

She grumbled and pushed the covers off herself. "Then I have to... oh, I have to see Ka—I got to go."

The door out opened to reveal an urgent redheaded woman. "Gina!" she shouted. "Get your friends outside. We found J.M.M."

Gina bolted awake from the bunk over Martin's. "Oh, shit." She rubbed her eye. "This oughta be an eventful day."

"Yeah, so hurry up and get to the picnic area."

"How's Kaylee?" Theresa asked the redhead.

"She's fine."

"Did she wake—"

"Don't know. But no detours," she replied before departing with heavy feet.

Theresa huffed and mumbled something about the ramshackle bed she had slept in.

_You take Alex's 'princess' nickname a little too seriously, you know._

The others stirred as Gina climbed down from her bunk and stepped to Theresa's side. "Aw, I think you and Paula will get on like a house on fire after a while." Theresa ignored her and struggled into her pants. "Damn, you know y'all are an unusual case. Most folks don't get to meet Negan right away. Some folks never even seen him."

* * *

The Saviors circled around the covered picnic area of the resort. Gareth and his people moved through the crowd when Paula called from the forefront of the congregation.

"He was adamant you see this," Paula said as the Hunters joined her.

"Oh, tell me it's not another brain-bashing," Gareth said.

She scoffed. "No one's dying today." The gathering shifted so the Hunters could see beyond them. Two miserable-looking women and one man with bowed heads knelt in a row beside a flaming grill. Gareth assumed they were slated for torture due to some transgression.
"Oh," Paula began, "and Negan asked me to say, 'no, we're not fucking cooking them for you.'"

Theresa settled into place next to Gareth. Just being next to the woman rose his blood pressure.

She gasped upon seeing the three. "It's them."

"Who?" Gareth asked.

Alex gaped. "Folks at the cabin."

Their male former attacker raised his head and his eyes grew into saucers at the sight of Theresa and Alex. "Oh..." he uttered. It caused the two women by his side him to notice them as well and let out small whines.

Gina quirked an eyebrow. "Oh, really? Well, I'll be a son of a bitch. Where'd you run into 'em?"

"I don't even remember," Theresa answered, corners of her mouth twitching up. "But that's—that's why they were freaking out about leaving someone alive who saw them."

"They were on the run?" Martin asked, holding his injured rib.

Gina nodded. "Stupid fuckers."

"Oh, J.M.M.," Theresa said. "Jackie, Mira, and Mac?"

"Yeah. Easier to say it that way."

"What happens next?" Cynthia asked, folding her arms.

"You'll see," Paula replied.

"Hello, ladies and gentlemen!" Negan's booming voice vibrated through the crowd and subdued everyone. He sauntered out from the former gift shop and down the stone walkway, holding a cloth iron wrapped around the end of a metal pole. "You know why we're gathered here this beautiful morning?" The Saviors gave verbal acknowledgments and nodded. "What do we do with those who fucking run? Who abandon us?"

"We burn them!" a rambunctious woman returned.

"Exactly!" he beamed. "And what did Jackie, Mackie, and Mira do?"

"They ran!" a croaky male voice shouted.

"Excuse me, sir!" Paula called. "Turns out they know them." She pointed two fingers at Theresa and Alex.

His eyebrows shot up. "Oh? Do tell."

"They were going to kill Alex and me," Theresa explained, glaring at the three.

Negan set the iron on the flaming grill, just enough to heat the metal. "Is that true, Mackity Mac-Mac-Mac-Mac?"

Mac's unshaven jaw quivered. "Y—yes. Those two. We—we were going to take their rabbits from th—their snare."
"Just them? They got a whole fucking pack."

"Y—yes, all we saw was them. Negan, please..."

Negan leaned down placed his hand under Mac's chin. "Tell me what happened or both sides of your fucking face get torched."

Mac gave Negan the story just as Alex and Theresa had. Their attempted thievery, Theresa going out the window, the knife to her throat, the fake declaration of pregnancy, and being locked in the pantry.

Negan put a melodramatic hand to his hip and interrupted his explanation, "I just can't believe you were going to kill that angel right in front of her guy. Tsk tsk tsk, that's not nice." He turned to Alex and Theresa. "Imagine you two must be pretty pissed they got away. Or pretty fucking happy you get to watch this."

"But they let us go," the older woman Mac said.

"What?" Gareth asked.

Theresa looked down and mumbled, "We lied."

_The hell would she lie for?_

"You said they put you in the closet and left," Albert said.

"No, she, uh..." Alex started, "she cut on her legs with the razor and said she was havin' a miscarriage. They believed us and opened it. We got control back and—"

"I told them to get lost," Theresa interrupted and Alex threw her a look. She stepped toward the doomed three. "It was a mistake! I should've had you for dinner!"

"And here I thought you were a hardcore gal," Negan said. "You just soft, squishy overcooked peach pie filling?"

"No... no! I made a mistake of half-asleep weakness."

_Oh. Anything but to have people think her weak._

"And where were they?" Negan pointed to the rest of her party.


He narrowed his eyes. "Okay, so while these two slept in like lazy fucks, you were all on a hunting trip and hadn't been home in a few hours so these two almost get killed?"

_Damnit. Problems with their story were piling up. And naturally Theresa was adding to them._

"They'd been up sick the night before," Gareth chimed in. "Decided it was best to let them stay and rest."

"Well, go on," Theresa said. "I want to see it. You're going to burn them, right?"

"Why don't you burn one? Jackie, perhaps?"

"What?"
"Jackie was going to make that lovely neck of yours gush like a fucking fountain. And you know I hate having to do this shit to women. But I do like some girl-on-girl." He winked.

Theresa stared the young woman in her glassy eyes. "Okay, sure. I'll do it."

Negan scrutinized Alex who wore what might have been the sourest look Gareth had ever seen. Though it seemed to be directed at Negan rather than his former assailants.

*Why don't you just mark your territory by pissing in a circle around your girl, baby bro?*

Yet Gareth had to admit he disliked Negan's attention toward her too.

"What about you, cutie?" Negan asked Alex. "Jackie was going to cut your wife's throat while you watched. That must've gotten your blood a little hot."

Alex gave a one-shouldered shrug. "You want me to help her press the iron in?"

"I'd think you'd want to."

"You bet."

Negan held his arms out and directed the couple to the grill. "Step right up, step right up! Experience the most awe-inspiring sights and sounds of sizzling skin you ever laid your eyes upon and treated your ears to! The greatest show on earth!" He cackled at his dead-on carnie impression.

Theresa gripped the middle of the pole with both hands and lifted it. "Where do I burn her?"

Negan ran his hand down the side of his face. "And why's it put there, children?"

"A mark of shame!" the same exuberant woman called.

"Bingo."

Gareth couldn't imagine the pain of seared flesh. If he thought burning one of his eight fingers on blazing a hot ember hurt...

"Now, promise me you won't eat the burned skin on the damn iron. No matter how delectable it smells."

"Promise," Theresa said as she and Alex approached Jackie.

Alex gripped the end of the pole and positioned himself against Theresa's back. Much closer than Gareth thought necessary.

"Scooch forward, doll," Negan ordered Jackie.

Jackie sniffled and complied, gazing up at Theresa. "You let us live, you don't belong with us."

"You're lucky I can't leave you to rot in the sun like I promised you," Theresa sneered.

Scarring traitors for life. An image of a charred Kaylee flashed through Gareth's mind. Permanent shame. A horrific reminder of her betrayal that would remain forever. He *had* done something similar—told Sipsey her actions thus earning her judgmental looks from the residents. But that could never hold a candle Negan's method.

"And why, oh why," Negan began, "do we do this instead of just fucking Lucilling them? Because
first time deserters always deserve a second chance."

Gareth could have doubled over at that knife through his chest.

Alex and Theresa jointly pressed the iron against the side of Jackie's face and she let out an ear-
piercing shriek. Steam billowed from the wound and the all too familiar scent of burning skin
wafted over. Theresa's eyes were wide and her lips parted. Her chest heaved with such force it
swayed the expressionless Alex behind her.

The faces of the Saviors were mixed. Many shouted encouragements while some wore looks of
fear and others appeared indifferent. Paula yelled a few swears.

"Okay, that'll fucking do," Negan said. Theresa and Alex remained focused on their task. "Hey,
peach!"

Theresa jerked the iron away as if pulled from a trance and lurched backward against Alex. Jackie
fell to the ground and wailed, her two comrades sobbing. The burned scent of her red and melted
skin became almost overwhelming.

Could he do that Kaylee? After the pain he had seen her go through in the Occupation?

The answer was a plain and simple no.

Negan clapped. "Come on, don't they deserve a round of applause?" The Saviors gave modest
applause and Theresa placed the iron back on the grill before she and Alex returned to her people's
side.

"You'll all have to tell me..." Negan began, taking the iron and positioning it above the flames.
"How mine and theirs compare." He stepped over to Mac and smacked the iron against his cheek.

Chapter End Notes

Negan, stop being a lil' bitch.
Theresa sat in a fold-up chair at Kaylee's beside, all too aware of the dozing Saviors on the cots on the opposite side of the cluttered infirmary. At least they made no attempt to talk to her. She gripped Kaylee's clammy hand and tried to will her awake. The other girl's pale face was immaculate compared to the filthy one of Jackie's she scorched earlier.

Jackie's screams and the sizzle from her melting skin replayed in her head. After the spellbinding forgiveness of Beth, a trip back to reality had her alert and focused. Exactly where she needed to be—the real world where someone who was going to cut your throat had to pay for it. She wondered where Beth and Tyreese were, but figured it best she never saw them again.

Her hand fiddled with Kaylee's fingers, a gentle touch from the same hand that performed such a brutal act just an hour before. She shivered in spite of the room's warmth.

"Come on, wake up," Theresa urged, jiggling Kaylee's hand.

"Tried slapping the shit out of her?" Negan's voice shattered through her thoughts.

Her shoulders stiffened as his footsteps sounded behind her.

"Sir," one of the injured men piped up from his bed, a dopey grin on his round face.

"Ugh."

Negan strolled over to the two and looked them over. "I'm bursting with happy fucking rainbow colors you two are doing so well."

The other man sat up on his elbows. "You came to see us?"

"Of fucking course. My presence is the best medicine. And after having tea and crumpets with Jackie, Mackie, and Mira in their new room, I wanted an upper. Their melty, oozing, gross deformed faces are so depressing. It's reassuring to see men who'd take a bullet for me. For all of us."

The two nodded and in unison, saying, "Of course." The round-faced one added, "How long are you staying at this post?"

"Oh, another day. Soak me up while you can, boys." He gave a pat to the man's thigh, making him flinch and let out a bout of pained laughter. He made his way over to Theresa. "Well? You tried slapping the shit out of her?"

"No," Theresa replied, keeping her eyes on Kaylee. "I'm about to go anyway."

"Oh yeah... got to make those points. Hell, what did Paula set you up with?"

"Weapons cleaning and inventory with Martin and a guy named Dwayne or something."

"It's Dwi—yes, Dwayne. He's one of my lieutenants. Good for you, already mixing it up with my best men. Speaking of, that Gina of yours is a real go-getter. Eager to climb to the top. I say jump, she says 'how fucking high?' Any other private asked to trade their points for their old people at an
exchange and I'd have said, 'hell no.' There's a reason I had her fill in for Dwayne on the scouting trip when he had his widdle tummy ache."

"Well, she was a Navy S.E.A.L."

"Oh, really? Well that explains her fucking mouth."

*And what explains yours?*

He fell silent for a moment and she felt his gaze piercing her, slicing her in half. "So... been trying to figure you out."

She suppressed a sigh. "And why is that?"

"Sleeping Beauty here ran off and left you for someone who'd snuggled up with some sworn enemies. And here you are bending over backwards to save her ass."

"Was I supposed to get an iron and burn her face?"

"Oh, is that judgment in that sensual throaty voice of yours? Because it looked to me you got a little dewy between your legs while you were cooking Jackie for something other than a meal."

His obvious attraction to her was well under her skin though she committed to ignoring it. "I wasn't going to turn down an opportunity to disfigure someone who was going to cut my throat while my husband watched, even if I think that method of yours is a little overboard. And I couldn't just let Kaylee die." She stood up and faced his imposing form. He was only a tad taller than Gareth and Martin whose height never intimidated her, but Negan had her very aware she was five-three.

"Hm, what about Mark-o's brains squirting out of his head? You liked that, didn't you?"

"I didn't cry over it, did I?"

"No, ma'am. Bet you even wished you were doing it."

"You never know." She recalled using a rifle to beat in the head of a bandit who assaulted Alex.

"Makes me wonder how someone so spicy ended up with such a honey bunny. Don't get me wrong, I can tell he's no weeping pussy, but I can also tell he doesn't have the fucking pepper you do."

Her throat tightened. "So, me being a married woman *has* crossed your mind?"

"With honey bunny sticking his tongue down your throat and practically humping your ass in public? How could I not? I'm going to be uncharacteristically self-centered and say said tongue-sticking and ass-humping was for my benefit."

She grimaced. "I think I'm going to get started on weapons cleaning early."

He sighed. "Oh, alright. You be a good little worker, peach."

"Theresa," she mumbled.

"What's that?"

"My name's Theresa."
He rolled his eyes. "I fucking know what your name is, you're just so peachy. I hardly ever hear the name Theresa. Is yours with an 'H'?
"

She folded her arms. "Uh-huh."

"Now Jenny will know how to spell it on the new recruit roster."

She started to argue before realizing it would be pointless. "Good, hate it when people misspell my name."

"Well, see you later, Theresa."

"Right." She gave one last look at Kaylee and started for the exit—hoping to god Negan would not be the first thing Kaylee saw when she woke up.

Pulling open the door, she squinted from the sunshine and headed for the tented picnic area. Its grill still smoked from dying embers as she passed it. Martin sat at a long picnic table full of weapons beside a blond Savior she assumed was Dwayne.

Theresa took a seat across from the two and Martin said, "Hey, she's early."

"Too much company in the infirmary," she replied. Dwayne only acknowledged her presence with a glance before returning to the dismantled AR-15 before him.

She took an unused rag and reached for a revolver to her left when she realized armory's extent. Even though her knowledge of firearms was only enough to get by, she knew at least half of the weapons before her were military grade.

Of course. That's where the Samaritans got such impressive firepower.

Negan boasted The Saviors were so equipped with weaponry, they could spare some to other communities, keep each outpost overflowing, and still have enough to share among those on the road. Hell, the Saviors themselves she had physically seen were not even all of them and they swarmed the place.

Terminus had never been as populated and stocked. And if the heat before her was only a fraction of The Saviors' arsenal?

Oh... fuck.

Nuclear bunker with a blast-proof door aside, The Saviors could still wreak havoc on Sipsey. They could kill those outside as Sipsey's armory would be no match for The Saviors'. A few strikes to the solar panels would leave the bunker in the dark and force them to the surface where they would have no choice to comply with their enemies' demands.

A pit formed in Theresa's stomach. She attempted to shrug it off and pulled over the revolver. Upon closer inspection, its barrel was caked in blood and gore. Asking how that came to be would only further her growing fear of their group. Or asking about the splatters of dark red inside the SUV they transported Kaylee in. Or the speckles of burgundy on the doorframe leading into their shabby quarters...

At Terminus, Gareth had all unsavory traces of violence cleaned up. She wondered if the group left them there on purpose. Perhaps to show newcomers it was better to be staring down the barrel of their guns than into them.
Theresa cleared her throat, struggling to wipe away the weapon's stains and noting Martin's improved mood. It was out of the question to ask him how he was doing as it would turn him livid. The best thing she could do was treat him the way she always did and make their sappy embrace a distant memory for him.

She narrowed her eyes at the forest green baseball cap he wore. "Where'd you get that hat?"

Martin pulled a black bayonet through a knife sharpener. "Gina didn't want it anymore."

She squared her shoulders. "Good, I get tired of watching you pull your hair over your forehead to mask your massively receding hairline."

His head jerked up. "I don't have a—" He let out a laugh. "Ha-ha, very funny."

Dwayne ignored them and pulled a pack of Virginia Slims from his pocket along with a lighter.

Martin's eyes filled with puppy love at the sight.

"You want a drag or something?" Dwayne asked, sliding the cigarette between his lips and flicking the flame over the end.

Martin shook his head. "Nah, I quit a long time ago. I can—I can... yeah, go ahead." He went back to sharpening the knife, his passes harder than before and rhythm uneven.

Dwayne took a long inhale before exhaling a cloud of smoke.

Theresa considered herself the only non-smoker on the planet to like the smell of the stuff. It reminded her of her aunt, Willa, who smoked like a chimney. As a child, a nose full of the carcinogen had always meant it was time to see Aunt Willa and dig through her box of comic books.

Her distant thoughts shattered yet again as Dwayne pushed away the reassembled AR-15 and pulled over one of the three crossbows on the table.

Her mouth moved quicker than her brain and she asked, "How many of those you guys have?"

_Dumb question. At least this might kill a minute of time._

Dwayne looked up at her as if seeing her for the first time. "A few." He flicked his cigarette's ashes on the ground.

Theresa continued to struggle with the revolver. "Always wished we'd find a crossbow while we were on the road. They're definitely hot items so they're few and far between."

"You any good with them?"

"I was starting to be at Terminus. I was training with them about an hour every other day or whenever I got the time. Liked them better than guns and regular bows."

"Well, I oughta take you out later with Gina and show you some more. I got a spot open with Kitrick having a bullet in his thigh and all. But only if you swear you have skill 'cause I've wasted a hell of a lot of time trying to teach folks who don't got it. Negan insisted I try and teach every moron how to use one even though it—" He paused and put on a smile. "Yeah, I'll help you out."

Theresa's ears pricked up at the contempt placed on Negan's name. "That sounds good, Dwayne"
"It's Dwight."

"Negan said it was Dway—oh, I guess he was trying to mess with you."

Martin cracked up and Dwight took a drag from his cigarette so long Theresa questioned his lung capacity.

"Right..." she continued. "I'm—"

"Theresa," Dwight interrupted. "Oh, I know. Damnit, hang on, we need more rags. I'll be right back." He stood up and started to the outpost's quarters.

After was out of earshot, Martin shut his eyes and said, "Ahh, sweet relief. The guy's a fucking drag. He's sucking the life out of me."

Theresa leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Well, he doesn't seem to like bossman much."

He breathed in the lingering smoke, his eyes fluttering. "You really wanna go crossbow trainin' with him?"

"Not really, but I figure I might as well learn something new-ish while we're here. And I've barely had any time with Gina."

"I've been avoidin' that."

"What? Gina?"

"Old baggage. Old baggage that wants to be current baggage. I'm tired of baggage."

* * *

What, not as hot anymore when there's no repercussions for fucking her? she wanted to say, but figured it a tad too harsh.

Theresa rubbed her thumb and index finger together. "You know what this is?" Martin rolled his eyes. "It's the smallest violin in the world playing a sad song for you."

* * *

Theresa frowned at the instant bean and rice cup and packet of saltines she held in her hands. The meal was nowhere near enough to keep her until whatever pitiful dinner she would get. A panic clawed its way up her throat. Anything but to go to sleep with a growling stomach.

Either work for a meal or take your chances in the wild. It was obvious why so many people chose the former. Her survival instincts urged her to work harder for a bigger dinner despite how much the notion offended her. But hard work could translate to a bath, a change of clothes, a private room for her and Alex...

"You gonna eat that or stare at it?" Alex, her lone lunchmate, said from his seat on the bench beside her. He had been given the same portion which he had already wolfed down.

"If I do, it'll be gone," she replied, tracing her spoon across the edge of the cup.

"You'll feel better if you do. Oh, I almost forgot, Cynthia wanted me to say she was sorry and that you'd know what it was about."

"What?"
He shrugged. "No idea."

Did they have an argument? She thought on it... oh! Cynthia's accusation that Theresa was using her as a replacement for Kaylee.

"Oh, I know what she was talking about. The fight in the women's showers I told you about. I guess she didn't know if you knew. And I'll tell her it's fine. I don't care about that fight anymore."

"Uh, what about Albert? You talked to him yet?"

She would rather gouge her eye out with her spoon. "No, not yet. I'm so not in the mood."

"Negan's into you," Alex said, leaning against the back of the bench.

"Heh... yeah, I've noticed." He remained silent. "Alex, I can take care of myself."

He pursed his lips. "I know you can. I just can't sit here and—wait, how've you noticed?"

"He's forward."

His eyes grew. "What'd he say to you?"

God, did she not want to repeat to him what Negan said in the infirmary. "Just that he thinks I'm oh-so interesting."

"Tess, this is a two-way street. You got on my ass 'cause I kept what Gabby did to myself so—"

"Whoa, hey." She set aside the rice cup and raised her hand. "I didn't say I wasn't going to tell you."

His face fell. "Sorry. I just... I hate this—these people. Just icin' on the cake that Gina's one of 'em now. What did he say?"

She filled him in on Negan's advances, his cheeks growing redder with each word she spoke.

Alex crumpled the empty rice cup to his side, the metal spoon flying out and clattering to the sidewalk. "A—and you—you didn't tell him off?"

A few Saviors in the area took notice of them and Theresa shifted closer to Alex. "Trust me, guys like that love to be told off. It'd just add fuel to the fire. I'll be okay. I know how to handle this."

He picked the spoon up and placed it beside him. "I just don't want him to ever be alone with you."

She put her hand on his knee. "Hey, I don't either. I don't want to be alone with any of these people. That's why I wouldn't have agreed to crossbow training with this guy later if Gina weren't going to be there too."

"What guy?"

"Same one Martin and I were maintenance-ing guns with. Don't worry, he looks more likely to hit on a pile of rocks than me. And he doesn't seem to like Negan very much."

"Really? He said he didn't like him?"

"Oh no, just implied it. Honestly, it was refreshing." She pulled her hair over her shoulder. "Does it bother you though? Going somewhere a little ways away with him and her, even if he's
He breathed a laugh. "It ain't like you need my permission. And we're all havin' to put up with these people. All I wanted was to know you'll be safe wherever you are."

"Oh, I know. I just didn't want to make you—"

"Listen, I know you can handle yourself. I just don't want you to have to."

"Not really an option anymore."

"I know, I just—"

"Theresa!" Cynthia's voice called from across the courtyard. Theresa anticipated some theatrical apology. "Kaylee's awake!"

She bolted up as Cynthia jogged over to the two. "She is?"

Cynthia nodded. "Yeah."

Alex smiled. "That's great, man."

Theresa grabbed up her rice cup and crackers and thrust them at Alex. "Uh, could you take this?"

He accepted and the three hurried to the infirmary. Theresa burst inside and found Gareth standing at the foot of Kaylee's bed.

*What the fuck is he doing here!?*

"Relax," Gareth said as if reading her mind. "I didn't beat her awake."

Theresa growled and rushed to Kaylee's side. She sat down in the fold-up chair as Alex and Cynthia stood by.

Kaylee attempted to prop herself up, her eyes wracked with sleep. "Th—they said you—they... Gina... I was... I remember..."

Theresa petted the girl's unkempt hair. "Shhh, shhh. Save your energy."

"We're so glad you're alright," Cynthia beamed.

"Good to see you up," Alex added.

Kaylee's mouth offered a semblance of a smile. "I don't understand... how did..."

Theresa took Kaylee's hand. "You saw I saved Negan a bullet through the head, right? This is how he's repaying me."

"Oh... no... you didn't have to... Where are we? Are we in their like... place?"

"Yeah. And yes, I did have to save you. No way I'm letting you die, no matter happened in the past, okay?"

Her face crumpled. "For a second I thought... I thought you'd shot me or..." She looked to Gareth.

Theresa swore she heard her own heart audibly break. "We don't do that, remember?"
"I wouldn't do that, Kaylee," Gareth assured her.

Theresa flashed him a glare.

*She thought you'd kill her, you motherfucker.*

But she also thought Theresa would.

Her thoughts went to the place she had forbade them—her rejection of the woman. The same woman who had neared ending her own life. How had her censure factored into that? Did she consider suicide again? Her old group hated her, Gareth ridiculed and chastised her at Sipsey. And Theresa stood by and let it happen. How could she not have contemplated suicide again?

The thought of Kaylee going through that pain because of her...

Theresa's chin quivered she burst out crying, burying her head against Kaylee's shoulder.

Alex rubbed her back. "Tess, hey, it's okay."

His touch failed to soothe her in the slightest. "I'm sorry..." Theresa choked out.

"Oh..." Kaylee uttered and grazed her side. "Theresa, it's okay."

"No... no, it's not. I once told you that the next time you felt like... to come and sit with me. And you felt like you couldn't come tell me or anyone when you wanted to leave." She lifted her head, tears wetting her cheeks. "You should've been able to come to me and tell me without me judging you or saying you were wrong."

"Yeah, but you're here now."

* * *

Kaylee ate a small helping of soup before falling back asleep. Theresa stayed by her side and managed to hold back her tears, but the heat refused to leave her eyes. Her heart ached with every beat. All she wanted was to curl up somewhere quiet and punish herself with cruel words.

The last thing she wanted was to go crossbow training behind the outpost with Gina and Lieutenant Buzzkill. But she sucked it up and went anyway, she had to. No one had the luxury of locking themselves away when they were upset. And after all, the three go-to's for when humans were upset were sex, alcohol, and violence. Since there were no vibrating heart-shaped beds for her and Alex, or a juicy bottle of amaretto, she opted for firing a weapon—counting on Dwight's promise that they would use walkers as target practice.

"Good, good," Dwight said, standing behind Theresa while she aimed the crossbow at a dartboard nailed to a tree. "Hold it a little higher though. You keep holding it too low."

The board was boring and she was beyond ready to move on to living-dead targets. She imagined the bullseye as a walker's rotted forehead and she let the bolt fly. It hit two rings to the left of the center.

"Ooh," Gina began with a smirk, "She's gettin' better. I think she's ready for the flaming bolts."

Dwight ignored her—as he had most everything Gina had said—and took a step back. "Stay there, Gina and I will get a smaller target from the truck."

Why getting another target required two people, she didn't know. Theresa stomped over and
yanked the bolt from the board. "I'm really ready to go to find some walkers. This is kid stuff." She sniffled from the strong scent of the mosquito repellent Gina offered.

Stepping backwards to her former place, she placed the bolt back in the weapon and fired it, hitting the board in roughly the same place. She drew yet another bolt and continued her practice, wondering how long it took to retrieve a target.

At last, an assortment of footsteps approached and she said, "At Terminus, Josh was having me shut my eyes and fire at the target. Is that a good—" Something heavy smacked against her back and she plummeted face-first to the ground. The faint hiss and putrid smell revealed it as a walker.

"All part of training," Dwight said.

Theresa wriggled under its weight and spit out dirt. "Wh—what the—" She swung the crossbow and hit the thing in what she hoped was the head. It wavered just enough for her to roll on her side, kneel it in the stomach and fire into its skull.

She groaned and shoved the female walker off of her. Getting up with her weapon, her front throbbed from the impact as Gina giggled and Dwight wore a smugger expression than she cared for.

Theresa wiped the mud from her lip with her free hand and got a taste of the bitter mosquito repellent from her wrist. "What the fuck was that!"

Dwight's expression sobered. "If all you got is a bow with you, you need to know to use it when otherwise you'd be going for your melee. You did great. I'm a little impressed."

"You could have told me before you pushed it on top of me!"

"Hey," Gina started, stifling her laughter, "he did the same to me when he first took me out. You should've seen how pissed I was, that's why he ain't a tripod anymore. But you don't always see or hear geeks before they get you, you know."

"It ain't like I would've let it eat you," Dwight said. "I'd have ganked it if it looked like you were going down."

In earnest, it was a good tactic. Though she felt as if she were a high school sophomore the seniors invited to a party only to prank her.

Theresa swallowed her anger and it settled ontop of her persistent guilt over Kaylee. "Okay." She started to reach for the bolt in the undead's head when she recognized it as Lucy. "You... kept her?"

She focused the odd hole in her throat.

"Fresh geeks are hard to find," Gina explained, stepping over and taking the bow from Theresa's hand. "New ones are a lot heavier, too. Good practice."

"They can't make as much racket if you cut out the vocal cords," Dwight said. "Surprised you didn't ask why it was so quiet."

Theresa scowled. "Sort of got distracted by it trying to kill me." She dusted off the dirt and leaves from her clothes.

Gina pulled the bolt from Lucy's head and nudged her rear with her boot. "Bitch had a big ass. Where'd y'all say she came from?"
Where did Gareth say they found her?

"I wasn't with them when they found her, so I don't know exactly."

Gina loaded the crossbow. "Must've had that fantastic luck of y'all's to get such a fat ass."

"I don't know, she might've been part of a community before. Maybe one of the ones you trade with?"

"No way," Dwight replied, kneeling down and gripping the undead's upper arms. "We went through every goddamned place we could because Mark would not let it go."

"Where you think that stray came from?" Gina asked, firing the bow and hitting the bullseye.

Theresa shrugged.

"Hey," Dwight barked at Theresa. "You gonna help me move her or not? My back's still a little too fucked up."

"Ugh, right." She stepped over and gripped Lucy's ice-cold ankles.

"You're pretty damn lucky you came across both those chicks," he said as they hoisted Lucy up. "Right place, right time, huh?"

Oh.

How had she been so stupid? She knew what they were doing. Like Dwight cared about helping her crossbow skill. He and Gina were trying to get her to slip up so they could compare stories with the others because they thought they were hiding something.

Gina was so tangled up in the Saviors' web she was trying to out her real friends and found it funny to shove a walker into one. Yet the latter she could see Gina having done anyway. Theresa recalled why she had problems with the woman. She would never to treat her like she had Kaylee, but...

Fuck you, Gina. And fuck you ever harder 'Dwayne' you fucking buzzkill asshole. No, both of you fuck each other.

Theresa struggled to form a smile. "I can't explain it. I wasn't there."

Chapter End Notes

Negan is soooo much fun to write I can't even begin to explain. And I thought Martin's crassness was fun. Negan makes Martin look like a polite prude. ;)

I want to give Dwight a real role because fic wise, he never seems to do anything except go places with Negan and have a burned face in the meantime. Of course, he's unburned at this point in the story.
This chapter's a little... different? I've been trying to develop Cynthia more and she's currently entwined in all sorts of romantic desires. So this chapter was a somewhat new territory for me.

Cynthia missed reading aloud to her third-grade class, a longing that grew as she and Albert listened to Theresa read Kaylee a young adult novel.

When Kaylee dozed off, Theresa shut the book placed it on her nightstand. "I never know to be flattered or insulted that my reading puts people to sleep." Her face grew long.

"You gotta forgive yourself," Cynthia told her. "If she has, then you can."

"She's delirious," Theresa said, and stood from her chair. "She doesn't know what she's saying."

"Yeah, well, it's not just about you," Albert chimed in.

Theresa gave him a look. "What?"

"What I mean is we all screwed up. I could've gone to her and asked how she was, really was, but I didn't. And I could've gone past Gareth after we found her and tried to understand but I didn't." He stepped over to Kaylee's side and pulled the ratty blanket up to her shoulders.

"I talked to her a few times since we got her back," Cynthia said. "Nothin' big, but I wasn't hatin' on her. Not like Gareth." She glowered. "He totally screwed her—"

"It's not his fault," Theresa said.

"What do you mean?"

"I used to think it was, but it's not. He's not the cause of all our downfalls. Martin and I were the ones who got us here. Not our fault that we were kidnapped or not, we were being reckless and stupid. What Gareth wanted to do..." She glanced across the room at the sleeping Saviors.

Cynthia was most comfortable blaming Gareth for whatever she could. It had been so convenient. But if Theresa was admitting he wasn't solely to blame?

Damn.

"Anyway, um," Theresa began, "can I be alone with her? Or as alone as we can get."

Albert nodded. "Yeah, I actually have to go anyway. They put me on late kitchen clean-up in the cafeteria."

"Yeah, I'm gonna walk him and then go back to our awful barracks," Cynthia said, exchanging waves with Theresa.
The two left the infirmary and strolled along the sidewalks. Dim light from the buildings and garden lamps dotted their path.

"Did Alex hit you?" Cynthia asked after a moment.

Albert slowed his pace. "W—what?"

"I helped you move Lucy and I know she didn't hit you in the face."

"Yeah, he did... but it's okay. I'm not mad."

"But why didn't you tell me?"

"He wanted to keep it between us."

She frowned. "You mean he thought I'd blurt it out to Gareth. I wouldn't have, I swear."

"No, he just wanted to put it behind us. I did too."

"Well, I might've thrown another vase at him if I'd have known." She drew her hand back and pretended to throw something. "Given him a matchin' scar."

He cracked a smile. "You know, it's funny because I'm not even like... into Theresa anymore." He stopped. "You want to know the god's honest truth?"

Her eyes lit up. "Always."

"Alex ruined it."

"By hittin' you?"

"No, before then." He leaned in. "Overhearing them together? I never wanted to know Alex like that." He gave a comical shudder.

She giggled. "Oh, he got in the way of any enjoyment."

"I'll say."

She wrapped an arm around him. "Why'd you always like older girls?"

He stiffened. "Not always. Beth was only a few years..."

Cynthia tightened her grip into a hug. "You sad you missed her?"

"Nah, it would've just made things harder. You know, yet another something with someone that could never happen."

"Yeah, I know." She released him and they started back toward the cafeteria. "God, do I know."

"Hey!" a female voice called. They turned to a darkened rest area and saw Paula sitting in a lounge chair beside Dwight. "Is she your mom?" she asked Albert. Her upturned eyebrow could be seen even through the dark.

Cynthia imagined shoving her so hard it capsized her chair.

"Paula, stop being a fucking bitch," Dwight said, tossing back a shot of something in a clear glass.
"Sorry, sorry," Paula said without sounding the least bit remorseful. "Us redheads should stick together."

"Hey," Albert piped up, pointing a finger at Dwight. "You're the one who pushed Lucy's walker onto Theresa."

Dwight shrugged. "Lived, didn't she?"

Was that some sick joke? Cynthia mused. Push the walker of someone they had issues with on top of them?

"Yeah, well, still kind of a dick a move. No offense."

"Hey, want a shot of tequila?" Paula asked before Dwight could reply, lifting her empty glass. "Peace offering. D's buying."

"Sort of my way to kitchen duty," Albert answered.

"And don't you gotta have points to do stuff like drink or breathe?" Cynthia griped.

"Relax, this is mine," Dwight said, and took hold of the flat bottle from the table. "The less we drink, the better."

"I don't really drink. I was just walkin' him to the kitchen and was gonna go back to our quarters or maybe talk to—"

"So you are his mom," Paula quipped.

Cynthia bared her teeth. "Gimme a fucking drink." She marched over to the remaining empty chair beside Paula and plopped down.

Albert's eyes darted between the three of them. "Uh, Cynthia—"

"I'm fine," she assured him as Dwight poured a shot into his glass and passed it to her. She brought it to her lips. "You're gonna be late." The pungent scent of tequila filled her nose.

"If you say so." Albert looked them over again before starting toward the cafeteria.

Cynthia sipped the tequila and grimaced from its zest.

Paula went on about various subjects that Cynthia found no relation. While Dwight conversed back, his eyes held no note of any true interest, as if his responses were automated. Regardless, Cynthia's skin began to tingle as she polished off her second drink.

Paula's watch beeped. "Oh, dammit! I'm late for my date with Donnie." She winked and stood up, reaching for the tequila bottle when Dwight snatched it away. "Asshole."

Dwight eyed the dwindling liquid in the bottle. "You know Negan doesn't want his lieutenants getting shit-faced at an outpost. Especially when there's only two of us here right now."

"Yeah, yeah." Paula waved him off and ambled toward the complex's higher quality quarters.

Cynthia waited for Dwight to do or say something as a distant cackling came from somewhere close. She hoped he would leave so she could live out her buzz in peace.

Instead, he filled her glass. "Consider this second a thanks for not being Theresa."
"Oh, this would be my third." She gripped the cup tighter. "And well... Theresa's goin' through some things."

"Yeah, well 'going through some things' or not, I offered to help her crossbow and she spent half the time bitching at me." He rested a leg on the table. "She keeps that up and next time I'm gonna fire a bolt up her ass."

Cynthia tried to take offense, but instead laughed. "Well, she don't like anyone that's not us. It ain't personal." She downed half her shot.

"Didn't seem to bother Gina."

She sat up. "Oh yeah, she hadn't said much about when y'all found her. Were you there?"

"Nah, but Bud was. Said she was all skin and bones, dirty from head to toe, and waving what might as well have been a butter knife at them. She was apparently screaming she was gonna eat them alive. Didn't know at the time she was half-serious."

"So why'd y'all take her in?"

"She had nothing to lose and everything to gain."

"What about when she told you about Terminus? I mean, I would've thought you'd think she was crazy or no good."

"Believe me, not what anyone expected to hear. Made me a little sick to think about, but it's not like there's not plenty around here to be sick about."

Like Negan turning Mark's head to jelly.

"Hell," he continued, "her honesty blew us the hell away."

"I hated doin' it, just so you know. We all did. We haven't had to in a long time and it's been a relief."

"If you stay with us, you'll never have to." Again, his eyes lacked interest in his own words.

She drank the rest of her shot and reached for the bottle, surprised when Dwight allowed it.

Something inside her unfurled as she took in her fourth drink and said, "Sometimes I think we did go crazy. That we got so into ourselves that we couldn't see the forest through the trees. I mean, Theresa still thinks anyone that's not us is dead weight."

"Then you need to get over it. There's strength is large numbers. Ever thought maybe that was your problem? You're too stuck in your ways?"

"Yeah. A lot, actually."

"Then you should've said something to Gareth. The guy looks like he listens to you."

She shook her head. "No, I'm like..." She nursed the last few drops from her glass. "I can't talk to him, he's... I love him."

He raised his eyebrows a tad. "Hm."

"Yeah... I need this drink. I gotta go back and sleep in a bed next to him. But he don't want me. 
He's into Martin. I mean, he's not gay, he's just not into a girl like me." Her voice shook, tears threatening to spill forth.

"Martin?" He gave a small snicker. "Damn, Negan was right. Guessed he had multiple proclivities as soon as he saw him. Didn't say anything about Gareth though."

Cynthia smirked. She would make sure to tell Martin that.

"But Gareth must be fucking stupid. You're much more pleasant than Martin."

She scooted to her seat's edge. "I know, right? Thank you!"

"Nah, you situation could be worse. Trust me."

"How?"

"Think about it."

She traced sloppy patterns on the table. "Like... we broke up?"

"Something like that."

"Yeah, I guess that is worse, but why—oh." She puckered her bottom lip and stumbled over to the seat next to him. Closer up, he looked oddly more attractive than he had before. Had he always been blond? She adored fair hair. "Whoever left you was stupid. I hate her."

"Nah, don't hate her. It don't do any good, I tried."

Poor Dwight! She wanted to wrap him up in a big hug. Maybe nuzzle his neck, kiss his lips, brush his chest, unzip his pants, reach inside, and...

Oh no!

She had to get out of there, but her limbs refused to budge. "You ever try to get over her?" she asked. He was quiet. "I try to get over Gareth and I can't. I think I need to—to take some big action and just say, 'fuck off, Garrett—Gare... Gare."

"I'd feel unfaithful if I did."

"Aw, you're not though." Her senses burned with a need for touch and she found her fingers grazing his arm. A tattoo peeked out from under his sleeve.

Now it was over. Men with tattoos? She could feel her underwear slipping off already. Or were they getting tighter? Wetter?

Dwight glanced at her wandering hand before meeting her amorous eyes. Nothing about his body language said he would reciprocate, but if she kept trying, maybe he'd—

"Cynthia?" Theresa's voice broke through.

No, goddamnit!

"Albert said you were going back to our quarters," Theresa continued, glaring bloody murder at Dwight. "We were just wondering where you were."

Cynthia lurched away from him. "Oh, y—yeah, sorry. He and Pauly P—Paula offered me a drink
and away—away got time from me."

She gave a slow nod. "Right."

Dwight rose to his feet, grabbing the bottle and two glasses. "You should get going. I should've cut you off already. I'm not getting my ass in a sling for your alcohol poisoning." He took off to the quarters without so much as a second look.

Cynthia sunk in her seat before Theresa's pout brought her back to life. "Theresa, I don't need a damn babysitter." She braced herself for the lecture.

"What the hell are you doing? Getting drunk with some random guy? And Dwight of all people who pushed a walker onto me! He could've done anything to you! These people aren't our friends!"

And bla, bla, bla. Typical Theresa ranting.

Yet Theresa remained quiet, moved over to Cynthia, and helped her up. "Come on, there's a nice rock hard cot waiting for you."

Cynthia giggled against the top of Theresa's head, a few hairs clinging to her lips. "Rock hard cot. That's... dirty."

Theresa breathed out a laugh. "Yeah, I like my cots rock hard. Soft limp cots are so sad."

Cynthia burst out laughing.

* * *

"You know that wasn't a good idea," Gareth said, his eyebrows raised in his classic scolding position.

Cynthia shunned the daylight and leaned against the bunk bed, the remaining four hunters gathered around. "Yeah, I know. I'm really sorry. But I remember everything and I didn't say nothin' I shouldn't have. Promise."

"You were a teacher, I thought you'd be hip to peer pressure. You know, be above the influence?" He imitated an arrow with his fingers. "Promise me you'll never do that again."

"I promise." He was close enough that if she inched up a tad, she could kiss him. And why did he always have to leave the second button so flirtatiously undone on his shirts? Was is that hard to—

"Hey, earth to Cynthia." He waved a hand in front of her face. "What did they ask about?"

She rubbed her aching head and took a step back. "Um... nothin' actually. I did most of the askin'. I asked Dwight some stuff about Gina and I said some things about Terminus."

Gareth turned to the rest of his people. "Alright, they don't have solid proof of anything, but we're still staying out there for two weeks once Kaylee is better because they will be following us. It'll be rough going back out, but once they see we have nothing to hide, hopefully they'll give up. If not, we might need to regress. But I think we can wrangle some supplies from Gina."

"I hate havin' to leave without Gina," Alex said.

"I know, believe me. But it's what she wants. Can't convince her to want something else."

Was that directed at me?
Albert nodded. "Yeah. I'm gonna miss her though."

"Think she'll hand out more painkillers for the road?" Martin asked.

"What?" Alex returned.

"She cornered me outside the john earlier and shoved three Vicodin at me. Said she ripped 'em off. Relax, I didn't take 'em. They're in my pocket. Figured Kaylee could use 'em more than me and I ain't in any mood to be fucked up. Not with these assholes humping our legs."

Theresa stepped toward him. "Kaylee was abusing cold medicine, though. I don't want her to get hooked on anything."

"I just figured—"

"She shouldn't have them," Gareth said. "She's already enough of a problem to take with us. If she starts having blinding pain, sure. But otherwise, no."

"Yeah, well, that's not all." Martin reached into his pocket and turned to Theresa and Alex. "Since she was all sorts of busy, she wanted me to give y'all these." He tossed a packet of four condoms at the two.

Alex caught them and Theresa failed to stifle a giggle. "Yeah, that's—that's real nice of her," Alex said. "But stealin' shit's gonna get her in trouble. Did you try to give either of these things back?"

"She didn't take no for an answer. I told her the same thing you did."

Alex shook his head and slipped the condoms in his pocket.

Theresa simpered. "Don't nobly vow to return them or anything."

"Well, she outright refused to take 'em back..."

Gareth rolled his eyes. "Gina feels guilty. Guilty she found new playmates while we were still out in the wild blue yonder."

"Sure does," Martin agreed. "Those rubbers are ribbed. You don't see those too much no more 'cause they go fast."

Cynthia blushed from Martin's nonchalance toward the subject, but her heart dropped when the worst realization came over her—she was supposed to be in love with Gareth. Yet she desired other men. One brought on by alcohol or not, it was wrong to feel such things when madly in love with another. Dwight all but said he was still in love with whoever had left him. So much he hadn't given a second thought to Cynthia's flirtations.

Maybe she didn't love Gareth, maybe she was merely in lust. Or perhaps she was an awful person who couldn't keep her eyes from wandering astray.

Like Gina.

Cynthia rested her head against her bunk bed as the door creaked open. Negan sauntered in followed by a cross-armed Dwight.

Her breath caught in her throat. No doubt Dwight told his leader of her drunken antics. She gulped, awaiting the mockery Negan would serve.
"Do I see some conspiring?" Negan asked.

Cynthia met Dwight's gaze despite herself, yet he looked right through her.

"Does this look like conspiring to you?" Gareth jested. "We're discussing ways to brighten this place up. Spray paint the rats pink. Blow up the used condom under my bunk and tie it into a cute little balloon animal."

Negan shook his finger. "I know conspiring when I see it. But I came to say we two are getting the fuck out of here. Exhausted myself with these outpost visits. Besides, Sherry..." He leaned toward Dwight. "Promised me a surprise when I got back."

The tense look on Dwight's face spoke volumes and Cynthia almost gasped when it hit her.

*Oh my god... is his girlfriend with Negan?*

"I also wanted to say we've been assessing your skills and doing some conspiring of our own. Since Gina spends most of her time at the Sanctuary, we'd love you to join us there."

Dwight focused on Theresa. "Yeah, 'cause we ain't done with our lessons.."

"Hey, yeah, meaning to fucking talk to you about that. You stained her only shirt. The one that was my gift. Not cool, man. Not fucking cool." Dwight remained stoic. "Anyhoo... Peach, Martin, Gareth—I think you'll do well with muscle work like patrols. And we do have a crew headed to one of our subsidiaries soon. Alex, not sure about you yet. Cynthia and Albert, you can give a hand doing maintenance. And Gina told me you liked kids, ginger snatch. We have a few to cuddle and adore."

"I can do muscle work," Cynthia bit.

"Oh, I'm sure you can. But no one's seen it, doll."

She waited for him to taunt her and Dwight's encounter, but he said nothing.

*Did he not tell him?*

"Negan," Gareth said, clenching his fist. "You assume we want a piece of your pie when we've made it clear we don't. We are perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves. I've been able to keep all of us alive for this long which proves we don't need you. You try to make it so life without you around here is either death by exposure or death by you. That's not how it's going to be for us. We've all agreed we want no part of your 'New World Order.' Thank you for your help and thank your for your offer, but no thank you."

Negan chuckled. "Listen, kid, I know, oh I know, you're a fucking fighter. You're a titan. You got your people out of a fucking nightmare. Don't think I have no respect for that. Hell, even a little sympathy. You want to know something? I'd have done worse to those vermin who did that shit to you. I'd have sucked the marrow out of their bones and flashed a big toothy grin.

"And I know, I know you dragged your asses all the way up from ass crack, Georgia to beautiful rural Virginia. And with the exception of your fingers, all in one piece. But after all that, just bailing on a piece of this pie? You're either fucking stupid or hiding something. Now, I like to believe everyone I meet is telling the truth because I just have the kind of face that makes folks spill their secrets. But I'm not stupid."

No one had ever spoken to Gareth like that. Not even Rick.
Cynthia ceased breathing while Gareth's face flushed redder than she had ever seen. She awaited the imminent explosion; the appearance of the Gareth who frightened her.

Dwight took a few steps past Negan and raised his hand. "Listen, Gareth, I can find you a spot where you don't feel like you're being smothered. If you do your part, you can all be moved to an outpost. I think you could lend a great hand if what Gina says about your abilities are true. You don't have to be sat on by his big ass."

Negan placed his hand over his chest. "Big ass? Excuse you, I do lunges. It's all muscle."

Gareth pressed his eyes shut and took a deep breath. "I appreciate that, Dwight, but like I said, we aren't staying."

Chapter End Notes

Negan and Dwight remind me of Zapp Brannigan and Kif from Futurama hehe.

Next chapter will be the introduction of The Sanctuary.
Blackmail

Chapter Notes

To zaidelles: I think you'll like this chapter. *eyebrow waggle*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After enduring another day with The Saviors, the group at last journeyed to the fabled Sanctuary. Martin snickered at the irony of its name having been one of Terminus's catch phrases. Meanwhile, he downed dry another dose of aspirin for the lingering pain from his fractured rib and bruised skin. A mere three doses remained in the bottle Negan had 'gifted' him due to Theresa's request.

Gina drove an SUV north ahead of the Jeep that carried a fragile Kaylee—something Theresa had argued. The latter's arm pressed against Martin's as they rode in the back, a touch he wished to avoid. Sobbing in her arms had been enough contact for several lifetimes. At least she hadn't mentioned the embarrassing experience. And she had even insulted him several times which he silently thanked her for. Though along with the pain, he sucked up the discomfort and forced normalcy.

When she lifted her leg and rested it on the front seat, Martin noticed the considerable amount of hair on her ankles and said, "Damn, you got some furry legs, woman."

She lolled her head around and shook it, a small smile on her tired face. A sleeping Alex stirred beside her, his head lying on her shoulder. Long car rides always put the little bugger to sleep.

"Pardon me, Gina," Gareth began from the front seat, "but are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" Gina released her hands off the wheel long enough to shoot him both middle fingers. "Oh, that's not fair. You know I only have one to give back." He raised his one middle finger and she tittered.

Martin weighed his options. If he were meticulous enough, he could nail them both in the same day. Neither one would mind, but what would normally have a certain organ quivering with anticipation instead brought him anxiety. His cracked rib made excessive movement painful. But most of all, he never wanted them to see the extensive bruising.

* * *

The Sanctuary rested on the edge of a small town, comprised of a sprawling factory and several surrounding buildings. More imposing were the many chained and impaled walkers lining the barbed-wire-topped fence. A few of their rotting heads even rested on pikes.

Nice, Martin thought. He much preferred its grittiness to The Samaritan's candy-coated town and even Sipsey's smooth interior.

Gina rolled the SUV along the narrow passage in and a male guard lifted the boom barrier.

"We talked about piling walkers around Terminus, remember?" Gareth asked Gina as he gazed outside.

"Yeah," Gina replied, searching for a parking spot beside a few askew trucks. "Figured it'd be off-
putting to newcomers. 'Course here, that's the point."

Alex peered out. "I don't even wanna think about what that's gonna smell like when we get out."

"Oh, well..." She hit the switch for Alex's window.

Alex covered his nose. "God... dammit..." He looked over his shoulder at Theresa sleeping across the seat. "Hey, Tess! We're here." She remained still and he shrugged. "Eh, she needs every second of rest she can get. She was awake most of the night."

Gina pulled the SUV into a spot beside a large garage opening and the Jeep followed suit. They filed out and gathered their bearings. The putrid scent of the dead indeed filled the air.

Martin pulled the back seat aside and patted Theresa's shoulder. "Wake up, we're at Neegsy's Claus's toy factory." A term Negan himself had used. Martin had to admit the pompous jackass had style. And a silver fox vibe. "Oh, come on." He gripped her wrists and pulled her forward a tad.

Her eyes flew open and she shrieked, flailing her legs as she tumbled to the ground against Martin's ankles.

He slid back. "Whoa, jesus christ. Calm down!"

Alex bolted over and knelt beside her as she panted and sat up. "What happened?" he asked.

Theresa smoothed her hair. "It's—it's fine, h—he just startled me when he woke me up."

"Sorry," Martin said, wondering what was so upsetting about being tugged on when he realized he was dragging her.

Oh, fuck.

"Hey, I'm sorry again, I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine," Theresa said, Alex helping her climb to her feet while the others gathered around.

If being beaten senseless was humiliating, Martin couldn't imagine the Occupation. And it went on for weeks. How they weren't all drooling heaps on the floor...

At least she got to own every one of them who hurt her. He only got to give one of his assailants their just desserts.

Theresa took in The Sanctuary before starting toward the Jeep. "We um, need to get Kaylee."

"Bill and Steph will get her, sugar," Gina said, pulling a walkie-talkie from her belt and holding the button. "Hey, someone tell Bill and Steph that we're here and to get the girl outta the Jeep and take her to the infirmary." A voice came through moments later and agreed.

"When will they get here?"

"Soon, she's okay. Come on, follow me."

Gina took lead as they traversed through the courtyard to the double doors. Her hand fiddled with her exposed bra strap, wiggling the bosom Martin had nicknamed 'sugar and spice.'

Dear god, that woman's tits... fucking work of art.
Yet he was unable to shake his revulsion over her Negan worship. The woman smiled and nodded for him. She had never been so reverent to anyone, not Gareth, not guys she wanted to hop into bed with, and not her former love, Greg. Though she had moved heaven and earth to help her old friends, it was clear she would sooner bend over for Neegsy Claus.

Once inside, Gina said, "Negan asked me to introduce y'all. Being that Theresa saved ol' Neegs's ass."

"Well, aren't we special," Gareth said, stopping inside the checkerboard-tiled foyer. "He's so kind for a domineering blow-hard with a god complex."

Her smile faltered. "Hey now, play nice."

A jet black-haired man greeted them. "Gina, welcome back. Negan said you found some old friends?"

She beamed. "Some from my old crew all the way back in Georgia. Negan wanted me to introduce 'em."

"I can introduce myself just fine," Gareth said as the man gave a complacent smile and went on his way.

Gina scowled. "Then you get to shout out your name, okay?"

Gareth held up his hand. "Gina, I don't understand this. You obviously think we're hiding something. Something Negan might want. So why are we playing this game? Just tie us up and torture us until we spill whatever it is you think we have."

"Don't think you're hidin' nothin', sweet pea."

"Don't ever lie to me and don't 'sweet pea' me."

Her jaw clenched. "We don't tie up new folks and stick shit in 'em on a hunch. Not if we got no shred of proof. Now please, follow me."

Yeah, fuck you, Gina.

They accompanied her up a flight of stairs to a catwalk over the main room. Numerous people moved about the expansive area dotted with rows of picnic tables and various machinery. Martin again admired its grittiness.

Gina halted mid-way on the catwalk, slipping two fingers past her lips and whistling. Those below took notice and averted their attention. "Alright, assholes," she began, "Negan wanted me to introduce my old pals here since they helped us out in a big way as you may or may not have heard. Theresa here..." She urged a stiff Theresa forward. "Saved Negan's life. One of the Samaritans was parked in a tree durin' our trade and was gonna take him out. But Theresa here was on the other side of the exchange and saw him first. Shouted that the motherfucker was there just in time."

A few Saviors shouted words of gratitude and others began clapping before the room erupted into applause. Theresa let her arms fall to her side and a smile flitted across her weathered features.

"Of course," Gina continued, "this means we left a hole in trade security but now we know." She pointed to Gareth. "And this here's the ringleader."
Gareth waved at the crowd and muttered, "Hilarious, Gina."

* * *

Martin only listened to enough of the rules to avoid trouble, and enough of his first assignment to learn he would be taking ammunition inventory. He tuned out the names of the Saviors slated to join him. To his surprise, Cynthia raised her hand and volunteered.

"I want you to tell me all about ammunition types," Cynthia requested as she trailed beside Martin on their way to the basement.

"Pretty sure you know the basics already," Martin replied.

"I wanna learn how to use a semi-automatic."

He began down a flight of steps. "Okay."

"I can do this. I ain't sittin' on my ass and homemaking."

"I never said you should."

"Listen, I know I'm not this hardcore chick like Theresa or Gina, or even Kaylee who heals people, but I'm capable. I can do this."

"I said, okay!" Martin snapped, stopping in the warehouse hallway before the second door on the right. "Is this about what Negan said?"

Cynthia glanced away and nodded.

Martin rolled his eyes and pushed opened the storage area door to a couple in the throes of passion. A pixie-haired blonde sat on the edge of a desk with her legs wrapped around a sandy-haired man's hips. Cynthia squeaked and covered her eyes while the two froze.

"Sorry to interrupt," Martin started as he took a few strides in, "but is this where the ammunition is kept?"

The couple hurried to make themselves decent, and the woman cried, "Please don't tell!"

"Lady, I don't care. I asked if this is where the ammunition is. Where you the two we were supposed to do inventory with?"

The man tucked his shirt into his pants. "Uh... no. Room across the hall. I didn't think anyone would be down here for—"

"Please don't tell Negan!" the girl begged. "W—we'll do the inventory for you!"

Cynthia peeked through her fingers before uncovering her eyes. "Why would we tell Negan?"

The blonde gaped. "O—oh... are you new?"

Martin narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, why? Why'd it be so bad if we told Negan about this?"

"It wouldn't," she said. "Nevermind." She started to pass him when he held his arm out.

"Tell me why I shouldn't tell him or I'll go out there and shout about this just for kicks."
Her face crumpled. "I'm... one of his wives."

Martin's face brightened. "Oh, really?" Five wives sounded like a nightmare. "I guess he don't want you fuckin' other guys, huh? Let alone while he's here."

She folded her arms. "I said I was going for a walk to clear my head. He hates that stuff, and he's busy, so...

"What do we have to do to get you not to tell?" the man asked.

"What's y'all's names?" Martin asked.

"I'm Amber," the girl answered.

"Mark."

Martin groaned. "Aw, another Mark? Just got rid of one."

Cynthia stepped forward. "Martin—"

"Shhh." He raised his hand. "What can you do for us?"

"I—I can try to get you some extra supplies?" Amber offered. "It's hard around here for new people. Are there more of you?"

"Five others."

"Oh... wow. Um... well that would be more difficult, but—"

"We'd like to get enough to eat," Cynthia said, throwing her shoulders back.

"There's only so much we can do before missing supplies are noticed," Amber said.

"That's fine," Martin said. "I understand. But tell me, what happens if we do go and tattle?"

"I'll be scarred," Mark replied, folding his hands together.

Martin twiddled his fingers across his cheek. "Sizzle sizzle?"

Mark gave a curt nod.

"I can't have that happen," Amber said. "I'm taken care of because I'm Negan's wife so I don't have to work for points. I guess I could sneak you some food from his quarters. But it's so risky..."

"I don't have to earn points either," Mark explained. "Me and Amber were together, and she agreed to be his wife and I get it easier too. So I can... sneak you some goods. Do you have a dorm yet?"

Martin and Cynthia nodded. "Okay, I can do that."

Amber frowned. "If it's too much though people will notice. And if he starts to lose weight again —"

"I'm missin' the part where I'm supposed to care," Cynthia barked. "And we want continued favors. Not just one meal. We're Gina's friends, if you know where Gina came from. So we don't put up with bein' hungry."

I get it, you're as big a badass as Theresa and Gina.
"Fine," Amber said with clenched teeth.

"I can get started collecting," Mark said with a shake to his voice. "If you tell me where you're set up, I can come by at around ten-thirty tonight."

* * *

"You sayin' I did good?" Martin asked Gareth inside their dorm; a tiny room with three hard futons and poor lighting.

"Yes, you did," Gareth replied on the edge of his chosen bed. "And later we can probe them for info. In fact, it was best you only asked for supplies first so we can keep applying the pressure. We can't overwhelm them with requests right off the bat. Good job."

"Well, I assumed you'd want a steady stream of favors," Cynthia said with a quirk of her lips. "So I asked for it."

"And good job to you too," Gareth said. "Thanks. But um, can you give Martin and me a minute?"

Cynthia's face dropped. "Yeah, sure." She whirled around and slammed the door on her way out.

Martin scratched his cheek. "Even I think that was a dick move."

"Is it that obvious what her problem is?"

He cleared his throat and imitated a falsetto, "'I'm not puttin' on a show to get your attention if that's what you think!'"

Gareth laughed. "She'll have to get over it. I talked to her about it and she was upset, but in time, she'll be fine. I do hate having to be so stand-offish about it though. But if I weren't, it'd just make her cling harder. Then she'd never move on."

"Yeah well, I don't dig her anymore, but I still think you should at least cut a small slice of ginger."

He placed his hand over his heart. "Oh, but you're so much more romantic."

"Heh, yeah, I told you I—"

"I know, that's why I wanted to talk to you. It's your bruises, right? And you don't want to be... oh, let's see... how do I put it... oh, I'll be crass: you don't want to be my bitch."

His ears rang. "Did Theresa say somethin'?"

"Nope. I know you well enough to know your whys and hows."

"Maybe I just wanna get back with Gina and having you around is too much to—"

"You haven't looked remotely interested in her."

"Yeah, alright. I'm not. It's the way she is with these people. It's pissin' me off."

"Feeling's mutual. And you're not my bitch, I swear. I think of you as an equal. And I know what it's like to be bruised and battered. You're one of my people and I need to make sure your head is in the right place. Just know I'm not averse to ever—"

"I don't care about the bruises." He lifted his sleeve to reveal a trail of blue. "See? I think they
"Okay. I believe you."

"They don't bother me."

"I said, I believe you."

"They don't bother me." Martin charged forward and pulled Gareth into a rough kiss, pushing his hand into the other's pants.

Gareth kissed back for a moment while his body responded from Martin's touch. He inched back. "You don't have to prove anything to me."

"I'm not." Martin began nipping at Gareth's neck and his own body flushed. "I want this, baby, just you. So bad. Give me a string of pearls all over my black and blue stomach. That'll make me all better."

"You promise not to do the same to me? Because I hate having to soil a perfectly good rag to clean that crap up."

He licked a stripe up to his beard. "I think I'll blow my load in your sexy scruff here just to piss you off. Done it before, I'll do it again."

Gareth chuckled and pushed him away. "Actually, Martin, you know what? Let's put this on ice for now. This isn't a good time or place." He wiped the saliva off his neck.

"Alrighty, then." He dug his hand into his pocket for the Vicodin. "I'll just get high as a kite. Because that's what I need. Yank my cock or give me some happy sauce. That's all I need to fix me up." He searched his other pocket. "Where did..."

Gareth rubbed his forehead and stood. "I gave them to Theresa."

He smacked his thighs. "Oh, 'cause you didn't trust me? Yeah, say it."

"No, because she sees Kaylee most often and if she needs them, she'll be the one to give them. I assumed she told you."

He unclenched his fists. "Yeah, but you still don't trust me. I opened up Sipsey's hatch without your permission. Why haven't you yelled at me for that?"

"You realize how stupid it was, and if it hadn't been for your kidnapping, I think it would've given us the edge we needed."

"Don't—don't say I..."

"What? Did something right? You both did and you didn't. But in the end, you and Theresa are alive which is what matters. No matter how awful this mess is we're in."

*Negan had made himself scarce since they arrived at The Sanctuary. Martin assumed it was some power play. Regardless, at ten-thirty sharp, a grim Mark Number Two appeared at their door holding a small assortment of food items inside his jacket.

"Give Amber my thanks for cooperating," Gareth said, gathering the items alongside Albert. "I
mean that, and tell her 'Gareth and his friends hope you do well.' Oh, is that chocolate?"

_Chocolate?_

Martin's mouth tingled. He felt he loved chocolate more than a PMS-ing woman who just got dumped. Though if Gareth gave it to him, he would decline. No sympathy handouts.

Mark nodded. "Of course. When I get a chance to see her." He slipped down the hall and Gareth shut the door. Albert began distributing the snacks.

"I swear," Theresa began, snatching one of the two chocolate bars, "at this rate, we'll end up in some other community by next week. Or I will."

"We will," Martin said, grabbing the remaining chocolate.

"I can't believe those women," Cynthia remarked as Albert tossed her a granola. "I think Dwight's girl was named Sherry and she got with Negan too. I can't imagine."

Gareth heaved a sigh and perched on his futon. "You know what? When you're outside the situation, you can't imagine what would make people do what they do. I think Sherry and Amber are just doing what it takes to keep themselves and Dwight and Mark taken care of. I can't judge them for that."

"Yeah, and we're takin' from one of 'em."

"Got to put us first."

Albert turned over his bag of chips. "You think they actually like being 'married' to Negan?"

"They might just pretend to be okay with it," Alex said.

"They'd have to," Theresa mumbled.

After eating, they stashed the evidence under a mattress for disposal the next morning.

And since Martin felt fate against him, the room's three beds meant he would bunk with Gareth. Cynthia or Albert would never take him when the obvious choice was to sleep with someone he had slept with. Though he had literally slept with the man twice during their starving period, this time he considered curling up by the walkers around the fence instead. Yet he swallowed his pride and settled beside the man with his back turned.

Martin lay in the dark and listened to the bustle of the factory. People pattering around, talking, laughing, and shouting obscenities. Eventually, the human sounds melded with the building’s creaks, and whirs of machinery. Theresa and Alex's bed then emitted a rustle and squeak. It was from the side closest to Martin, meaning Theresa tossed and turned because Alex _always_ had to have the left.

He cursed the things he'd unintentionally learned about them over the years.

Theresa let out a low huff before shuffling out of bed, her feet running into something on her way out the door. He expected a short absence, but when the minutes piled on, he assumed more than a bathroom break. The woman never did anything beyond number one at night. Again, he cursed the knowledge. Martin climbed out of bed with no resistance from his sleepless body and followed her. She stood outside resting her back against the wall.
He glanced around the open corridor for any Saviors before speaking. "You tryin' to get Alex to chase you?" She cocked a smile but didn't reply. He opted for something inflammatory to elicit a response. "Don't lie to me, all you needy women love to be chased."

She let out a small exhale. "I hate this place."

"More than not-Charleston?"

"Eh, apples and oranges. Hm, at least the Samaritans had fresh fruit."

"So..." He rubbed his hands together. "You think Negan's gunning to make you wife number six?"

Her head whipped around. "Don't... I don't want to talk about that."

"Sorry. But I gotta let you know I'm about ready to go all protective big brother on him. Gettin' sweet on a spoken for woman? That's my job."

She grinned. "How's your pain?"

"Meh, better than it was. Hey, uh, did Gareth give you the Vicodin?"

"Yeah."

"Why'd he say he wanted you to have 'em?"

"Because I'm spending the most time with her so if she needs them, I'm more likely to be there to give them to her. Why?"

He propped himself against the door. "So he was telling the truth."

Theresa furrowed her brow. "What, did he think he was hiding them from you?" Martin remained silent. "This may come as a shock to you, but I think he might trust you ninety-percent of the time."

"Do you trust me?"

"Of course."

"With your life?" She nodded, and he scoffed. "Oh, you dumb bitch."

She straightened her spine. "Hey."

"I mean, you don't know, I could still kill all y'all in your sleep if it'd benefit me."

"For a long time, yeah, I was afraid of that." She shook her head. "No, I think you're past it. You're just as good as any of us."

A low growl crept up his throat. "No..."

"Deal with it, asshole."

"I'll eat you. Been thinkin' about it for a while."

She offered a warm smile. "Mm-hm."

"Think all the weed Alex has smoked over his lifetime has permanently soaked into his skin? Think I could get stoned from chowin' on him?"
She raised a finger to her chin. "Hm... I've definitely wondered about that." She tapped his shoulder. "Alright, goodnight you white trash piece of shit." She crept back inside their dorm.

The same warmth touched his center as it had in his dream about Marion. He had the oddest suspicion Theresa was his friend.

Theresa.

His friend.

Nothing had surprised him thus far. The dead walking? Not what he expected to wake up to, but he rolled with it. Killing his sister and watching everyone but him in his initial camp eaten by the dead? It was a hard blow, but he knew it was a possibility. Stumbling across a cult of mentally fractured cannibals? Again, not what he expected that particular day, but it didn't shock him.

The most insufferable, bitchy little twit in the entire apocalypse becoming his friend? That was astonishing.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know, man, they're poking the Savior beehive with this blackmail shiznit. Part of me thinks Gareth needs to accept he's not queen of the castle anymore, but part of me wants him to have his own house again.

You think they're in denial about who they're dealing with? Theresa freaking at the weapons they have makes it seem like she's the only one who at least gets it a little about how dead serious the Saviors are. And like spending two weeks out there alone then going back to Sipsey will fool the Saviors. Please.

Here I go again... talking about my own story as if I weren't the writer of it. Really though, I have zip control over these characters. It's like I'm just watching them and I write down what they say. I feel like almost as much of a reader as you...
Date Night

Chapter Notes

This chapter feels kind of silly... containing Negan debauchery and stuff. Feels like a departure from normal, but when in Rome...

I also apologize for what I feel is its glacial pace.

Theresa urged a wandering walker toward The Sanctuary using an animal control pole. The checkered bandanna wrapped around the bottom of her face failed to entirely dispel the rank scent of decay. And the blustery day brought forth the odor from the factory’s fences undead.

*It’s going to soak into my clothes...*

“Aw, come on,” an older man with a thick grey beard began, “this is fun if you just try!” He tugged along the snarling walker on his pole.

Theresa cursed her partner under breaths of exertion. Though he was nice enough to lend her the bandanna as the smell didn't phase him. Her walker slowed and she yanked on her stick.

“Hey, not too hard or the head will snap off,” her partner warned. “That one’s basically a skeleton. Oh, hey! You ever see one shit? It’s disgusting. Once they eat so much they get this jelly belly and kablam! Like an explosion out of the ass. I guess it gets pushed out even though they don’t actually digest it.” He laughed and Theresa suppressed a growl. “Sometimes I’ve seen their guts just burst open. Don’t know why that happens instead of being quote-unquote ‘digested.’ Maybe because they eat too fast.”

The man spoke of nothing but walkers since their excursion to find more undead for the perimeters. He had no care in the world that she had only returned a handful of words back. While he droned on about walker tooth decay, they restrained the last of their catches by the back fence of the factory.

“Hey, good talking to you,” the man beamed, taking Theresa’s control pole. “I hope we get put on more assignments together, uh...” He rolled his hand.

She wiped a trickle of sweat from her brow and pulled off her bandanna. “Theresa.”

“Right! Well, I’ll return the stick for you since you look beat.” He retrieved his bandanna and began off with a wave. “Have a good one. Hope you have enough points for a shower.”

Her eyes met the row of putrid undead and she glowered. A shower cost fifteen-hundred points and she would have two thousand after her round-up which she needed for food. Mark would deliver more goods that night so she could waive dinner and use her points for a shower. Though his haul fell short of a full meal.

Theresa trudged inside the factory and past a group of boisterous men. A few chortles unmistakably aimed at her echoed through the room. She meandered through the main hall before settling underneath a stairwell and resting her forehead against the wall.
“Just the pretty peach I was looking for,” Negan’s voice rang. The man had the same stealth ability as Gareth much to Theresa’s displeasure.

She kept her forehead planted on the rough surface. “I was pulling in more dead ones for the fence.”

“Ah, who’d you get stuck with?”

“Um... some older guy, I don’t remember his name. He talked about walkers the whole time.”

“Oh, Chris! That motherfucker’s weird. He talk about roamer shit?”

She smiled a tad and turned around. “Yeah.”


She almost shuddered at the thought. “Could take it or leave it.”

“What if I said I’d let you have that? A nice meal, some clean clothes...”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to be your wife.”

He threw up his hands. “Whoa! The fucking ego on you! I just met you, I’m not proposing.” She pursed her lips. “I do thinking you’re fucking hot and I’d like to get to know you a little better.”

“Not interested.”

“Hang on, hear me out. You spend a little time with me, and I’ll give every one of you hungry hippos five thousand points—even boring bed-ridden Kaylee. And I’ll gift you a very fucking needed shower and change of clothes the house.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “ Seriously? Just like that?”

“One time offer. And no, no funny business. I won’t even touch you. I’ll stay four feet away at all times if you say so.”

“What does ‘a little time’ mean?”

“We’ll find a little table somewhere tonight, kick everyone else out and have supper.”

“Too easy. I don’t buy it.”

“Only going to do this once. No ‘second dates,’ no special favors. After this, you go back to earning like everyone else. You’re not going to pull me around by my dick.”

“This what you did to court your possible wives?” She smirked internally at the fact Amber was cheating on him.

“One of them, yes. Did it for another chick once, she didn’t pan out. We just didn’t click. You know how rough the dating game is.”

She heaved a sigh. “So, what? You’re not proposing, so it’s an interview type thing? You do remember I’m married, and I am not Sherry.”

*Or Amber.* Though telling him she knew about Amber might lead to suspicion.
“What do you know about Sherry?”

“She was with Dwight.”

*Wonder if they’re fucking behind Negan’s back, too?* Cynthia said Dwight made it sound like they weren’t on speaking terms, but who knew?

He pointed a finger. “You learn quick. And I know you’re not her—you’re married to honey bunny and seem to be happy with the guy.”

“His name is Alex.”

“Do you think I need to be reminded of your fucking names? Gareth, Alex, Theresa, Martin, Cynthia, Albert, and Kaylee. And don’t answer me on this yet. Tell Dwight your answer after your crossbowing.” He winked and sauntered up the stairs, his heavy footsteps straining the steps above.

Her mind was a blur from the offer, and she stood still a few moments. Taking a deep breath, she started toward the elevator intent on reaching her quarters to gather her bearings.

She had half a mind to lie and tell Negan she was pregnant with Alex’s baby. How could Negan not flee at that revelation? But knowing she used the failsafe on J.M.M. would make it suspicious. That and it would be too close for comfort using something she gave Alex false hope for at the cabin, followed by the promise for children she made when she gifted him the locket. However, her decision they would once be safe enough to have children grew dimmer as their predicament with The Saviors continued.

The cranky elevator doors opened and to her surprise, out stepped Alex. She froze. Negan’s offer would have him seething.

“Hey,” Alex said with his quintessential crooked smile. Her heart sank at having to take it away. “I was wondering how you were with the...” He stopped and looked her across. “You look... dude, you stink.”

She breathed a laugh. “I know. Walker round-up wasn’t fun.”

“Well, I was gonna give you a kiss ‘cause I didn’t this mornin’, but—”

“I wore a bandanna around my nose, so my mouth is clean.” She slid forward, hoping a kiss would soften the impending blow.

He held his breath and planted a peck on her lips. “You seen Kay lately?”

“Yeah, a few hours ago. She’s sitting up. Ready to get out of there and I don’t blame her.” She gestured to a spot by a small window away from foot traffic. “Can we...?”

His face fell and he followed her to the window. “Is something wrong?”

“No, just... Negan offered me a free shower, change of clothes, and five thousand points to each of us if I go a ‘date’ with him.”

Alex scoffed. “Guy’s unbelievable.” When Theresa didn’t reply, his smile faded. “What did you say?”

“Um, he gave me time to think about it.”

“Are you crazy? You—you’re seriously considering this?”
“Believe me, I do not want to do it. I figured we’d put it up to vote since I keep making decisions on my own without Gareth. He’s still pissed at me. He might be coming around to Kaylee, but he’s still pissed.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. What does a ‘date’ mean?”

“Supper tonight somewhere private. He promised he wouldn’t even touch me.”

He scoffed again. “And you believe that?”

She dug her nails into her palms. “I don’t know. He hasn’t tried to grab me yet. That’s why I don’t want to—”

“Even if he’s not pawin’ at you he’s gonna be sayin’ vulgar shit to you. You gotta know that.”

“I can handle it. And it’s not like I’ve decided I’m doing this, okay? We need the points. The—”

She lowered her voice and slunk closer. “What Mark is giving us isn’t enough.”

“This is fucking ridiculous,” he spat, making no attempt to lower his voice. “I can’t even believe you right now. I’m not supporting this. What if Gabby had said she was gonna give us all special favors if I went on a ‘date’ with her?”

Theresa took a moment. “She wasn’t actually into you.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I’d want to kill her, but if Gareth decided it was—”

He shook his head. “That’s bullshit. No way you would’ve agreed to that.”

She raised a hand to her hip. “When did you get so possessive? You hit Albert for god’s sake.”

He placed a hand on his chest. “Possessive? You’re seriously accusing me of that? I’m sorry if I don’t want that asshole wining and dining my wife for points! We don’t need ‘em that bad. We have M—we’re fine.”

“You know what? I’m not even going to bother with arguing with you right now. We’re going to Gareth and the others when we have time.”

* * *

“No, Gareth!” Alex protested.

Theresa’s shoulders slumped and her head ached while the group debated in their quarters.

Gareth tapped his nails on the wall’s worn brown paint. “I think it’d be a good way to find out what makes the guy tick a little more.”

“Yeah,” Martin began, swallowing dry his last dose of aspirin, “we know what makes him tick; blood and bitches.”

“A little more about what makes him tick.”

“We don’t need points that bad, man,” Alex said.

“Mark’s haul still isn’t enough,” Gareth said before focusing on Theresa. “I don’t want you to go,
but I think it’d be a good opportunity.”

Alex shook his head and stormed out of the room.

Theresa’s heart sunk further and she regretted her previous words. Accusing Alex of being possessive?

_Spidid._

“I’ll hide somewhere if you want,” Cynthia offered, holding her knees on her unkempt bed. “Like in a cabinet or somethin’. Bet I could fit.”

Theresa scratched the back of her neck. “Uh, no, that’s okay.”

Albert gave a humorless laugh. “That’d get us in trouble.”

Gareth strode to Theresa. “Thank you, Theresa. For not deciding this on your own.”

“You’re still pissed though,” she replied. “Just say it.”

“That you threw my plans to the wolves and opened the vault? Hm...”

“That was my fault,” Martin chimed in. “My idea. My damn... issues.”

“Of course,” Gareth agreed, keeping his attention on her. “I’m not holding grudges, but I’m not forgetting. Regardless, Negan clearly thinks you have as much control over the group as I do.” He pressed his eyes shut for a moment as if trying to will down his blood pressure.

“Then why do this?” she asked.

He stepped back and faced the rest. “Ah, because you’ll let him know you asked _me_ and I decided to _let_ you do it.”

“Putting you back at the top?”

“Exactly. And if he says anything about what he thinks we’re hiding?”

She gave a half smile. “Don’t say ‘I have nothing to hide,’ or ‘I can explain.’ I know, it’s something only guilty people say.”

* * *

Theresa forced politeness to Dwight at their crossbow training behind an outlying building. Cynthia had told her to lighten up with the guy, and though she couldn’t care less if he was offended, she admired his skills and enjoyed the feel of the weapon in her hands. Training had been a welcome distraction, much as it had been after her breakdown over Kaylee.

_Kaylee._ Kaylee would get five thousand points from Negan too. And she needed them more than anyone.

Theresa’s fellow trainee, Kitrick, limped away from the targets and hole-filled walkers. Once he was out of earshot, she said to Dwight, “Tell Negan I said yes.”

Dwight took her crossbow and studied her a moment. “I didn’t think you’d agree.”

“Why not?”
He shrugged. “Didn’t seem the type.”

“What typ—I’m not Sherry.” As soon as the words left her lips, she knew it was a mistake.

He glared daggers, his expression turning on a dime. “Well then congratu-fucking-lations. Go to Carson’s office and he’ll give you the key for the good shower.”

Her impulse to snap back was overwhelmed by pity. She forced yet another polite smile before starting toward the factory. It confused her why Negan had Dwight be the liaison when the former’s dorky assistant would be more convenient. As the cool factory air brushed her sticky skin, she realized it likely stung Dwight to handle Negan’s wifely affairs.

She arrived at Carson’s hyper-organized office, reminding her of Gareth’s at Terminus. The man handed her a key from his desk and gave her more information on the ‘date.’ While she hurried to the locked room on level three, she was met with numerous stares and whispers.

“Her? Why? She has small boobs.”

“She’d be his oldest.”

“She’s a psycho people-eater, that’s why he likes her.”

“Ugh. Plain Jane. I knew he only chose A-m-boring for her big tits, but her? Come on.”

Theresa gnashed her teeth together and held the key like a knife. A key could be a useful weapon...

Willing her own blood pressure down, she unlocked the door to reveal a small blue-tiled bathroom. A casual, black dress on a hanger rested hooked over the shower door along with a black bra and underwear.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

The warm shower paired with the peppermint body wash was heavenly. Once done, she changed into her new clothes, left the old ones on the floor out of spite, and headed to the first floor break room.

She inched through the doorway to find Negan sitting at a round table. “That’s much better,” he said, tracing her figure. “I love seeing you covered in blood, but this...” He moved his hand up and down. “Gina told me your bra size if you were wondering.”

How the hell does Gina know my bra size?

Theresa marched over and took a seat across from him. “I just want to get this over with. Only reason I’m here is because Gareth okayed it.” The aroma of garlic found her nose and she noticed the meal before both of them: angel hair pasta topped with tomato sauce and a few basil leaves beside toasted bread.

“You must be famished, peach. Dig the fuck in.”

A sharp rumble shook her stomach. She hoped he hadn’t heard it. “A little.” She grabbed her fork, but first inspected the glass of purple liquid beside the plate. It smelled like grape juice.

“Relax,” Negan said, beginning on his dinner. “I’m not going to fucking roofie you.”

“Fantastic.” She started eating and had to suppress the urge to moan from its richness. It was leagues better than the slop they served in the cafeteria.
“I was dying to see you eat something red.” He licked a swipe of tomato sauce from his finger. “Guess you won’t want to pick it up with your hands and eat it like entrails, huh?”

She scowled. “I’m not a walker.”

“I’d wanted to see you take a bite out of flesh, but it’s been scarce lately. Our hunters fucking suck.”

“Haven’t you seen Gina eat meat?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t a sight to behold. She eats everything like a starved hobo. The slurping and smacking and ugh.”

Theresa had to laugh. “Believe me, I know.” It dawned on her Gareth’s method of witty banter might make the ordeal more bearable. “So how come you haven’t made Gina one of your angels?”

He nearly spit out his drink. “Gina? Fuck no. She’s a looker, but she’s fit for the field. Wants to earn her keep with sweat and blood, no matter how much she likes to fuck. Speaking of, she hopped on that Martin’s dick?”

“I don’t keep track.”

“Oh, is it because of bossman? Shit, I knew the second I saw Martin he loved to take it up the ass even though Gina hadn’t told me. He’s probably gotten her to stick her fingers in him because—”

“Can we change the subject?” She set down her silverware.

“Oh, am I fucking offending you?”

“I just don’t want to think about my friend’s asshole while I’m eating.”

“What, you never ate people brisket?”

“Never ate the actual asshole.”

He waved her off. “Ah, you’re no fun. No, I take that back. Gina told me stories about Terminus. Really goddamned interesting ones.”

“Oh?”

“Said after you took it back, she and a few others cut the junk off the lead asshole of that group and—“ He stopped for a breath. “Whoa, fed it to a roamer while the prick watched. I’m going to take a wild-ass guess and say one of the people doing that was you.”

Theresa went static at the memory. The vengeful act was the first time the ghost she was felt a spark of satisfaction. “Yeah, I was one of them.”

“I applaud you. But you know what? I think you’re just warm, gooey, caramel inside. All candy hearts. Falling to pieces over Kaylee and snuggling up to a sweet guy like honey bunny?”

She looked up as if in deep thought. “Hm, interesting theory. I’ll take it into consideration.”

“Speaking of... how did honey bu—oh sorry, Alex, react to this?”

Oh, god. Alex. The state he would be in when she returned created a pit in her stomach.
“That bad, huh?” Negan said.

“I just want my people to have enough to eat. You know that’s kind of important to us.”

“I know. And I know it was all Gareth’s decision to let this happen. He wants to remind me he’s large and in charge. You know, he’s so pretty that if his dick inverted and he grew tits, I’d be on him so fast you would never hear from me again.”

“And again, eating.”

Theresa finished her dinner as fast as possible. The meal filled her gut with a warm fullness, yet failed to negate the growing sunken feeling. Afterwards, Negan said to leave their dishes there as someone else would tend them. He led her to the door and opened it for her.

“Such a gentlemen,” Theresa remarked as they began strolling through the corridor.

“Damn, you know how many people—women—would kill to have me take a second look at them?”

“God help them.”

Deep, booming laughter erupted from his throat. “See? That’s what’s so refreshing about you. You’re not groveling at my feet. I’ve had so many chicks earn points just to get slutty clothes so they can bend over in front me and flash their ass or titties. Pa-thetic.”

She rolled her eyes as quick footsteps echoed from around the corner.

“Hey!” Negan called. “I said no fucking interruptions!”

An auburn-haired woman turned the corner dressed in a red silk robe wrapped around revealing lingerie. Theresa assumed she was a wife. Sherry?

“Nikki...” Negan groaned. “What the fuck are you doing down here?”

Nikki smirked and swaggered over. “I was dying to see the cannibal chick you were going on about last night.” She winked.

Theresa tensed.

“Yeah? And I said it was my business. Get back up there. Now.” He pointed.

She ignored him and scrutinized Theresa like a piece of meat. “I know you said she probably was a lost cause, but you have to convince her! I like her. I’d totally do her while you watched.”

For the first time in her entire Negan experience, Theresa blushed bright red.

“Nikki...” Negan warned, a small smile touching his lips.

Theresa straightened herself. “You’re interrupting our date.”

He placed his hand under his wife’s chin. “Go back to the penthouse, Nikki-Sticks. I’ll be home soon.”

“I’d lather her in steak sauce,” Nikki said, gazing up at him with sultry eyes before giving them to Theresa. “And lick it all up bit by bit. Then I’d climb in her lap and kiss here.” She ran her hand above Theresa’s neck. “And here...” Her collarbones. “Here.” Her breasts. She kept moving down
until her hands hovered above her groin. “And here.”

Theresa felt so far from home. Stolen from her family and placed in a monarchy of a seedy king loitering over his subjects with a barbed-wire-wrapped scepter. An alien world.

Her throat tightened, bubbling anger and an urge to flee threatening to overwhelm. If situations were different, she’d have punched the Nikki square in the jaw. At least Negan had not detailed what he wanted to do to her.

His amused expression fell. “Upstairs. Now.”

Nikki threw her head back. “Ugh, fine.” She turned around and stomped away like an indignant child.

“I’m so sorry about that, peach,” Negan said, his tone not convincing her in the least. “Nikki’s... enthusiastic.”

“Can we get on with this now?” Theresa asked, folding her arms.

“Alright, buzzkill. Just a little longer. Anything you want to say?” Theresa stayed quiet. “Oh, chin up. Nikki’s going to get a punishment.”

“This isn’t the life I want.”

“Well, tough titties. This isn’t the life most of us fucking want. None of this is what we wanted. So either you stay here or go commit suicide out there. Too fucking bad you don’t want it. You didn’t want Terminus, right?”

She bared her teeth. “I know that. But I'm not living my life as a prostitute to get by.”

He stooped down and she winced. “My girls are not prostitutes. Got that?”

Her heart skipped a beat. “S—sorry. You’re right. They’re just doing what it takes.”

He flashed her a grin. “Date over, peach. Run back to your room now.”

She sighed a breath of relief. “Thank you for the shower and the points.”

“Hope you enjoy the fuck out of them.”

She nodded and all but ran back to her quarters, past seas of dirty looks and a snide remark she didn’t bother to absorb. Her feet stopped when she reached the door and overheard Alex's voice. He was going to be livid. Sucking it up, she pushed open the door to find Alex and Gareth.

“Tess!” Alex exclaimed, rushing over and wrapping her in a hug. “Are you okay?”

She was too surprised to answer at first, but returned the embrace. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay. He didn’t touch me.”

He gripped her tighter, almost squeezing the air from her lungs. “I just wanted you to be okay.”

"I know. I'm sorr—"

“Did he probe for any info?” Gareth interrupted.

The two reluctantly separated and Theresa replied, “No. He didn’t, actually.”
“Man, Gareth, I’m tired of games,” Alex said. “Sipsey, and now this?”

He rubbed his temple. “I know. I keep thinking I shouldn’t have played the game at Sipsey. That it was all so clear what we had to do. But here? They’re forcing us to play. Negan’s forcing us.”

“What’s Sipsey?” Gina asked from the doorway.

Theresa’s breath caught in her throat.

Gareth raised a hand. “Gina—”

“I knew it!” she proclaimed. “I fuckin’ knew it all along. You’re hidin’ some place. Sipsey, Sipsey, Sipsey.”

“Hey!” Martin called from behind her.

“Martin! Get her!” Gareth ordered.

Gina started to turn when Martin pushed her back put her in a choke hold.

“Shut the door,” Gareth commanded. Alex inched over and closed it, keeping his eyes on Gina.

Gina whined and tried to pull Martin’s arm free to no avail. “Martin, stop!”

“Sorry, babe,” Martin said. “No one likes a tattle-tale.”

Theresa glared at her. “You would really expose us, huh?”

Gareth stepped forward. “Nark on your real people? You know, I just got through this kind of crap with Kaylee and now we have you.”

“I’m sorry,” Gina choked out. “I—I swore to ’em. I gotta tell ’em there might be another community out there.”
Alex avoided Gina's eyes as Martin restrained her, unable to face the woman he had starved and cried beside. The woman who now stood ready to give them all away. Kaylee had been different, defecting due to Gareth's tyranny and her weariness of their diet. Something on a basic level Alex understood. But all it had taken for Gina to switch her undying loyalty was a warm bed and promises of glory.

"We could tattle on you," Gareth said to her. "You have been stealing, you know."

Not more blackmail...

"Go for it!" Gina challenged. "Once I tell 'em about another possible horn of plenty, they'll forget all about it. You can trust me on that one."

Theresa was motionless, her face flooded with the same pain as when Kaylee left. "I can't believe you."

"Yeah," Martin agreed, stooping down to Gina's ear. "You're a class-A bitch, you know?"

"Guys," Gina started, "things ain't gonna be bad for y'all. He can put you in charge of this Sipsey place, Gareth. Or at least station you there. You'll be all taken care of."

Gareth scoffed. "Yes, because he's going to jump for joy when he finds out what we've been hiding. All forgiven, no Lucille at all."

Her face fell. "No... he won't."

"Liar."

A knock sounded on the door. "This is Dwight."

"Gina," Gareth mouthed. "Don't you dare."

She gave a semblance of a nod. "I'll wait for Negan."

Martin released her and she gasped for breath. Alex and the others struggled to form a normal composure as Martin opened the door.

Dwight held his hand ready to knock again. "I thought I saw you two come up here. Gina, came to say congratulations."

She cleared her throat. "For?"

"Your promotion."

Her face brightened. "I got it? I seriously got it!?"

"Lieutenant." His jaw clenched. "Negan's waiting downstairs to promote you in front of everyone."

Alex shuddered. Something wasn't right.

Gina smirked and twirled around. "Come on, y'all. Oh, I want Cynthia and Albert to be there."
"They're there," Dwight said. "Come on, they're getting antsy."

Alex met Theresa's fiery gaze, she apparently didn't share his worry.

They followed the chipper Gina and placid Dwight through the hall and downstairs into the main room. People chattered and circled around the pillars in the center, but hushed as they set sights on Gina. Alex spotted Cynthia and Albert at the crowd's edge. Cynthia was sniffling, and a ripple of nausea racked Alex's gut.

Once they reached the two, Gina screeched to a halt and gasped. This was no promotion.

Negan stood in the eye of the congregation beside a table that held several rags, antiseptic, and a butcher's knife. Gareth clenched his fist and muttered something. Theresa and Martin froze.

Negan's rough face softened upon seeing Theresa. "Oh, peach, I'm sorry to have to do this. Especially right after our lovely evening."

Alex's pulse increased, wanting to step in front of his wife and block Negan's view. The man didn't deserve to look at her.

"N—Negan..." Gina sputtered. "What—what's going on?"

He picked up the blade. "Well, Gina, as I was hopping along up to my penthouse, Carson stopped me and said he figured out who our resident thief is." The color drained from her face. "First clue was the missing shit in the crate from Hilltop a few weeks back with a curly hair by it. Not definitive proof, but you're permitted in there and you know, that lovely fucking hair of yours. Second clue was back at the outpost and the ribbed condom wrapper—sloppily stuffed, I might add —under Theresa and Alex's bunk. Of course I'm worried where the actual rubber went, but hey. Now, who had access to that storage room and who would give them fucking condoms?"

Theresa had been right, they should have disposed of the wrapper better. Though now Negan had the knowledge he and Theresa had had sex recently. Good.

See, asshole? My wife, our active sex life, our business, our—

Gina began to sob and Alex broke from his jealous haze. Going to nark on them or not, she didn't deserve whatever Negan had in store. His heart ached for her.

"And two stolen Vicodin!" Negan continued, brandishing the knife. "When there's coincidentally two injured people in your goddamned group. Yeah, your attempt to replace the pills with two ibuprofen failed, doll." He waited for a reply, but she remained quiet, staring at her feet. "Not even going to deny it?"

She shook her head. "No..."

"Aw, damnit. I had a whole motherfucking speech and some fantastic comebacks ready. Fucking hell. Well, sit the fuck down." He gestured at the steel chair before the table. Gina choked out more sobs, plodded over to the chair, and sat. "Carson?" he called, looking over his shoulder. "Want to read me a list of the shit she stole?"

She shook her head. "No..."

"Carson stepped forward from the crowd and pulled a list from his pocket. He unfolded the paper and began reading off her steals. "Three snack-sized bags of mints, four hair ties, nine butterscotch..." The list went on and on. Gina had become some sort of kleptomaniac.

Alex's heart was racing as Gina pressed her eyes shut. A glint of light bounced off Negan's butcher
"Bet you're wondering why no iron?" Negan asked once Carson finished reading. "Well, I thought it'd be ironic if Gina lost some fingers. Two to be exact. So she can match Gareth over there."

Gareth seethed, the vein in his neck popping. "Hilarious, sir."

"Ooh, if looks could kill. I don't give a shit if none of you like this, by the way. Peach, again, I'm sorry I have to do this to your friend."

"You don't have to do anything," Theresa mumbled through clenched teeth.

"Shhh!" a woman shushed from behind her. "Show some respect!"

"Alright, G-string," Negan started, "lay your index and middle finger out on the table. Oh, on your right hand. Got to round it out." Gina rested two of her trembling fingers on the surface. "For the crime of extensive-as-fuck thievery, Gina is losing two of her sticky fingers!"

Alex wanted to shut his eyes. To watch one of his people—his family—be hurt and humiliated before a crowd? Maybe it wasn't on the scale as what the Occupiers did, but it wasn't okay. No matter what.

But what was okay meant nothing.

Negan motioned for Dwight to come forward and he held her in place as Negan brought down the knife. Gina yelped and blood spurted from her lost appendages.

"Good to see you up, Kay," Alex said as Theresa helped Kaylee hobble to their breakfast table.

"Yeah," Kaylee replied, her face devoid of emotion, as Theresa ushered her into a seat beside Alex and the remainder of their group.

Theresa hung on Kaylee's every movement as if ready to jump through the ceiling if the woman asked. Alex thought what a fantastic mother she would make.

"They put Gina somewhere else," Kaylee mumbled, and brushed her fingers across her bowl of oatmeal. "I didn't see her."

"We know," Gareth said, tossing back a drink of water. "They did that with—you remember what we said about those three Theresa and Alex met at the cabin, right?"

"Yeah," she answered.

Alex waited for someone else to speak, but they ate their breakfast in heavy silence. He took a bite from his admittedly sweet peach.

"Peach. Negan giving my wife nicknames."

He glanced across the room at The Saviors going about as normal. One of their residents' losing fingers or being scalded with an iron was a regular occurrence. Of course, it had once been typical.
to eat people instead of a mere peach for breakfast.

But none of it was to hurt or punish.

A male figure stood at the far side of the room with a cigarette between his lips and his eyes fixed on their table. Dwight.

Alex met his gaze and mumbled, "Stay here."

Theresa's head jerked up. "What?"

"Dwight, over there. I'm gonna talk to him."

"Alex," Gareth started, "what are you trying to—"

"I can do this, okay? He's lookin' at me. Just me. And you might be kinda..."

"Intimidating," Kaylee said, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

Gareth sighed. "Okay, Alex. Go."

Alex fought a smile at Gareth's trust. He gave one last look at his weary people and rose to his feet. As he strolled through the room, he thought of Gina's anguish, his group's poverty, their need to blackmail to eat, and Theresa's 'date' with Negan. Something had to be done.

Dwight turned away and headed down the hall leading to the back exit. Alex stayed on his trail, keeping his head held high until he reached the exit and pulled open the door. The other man stood leaning against the wall and breathed a cloud of smoke.

"Yeah?" Dwight asked, keeping his sights on the walker-lined fence ahead. "I ain't sorry about pushing the roamer on your girl if that's what this is."

Alex ran his tongue through his dry mouth. "No, it's not that. It's... you hate him, don't you?"

Dwight puffed the cigarette. "What do you want?"

"Man, you were the one lookin' at me. So answer me." Dwight remained stoic. "Then why do you put up with it?"

"Got to."

"No, you don't."

"This is it. All there is."

"That ain't true. If I can see it, then you can. I've been out there. Really been out there. I should be as ready to throw in the towel as you, but I'm not."

"Yeah? Negan thinks that's 'cause you got some place you're keeping secret."

"Don't y'all have enough?"

"Never enough."

"That's bullshit."

A sad smile crossed his lips. "This was a nice talk, Alex."
"See, you even know my name."

"Eh, Theresa talks about you a lot."

"Yeah." He began to give up when he recalled Gareth's faith in him. "Look, I know you don't trust us, but I think we have the same goal here. What happened with Sherry?"

He let the cigarette fall to the ground and crushed it under his shoe. "Nope."

"Oh, come on, I can ask around. I'm sure whatever they say won't be the real story. Rather get it straight from the horse's mouth."

He was quiet so long Alex thought he wouldn't reply. "Me, Sherry, and her sister, Tina, found this group before Negan held the reins. I actually got along with him, thought of him as my friend. Sherry and I weren't getting along too well though. Going from, 'honey, should we go out for dinner, or order in?' To, 'honey, should burn the mauled corpses of our friends, or just leave them to rot?' It changes a relationship."

Alex laughed. "Yeah, I get that. Shit changed with me and family real quick. I didn't know Theresa from before though. Come to think of it, that might have its advantages."

He nodded. "Yeah, I think so. Anyway, I'd still have killed the first person who ever put her in danger no matter how much she pissed me off. Tina, too. Then Negan stepped up and 'took care of' all the people he called 'vermin' in our group. The liars, the thieves, the rapists... And he declared us the new world order. Hell, I was on board. I was fucking thrilled, this was amazing. Order in the midst of chaos."

"But Sherry...?"

"She was spreading her legs for him. I knew it somewhere deep down. It wasn't like we were still fucking. I hadn't even kissed in her months. Negan said he'd be honored if she would be his 'companion' and I could be his right-hand man. Told me he wanted a brother and a wife. And if we said yes, both of us, and Tina would be taken care of. I wasn't as thrilled about that, but I agreed and so did Sherry. Hell, if that asshole could make her happy, I was happy."

"Then the other girls?"

"Then the other girls. Sherry said it was fine, that she could share, that she could cope, but she wasn't happy. Then Negan said if she left, the deal was off. I didn't even know it was a deal like that. I didn't know there were conditions. But over time everything just changed. Nothing like it was at first when he stepped up and became our 'Savior.'"

Alex scratched his head, ruminating on the wealth of information. "Like I said, it ain't all there is."

He narrowed his eyes. "What are you even asking me this for? See, if you don't—"

"Out. I want out."

He scoffed. "Good luck."

Alex sunk, recognizing something uncomfortably familiar in the man; defeat. Feeling the only way to live was the status quo. Someone higher up deciding his fate, who he was and who he would be when he left the world.

But Negan wasn't Dwight's actual brother.
Alex took a deep breath. "Well, if you decide to stop feelin' sorry for yourself, come find me."

* * *

"Hey, Tess," Alex greeted his spouse. Theresa and Cynthia dragged their feet to the umbrella-shaded bench by an outlying building.

"Y'all look happy," Martin said from behind the bench where Alex sat.

"Yeah," Theresa returned, perching beside Alex and resting her elbows on her knees. "I went through that... 'date' to be rewarded with this. You should've seen Gina in there..."

Cynthia took shade from the hot sun underneath the umbrella and wiped her forehead. "Ugh, they didn't let me in to see her 'cause Steph thought I'd be 'weepy.' Little bitch."

"I like this mouth you've developed," Martin said. "It's refreshing."

She sneered. "I can't even look at you right now."

He sighed. "I didn't want to put her in a choke-hold."

"Not that! You know what..."

Alex had an inkling Cynthia meant her obvious feelings for Gareth. "I don't think this is the place, guys."

"He's right," Theresa agreed. "This isn't the time."

"Oh, shut up, Theresa," Cynthia snapped. "You ain't the boss of us, remember?"

Her eyes bugged out. "Hey! Don't take your problems out on me."

"Guys..." Alex started.

"This is your fault," Cynthia continued.

"Hey!" Martin exclaimed. "It ain't no one's fault but Negan's, alright?"

"I swear, I'll cut your dick off," she spat.

Alex and Theresa shouted, "Cynthia!"

Martin laughed. "Meow. And here I thought Theresa was the villain. If you got somethin' to say, red, say it."

She was quiet. "You don't understand."

"Can we please not do this now?" Theresa urged.

"No, bestie," Martin said. "My blackmail buddy's got somethin' to say. Honesty's good."

Alex groaned. Conflict was not what they needed. "Then we'll leave." He began to stand.

"No," Cynthia protested. "Stay. Y'all need to know too. Need to get this out in the open." She took a deep breath. "I'm... I think I—I love Gareth. And he..." She pointed at Martin.

"If you want me to step away, I'll do it," he said. "No need to castrate me."
"You don't get it. You don't care how I feel at all. And worse! You still flirt with Gina like you
don't already have enough, you pig."

Martin stomped forward. "How stupid are you? I haven't been flirting with Gina. And last time I
checked, he don't want your crazy ass."

"If you weren't here, or with him it'd be different. He wants someone fun and easy, and he'll never
entertain the idea of someone else when you're here."

"What did I just say I'd do? You know what? No, if you were so in love with Gareth, you wouldn't
have gotten plastered and tried to whore around with Dwight."

Theresa bolted up. "Martin? Really?"

"Sorry, bestie. Honesty's a bitch."

Cynthia hugged herself. "Maybe I do feel desperate. Hm, wonder why."

"Dear god, what was I thinkin' back at Terminus when I was tryin' to bag you. Gareth was right to
warn me away."

"He what?"

"He said if I started fucking you, once I got bored, you'd be inconsolable and it'd cause too much
trouble for our fractured group."

Her face dropped. "He said that?"

Martin sobered a little. "He told me to back off 'cause it'd cause more conflict we didn't need. If
you want me to back off now, I will. All this is doing is causin' more trouble we don't need."

Cynthia's eyes welled. "He thought I was too fragile, huh? That I'd what, fall in love with you and
freak out when you dumped me?"

"He thinks you're clingy."

Her chin trembled as she whirled around and stalked off.

Martin rubbed his temple. "Ah, hell."

"Good goin', man," Alex said.

"What did she want me to do? Anticipate her undying love and kill myself?"

Because Alex could do nothing else at that point, he burst out laughing. Martin relaxed a tad and
Theresa flopped back in her seat.

* * *

Near dinnertime, Alex sat on the floor beside Theresa against their futon. It reminded him of the
times they got stoned together in their rooms at Terminus. He craved a joint more than ever.

"You have leeway with Dwight," Gareth said from his own bed. "I'm surprised he told you all of
that." He raised a finger. "No, I take that back. You have that kind of face that makes people want
to bear their soul. One minute alone with those sensitive puppy eyes would probably make Negan
tell you about his mother issues."
Alex smiled as Theresa laid her head on his shoulder. "Lucky me." He did a double take. "Sensitive? I'm not—"

"It can be a good thing."

Alex blinked. "Not what you used to say, Gare."

"It's not always good, but I couldn't have gotten Dwight to say what he did." He stood up and smoothed his shirt. "I'll see you two, alright?" He moved past them and out the doorway.

*Sensitive puppy eyes...*

"You think he knows about Cynthia's feelings?" Alex asked.

Theresa shrugged. "He has to. He's not dumb."

Minutes passed in silence while his thoughts swirled with their fight over her and Negan's 'date.' In hindsight, he felt he may have overreacted, yet she had been the one apologizing the previous night. Though something else ate away at him. Something he had never consciously given solid thought.

Before he knew it, he began speaking, "You know why Negan likin' you bothers me so much?"

"I know why."

"No, it ain't that simple. I don't think so." Could he tell her this? Would she be mad? "It's just that—and I know this is stupid, and I'm wrong, and I don't *really* believe it, but I've always had this nagging worry."

She lifted her head from his shoulder. "About what?"

"All this talk from Dwight about arrangements, and Cynthia sayin' Gareth would want her if he didn't have the easier, convenient option of Martin..."

"Alex, what?"

"I'd always worried I was just easy. That because I was there after you were raped, because I had 'sensitive puppy eyes,' that you glommed onto me 'cause I was there. Convenient. That I was just a crutch and a phase you'd grow out of once you got your bearings."

Her mouth gaped open. "Alex, no. Oh my god, *no.*" She placed her hands on his. "Is that why you always thought I'd never like you if we met before the turn?"

He gave a weak nod. "Either that or you're just insane and misguided for loving me."

"Alex..." She embraced him. "I love you, okay? I'd love you no matter what. If we were amoebas, Theresa amoeba would love Alex amoeba."

Laughter erupted from his throat. She rarely said such sappy things.

*Because I'm the dewy, sensitive one...*

He rested his cheek on the top of her head. "I know that. I really do. I still think you're crazy, though."

"Then crazy's good. And just so you know, it wasn't like after the Siege I was moping around
going, 'god, I want a boyfriend. I need comfort.' The person I happened to connect with just also happened to become my boyfriend."

"What about mom?"

"Well, she wasn't my type."

He smiled. "You know what I mean."

"I wasn't looking for a mother either. But I found one. I found a whole family."
Chapter Notes

A special thanks to MintyRick for all your comments over the past week. It's been like Christmas in July!

And I couldn't resist the title I chose for this chap. You'll see why.

Gareth and Alex stood inside Gina's messy room as she perched on her bed and analyzed her missing digits. "Got my fingers cut off, then got sent to my room to think about what I did," she said, raising her right hand.

"You know I didn't want this," Gareth said to her, trying to avoid sight of the clothes pile on the rug.

Gina nodded. "Yeah, man, I know you didn't. And I still swear I won't tell 'em. They'd move heaven and earth to get their mitts on an underground bunker and its shit. Lucky you, I got caught just in time to save y'all."

"No," Alex protested. "No, we didn't want it this way."

She scoffed. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Gareth agreed. "We didn't want it like this."

But it was a silver lining.

"I don't get it, though," Alex said. "What's makes these people so great—makes him so great—that you'd sell us out?"

She looked away. "They saved me. Took me from some place awful to some place worth... you know, worth living."

They were quiet for a moment before Gareth asked, "You get the phantom feeling yet?" She nodded. "It gets better, but it never goes away. I'll see if I can get sweet little Mark to sneak you some more aspirin."

"Mmm, I think I like the idea of Amber screwing around on him. Kinda therapeutic."

"It is satisfying, ain't it?" Alex asked.

Gareth held up his left hand and she placed hers on par with his. "Perpendicular," he said.

Her smile faded. "Just how ol' Neegs wanted it. Nah, you know what? I got night watch. I'm outta here." She stood and started toward the door. "Not stayin' in my room like a kid no more."

* * *

Dwight and Carson delivered announcements from the catwalk to the crowd gathered below. Gareth attempted to make eye contact with Dwight, but it appeared he was ignoring him and the
rest of his party.

"With the flu going around," Carson began, "we have some impromptu open spots for tomorrow."

"Who wants to volunteer for assessment at Burleson?" Dwight asked.

Numerous men raised their hands, shouting, "Me!" and, "I do!"

Dwight laughed. "Yeah, I figured." He scanned the congregation. "Okay... Jeffery, Don... Theresa, Alex, Gareth, and..."

"What?" Gareth asked. "What's Burleson?"

"Man, you are so lucky!" a gruff voice said from behind him.

"And Cynthia," Dwight finished, Carson scribbling on his notepad. "Assessment is heading out tomorrow morning. Carson will give you who've never been on an away mission more info before then. That'll be all for now." He gave a wave and strolled down the catwalk with Carson.

"What's his problem?" Martin asked. "Does he think I'm frail or some shit? I could..." He heaved a sigh.

"Aw," the same gruff man groaned as the crowd began dispersing. "Sending dudes there along with their chicks? That ain't fair."

Gareth started to tell him Cynthia wasn't 'his chick' when he noticed her discomfort. "What's Burleson?" Cynthia asked those around.

A man shorter than her replied, "Seriously? Burleson. It's a place we got feeding us outside of Dover in Delaware. It's—"

"What?" Theresa piped up. "Dover?"

"Yeah," another man confirmed. "It's amazing. There's these four chicks there, they're sisters and they..." He and a few others snickered. "Okay, they're either angels or they're the devil."

Gareth rolled his eyes.

"I—I don't..." Theresa sputtered as the men discussed the sisters.

Alex's eyes grew. "Oh, that's where..."

"That's my hometown."

"You don't have to go in, right?" Albert inquired.

Gareth stepped in front of his group. "They said the outskirts, not in town. Where did you live?"

"In town," Theresa replied. "Not like I don't know what outside looks like though."

"Well, maybe we can ask 'em to get someone else," Alex said.

"Yeah," Albert said. "I can go for you. Cynthia and I can—"

"No," Theresa interrupted. "I'm not cowering away. I'm going."

"When's the last time you were there?" Kaylee asked.
Gareth gnashed his teeth. The woman's voice still grated. Martin was right; she was like a tiny mosquito that kept evading a good smack.

"Two—no, yeah, two years before the turn. For my grandpa's funeral." She folded her arms.

"I'd sure as hell hate to have to go back home," Martin said, then sent a scowl Cynthia's way. "Why'd he pick you anyway?"

Cynthia glared. "Maybe 'cause I don't have a history of stickin' my d—"

"It's fine," Theresa broke in, blocking the two. Gareth gave silent thanks. "We're not going inside the city. It's fine. I'll be fine."

"Sending us on an away mission though," Alex said, scratching his head.

"They know we won't try to bail without the rest of our people," Gareth said, a hand on his hip. "Besides, this way, we get a look at what we'd be leaving and going into if we did run. Nice move on their part. But we can't give them the satisfaction of longing for an escape. Make sure to act completely at home. We don't want to run at all."

* * *

Gareth woke at his normal time of 7:00 AM. Meanwhile, Alex and Theresa dragged along like walkers with no fresh body sight. Theresa never seemed to dislike mornings so much before she and Alex began sharing a bed. He had to tease her about his brother's 'bad influence,' and earned a sleepy smile from both. Cynthia was somewhere in the middle, groggy in the early hours, but not miserable.

Their trip to Burleson was to ensure they were sectioning off their supplies and harvest for the collect date in two weeks. They were to stay overnight despite the fact they could make a round trip by the afternoon. After all, Saviors kicking up their heels there made it easier to imagine them taking up room and board permanently. Gareth anticipated a trip ripe with tension.

Ten more distributed themselves into the three vehicles and set off for their expedition. Gareth and his three accompanying people sat in the back seats of the SUV that trailed behind Bud's jeep. The two men up front spoke at length of their last experience with the four sisters. Gareth tried to tune it out, but to no avail. Alex and Theresa were lucky enough to have both fallen asleep in the seat behind him. Cynthia kept shifting, keeping her arms wrapped around herself.

Gareth leaned over and whispered, "How many points you want to bet these four sisters are blow-up dolls?"

Cynthia cracked a smile. "Yeah."

Gareth continued to make small talk in an attempt to divert attention from the obnoxious men.

The deserted roads they took looked to have had debris cleared from their last journey. Theresa awoke shortly before their arrival, her grim face recognizing the crippled outskirts of her hometown. Until then, her memories of her first home had been untarnished.

Gareth imagined if he had never seen what happened to Stone Mountain and were to see it post-turn for the first time. Its state right after the outbreak was harsh enough. Such as a diner he frequented with his family as a child stained with crawling undead and signs of looting. A place enriched in good memories left to decay like it was nothing. But what it would be now? Nothing short of a nightmare.
He moved back to Theresa and Alex and found his brother stroking his wife's back while she peered out the window. As Gareth began to speak, Cynthia peeked from in front and said, "I'd hate to have to see Dothan now. Albert said he'd never seen the house he grew up in in Tallahassee before he left. Just the one he'd move into a few months before. I'd say that might be a good thing."

Theresa shook her head. "Well, I'm not going to my house."

"You were pretty rich, weren't you?" Gareth asked, figuring offending her would rouse her senses. "Your parents raked in more than two-hundred thousand a year, right?"

The couple gave him a hard stare while Cynthia buried her face in the seat and hid a smile.

"Gareth," Alex scolded. "Seriously, dude?"

He shrugged. "Martin's not here to say it."

"It's fine," Theresa said with a rough sigh. "And yes, we lived pretty comfortably."

The driver glanced over his shoulder. "Then you won't recognize Burleson. Was where the poorer folks lived."

Theresa scowled.

When they arrived, Burleson was indeed where the lower-class had resided. The rural area consisted of well-decorated trailers by a river and surrounded by a chain-length fence. A few larger homes sat up the road enclosed by separate fencing. Gareth assumed that was where the leaders lived.

The fourteen in the Saviors' party filed out and met a crowd of nervous people gathered on the gravel road. A man with a thick black beard and a fierce glower stood at the forefront.

"I got one condition for you!" the bearded man yelled as Bud sauntered forward. "None of you men touch my daughters again!"

Because the siren sisters are also the leader's daughters. Of course. At least the horrible trip had something for entertainment.

Bud stopped. "Well, Roger, I should think that's up to us consenting adults."

"Tiffany was expecting a child! And she lost it two weeks ago!"

Bud's face fell a smidgen. "Oh, well, that's unfortunate. But if—"

"No 'butts!' My girls are off-limits, you hear? You lot are 'reasonable,' right? You do whatever else you want, just keeps your mitts to yourselves."

"I'll keep them in line, sir," Gareth said, nudging through the Saviors to Bud's side. The two men who drove them pouted.

"Yeah?" Roger countered. "How you gonna do that?"

Make sure to act completely at home, Gareth reminded himself.

"Well, I'm the abstinence coach?" he answered as if the most obvious thing in the world. "None of these men will pleasure your daughters while I'm here. Good, shared physical sensations are the devil's work." The Saviors along with his own people burst out laughing. Even a few of the
Burleson residents broke smiles.

Roger's face flushed red, steam about to gush from his ears. "Just you lot stay away from our place up the hill! You got it?"

The group reluctantly agreed and proceeded to appraise the small community. Their farmers assured them their bounty of budding tomatoes would be 'big and plump' by the collection date, and the rest of their supplies were being prepared. Though their entire stock looked only enough to sustain the forty-odd inhabitants.

Something about taking half and leaving them with a hand empty seemed crueler than taking all. Gareth recalled the agony of having only one cracker and nothing else while starving. Giving his body and tongue the flavor of food and a few calories, but then failing to deliver more was often worse than going with nothing.

Yet the people of Burleson were confident they would get along. They even stated they knew where to scavenge for more supplies—which Bud promptly asked them to do so they could then take half.

Gareth figured it best one of the four daughters had a miscarriage.

By the end of the afternoon and their early supper of canned goods, they were discussing room and board situations. Gareth, Alex, Theresa, and Cynthia were given a small trailer by the river. Thankfully, they were able to have space to themselves sans any Saviors. Of course, their hosts considered them all Saviors.

* * *

A pleasant hum of generator-powered fans cooled the tight living room of the mobile home. Once Theresa and Alex went to bed, the hum became deafening as Gareth was left alone with Cynthia. He sat across from her on of the two flower-patterned sofas and prayed she was ready for bed too.

"Roger reminds of my daddy," Cynthia said, pulling her hair out of its tie and letting her tresses graze her waist.

Gareth tapped his foot on the carpet. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. When I was livin' at home on our farm and I'd have a boy over, daddy'd take his rifle out and lean it up against the wall behind the dinner table. So my boyfriend had to look at my daddy and the gun behind him the whole time. Heh, guess that's why I never had a real boyfriend until I left home."

Gareth laughed. "That sounds fun. Wait, a farm?"

He had a flash of her with pigtails, carrying two pails of milk in each hand, dressed in Daisy Dukes, and a red and white plaid shirt tied above her waist.

"Oh, yeah. I thought you knew. How'd you think I was always so good at gardenin'?"

"Sheer luck, I guess."

"So I was wonderin' if I should teach the people here the hunger pain trick."

"'It's 'pang,' not 'pain.'"
She frowned. "Er, yeah, whatever. You remember it, right? You rub your stomach when you get a pang and pretend it's a massage. Something nice. It helped me some."

Cold shot through his system. "I think it's best they don't get into that habit."

"But it helped. And I can't not feel a little bad for them."

"Yeah, I know. But they're not us."

She nodded and tucked her hair behind her ear. "You know... I've been hoping we could be alone."

Oh, no...

She squared her shoulders. "And don't start with your tired speeches okay? Just listen to me for a sec." He gave a nod. "Martin told me you made him stop hittin' on me 'cause you thought if we hooked up I'd go crazy once he got bored."

"Oh, Cynthia, that was—"

"No, listen!" She bolted up. "I ain't a child, okay? And I ain't gonna play this game. I don't need to be coddled. I ain't so fragile I need to be guarded like a porcelain doll. I ain't a liability and if I wanna be upset, I can. When you feel like a soda can that's been shook up and shook up and folks run for the hills when you explode I—I mean, I was so mean to Theresa the other day and she didn't deserve it."

"You a hundred percent on that?"

"Yes. And I've said I'm sorry to her a million times. But when people treat you like a soda can it don't help no matter what. So stop trying to control me. To do what's 'best' and let me decide for myself."

He sat with her words for a moment, though unsure of her motive. "Okay. Okay, I think that's fair. You're not a soda can."

She balled a fist. "I'm serious. How would you treat me different?"

He enjoyed her assertiveness and smiled a tad. "Keep acting like this and I'll show you."

"Not an answer."

He laughed and rose to his feet. "True. What do you want me to do?"

"For starts, look at me differently. What do you see right now?"

"I see Cynthia."

She pursed her lips. "Mm-hm. The weepy, needy, crazy girl, right?" Before he could reply, she pulled up her tank top and cast it aside, leaving her in a bra. "Now?"

He forced his eyes away from her chest. "Is that what this is? I told you, I don't feel that way. We've already been through this."

"Yeah, but that's when you were feeling bad for me. When you already knew you were gonna say no 'cause if you didn't, I'd get hurt and cry like a little baby. Just like my daddy thought I was, weak and impressionable. No, I'm asking you what you see without your stupid 'I don't wanna hurt you' bullshit. I want you to look without no preconceived nothin'. Not asking for a kiss to chastely test
the waters. I want you to look at me without all that. So what do you see?"

He breathed in a deep breath and tried to do what she demanded. To erase all preconceived ideas about how he couldn't hurt her, how she would be a ball and chain, and see her for herself. "I see... I see someone who's becoming more confident."

She twitched an eyebrow. "You like it?"

"Confidence is always good. Yeah, I do like it." He let his vision fall to her breasts, noting the mole atop the right one.

Her hands unfastened her shorts and she slid them down. "Well?" She folded the bottoms and placed them on the couch.

"Thanks for folding them and not throwing them on the floor like Gina. But your bra and underwear don't match. I'm a little upset about it."

She smiled, lighting up her face. "Keep lookin'."

He had to admit he did like what he saw; tall, leggy, and with more various moles across her body. Though the possibility Theresa and or Alex could walk in on the odd scene gave him pause.

"You know they could come out here at anytime and—"

Cynthia grabbed his hand and led him into the adjacent den, shutting the door behind her. "There."

"Kind of dark."

She tried the light switch and it flickered to, casting a dim, yellow light on the dusty room. Her mouth formed a smirk and she unhooked her bra. Gareth wanted to protest, but he had agreed to look.

"Now," Cynthia started, her bra still concealing herself, "I'll get dressed if nothin's changed, alright?"

"Alright."

Cynthia pulled off her bra and set it on a recliner.

His skin warmed and he wished the den had a buzz fan. "Should I guess your cup size, or...?"

She tittered and he couldn't help but crack up too. "Shut up." She slid her thumbs beneath her underwear and edged them down, leaving her stark naked.

The room's heat was oppressive and his cheeks burned. Even worse were his legs that felt stuck to the fabric of his pants.

"What do you see?" she asked, swinging her arms around her hips.

"You're um, you're beautiful." He pulled at his shirt collar. "Sorry, it's a little too stuffy in here to think straight."

"Really? You're hot?" She glanced down and started giggling, putting her hand over her mouth. "Oh, yeah. You are."

He noticed what she meant and his face grew redder. "Oh, that's..."
He tried to rationalize it as an evolutionary reaction as a man seeing a willing female undress. Although it was not the first—nor second—time he'd been cornered by a someone nude whom he had no desire for and thus turned down.

"So what now?" she asked, wearing the cockiest grin he'd ever seen her wear. "You wanna do somethin' about it? Or should I get dressed and leave you here all hot?"

This is bad. Very bad. I need to tell her I'm impressed she was so proactive, but nothing's changed...

But dear lord, she was incredible. A host of sinful things he could do to her raced through his head. Trying to remind himself it was Cynthia did no good. In fact, it only made things worse.

All she had to do was strip and he reacted this way? How much better was he than the smarmy morons salivating over Roger's daughters? Or worse, Negan and his harem?

"May I touch?" he asked.

No! Don't say that!

Her eyes sparkled. "Hell yeah."

His heart pounded as he stepped forward and let his hands roam her body. A gasp escaped her lips that settled square between his legs.

Cynthia leaned in when Gareth said, "You know this doesn't mean I—"

"Shhh. Just think about now. I ain't askin' you to be my boyfriend, or stop with Martin even. I just wanna... I just want you. Whoever and however you are, okay? Don't worry about hurtin' me, just have me."

She was a liar, she didn't want to share. Why was she doing this? Last he checked, she wanted Martin to disappear. Vanish he may though, as his prior groping seemed more to prove a point and he hadn't been back for more since.

They shared a deep kiss while she unbuttoned his shirt and ran her hands across his chest, igniting a trail of fire from where their skin met.

A glint of brain activity returned and he inched away a tad. "You know, our kids would be the pinnacle of human beauty, but—"

"Nah, it's alright. My time of the month has sorta started a tiny bit already so we're okay." Her lips met his neck and he shuddered.

Her touch was leagues apart from Martin's. Loving, caring, and smooth—as soothing as it was arousing. A three-fingered hand ran through her long hair and he was ready to take her. Pushing her to the recliner was one option, but he had a better idea.

"Don't worry about hurting me, just have me."

He led her to an open space by the wall and turned her around. No dissent came, but she stilled and he whispered a few words of sultry encouragement. All his world had become one person. The feel of her skin against his, the taste of her lips, the sound of her panting, the sight of her body, and her
lovely scent, so sweet and so Cynthia.

When they began, he worried it hurt her at first and he stopped, but she begged him to continue. She cried out in ecstasy until the very end and they fell still. His arms were resting on her hips and their breathing ragged. Sweat-dampened hair stuck to his forehead as he pulled away and struggled to form coherency.

What did I just do?

Cynthia turned around, her face flushed in a post-climactic haze. She was fucking gorgeous.

"See?" she choked out. "Wasn't that fun?"

We can't do this again. That was a one time thing. A mistake. I don't know what came over me. It's all this with Negan, and this place, and what happened to Gina. I'm not thinking clearly. I'm stressed out.

That's what he should've said.

Instead, he kissed her.
Absolution

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You better not, Theresa thought as Gareth ogled Cynthia's posterior—something she had never seen him do.

She would have to castrate Gareth with a butter knife if he preyed on Cynthia's desire. Though she didn't really think he would, would he?

Regardless, she rubbed her eyes and counted the minutes until they were ready to leave. Roger stood by as The Saviors packed, sending waves of hatred toward all except her and Alex.

We were good kids.

"I deserve a Tootsie-Pop," she mumbled and climbed into the SUV.

Alex was already nodding off when they started back to The Sanctuary. Her thoughts wandered from her home in Dover, her points, and reaching Sipsey again. She longed for hers and Alex's room there. That was if someone hadn't cleared it out as the Sipseans likely didn't expect a return.

The truck ahead of them ground to a halt and gunfire erupted. Theresa flinched and clutched her pistol.

"What the fuck!?!" their driver shouted. "I—" Bullets shattered through the windshield and pierced his neck and the passenger's head.

"Get down!" Gareth ordered as he and the others dropped behind the seats.

The vehicle swerved and jostled along as more erratic fire rang. One of the two cars screeched around and zoomed past them down the highway. Theresa's breath hitched and she shared a nervous glance with Alex. The SUV struck something solid and stopped with a whiplash, its engine straining against the blockage.

Quick footsteps neared as Cynthia whimpered and Gareth whispered something inaudible. Theresa wrapped her finger around the gun's trigger and fixed her sight on the window, ready to end whomever's life was on the other side. Sweat moistened her forehead.

The door swung open and revealed a frantic Bud.

Theresa exhaled the breath she held and Gareth bolted up, demanding, "What happened!?!"

Bud scoffed and waved his handgun. "What happened? What happened was some asshole was waiting in the back and opened fire on us! Leaned out the goddamned window and fucking shot at everyone. I managed to haul ass out of the car on the fucking pavement right before he took the wheel." He pulled open the passenger's door. "God damnit! These were good men!"

"Those men?" Gareth asked as the three filed from the car. Their SUV had run into a guardrail.

"What he meant," Alex started, "was how many did they kill?"

Bud circled around and popped open the driver's side. "You see anyone else?" He yanked the keys from the ignition. "All of—Candy!"
A feminine figure climbed out of the truck stalled against a downed telephone pole. Theresa recognized her as the middle-aged brunette who chain-smoked her way through their trip and told tales of her multiple ex-husbands.

"There anyone else alive?" Bud asked.

Candy shook her head and jogged over. "No. Some asshole just... they were all hit. I—I got the ones before they could turn."

"Well, we got to move these guys out, now," Bud said, unsheathing a blade and plummeting it into the driver's skull. "There's no time to have a funeral or load them up. We'll come back." He pulled the lifeless man from the seat and dropped him on the pavement.

Candy complied, hauled the dead passenger from his seat, and left him on the ground before hopping in the SUV.

"We're following them?" Theresa asked as Bud stuck the keys in and revved the engine.

"Well, duh!" he replied. "Get the fuck in! I need people for this!"

Oh, god. He headed toward... Not the city. No, no, no, no, no...

Protesting would do no good—she wasn't in control and someone had killed most of the Saviors' crew. Attempting to persuade them using her feelings would be in vain. Even Gareth and his scowl must have known refusing to help them was asinine.

"Someone had a bone to pick with you," Gareth said as Bud sped the coughing SUV down the road.

"Yeah, you think?" Candy bit back. "Look!" She pointed out a few run-over walkers. "They did go this way. Right past the exit to Burleson and into the city."

Theresa's hands trembled as they increased speed. Venturing back to Atlanta where her family's bodies lay was hard enough, but it was never her real home. Dover was. As Alex did when they headed to Atlanta, he reached for her hand and she entwined her fingers with his. Warmth flooded her system and she inhaled a breath of much needed oxygen.

After a few minutes, the decrepit skyline became visible. Yet a roadblock of a wrecked 18-wheeler and other automobiles stopped them. The stolen sedan sat parked in front. They hustled out and approached the open-doored car with raised weapons, but it turned up empty.

Bud struck the hood. "Damnit!" A gaggle of walkers opposite the barricade lumbered forth.

"Maybe we should cut our losses," Candy suggested.

He looked at her as if she grew a second head. "Are you serious!? Someone killed our men and took off, and you wanna leave!?"

She groaned. "You are just like my second husband—you don't listen to reason. Is it worth going into the city with people we can't even trust?"

"Negan's gonna tear my balls off if we let them get free and bring his men back dead! I ain't letting him down. This is my job. Hell, if you're so worried, let's just tie the humanitarians up and get the
asshole ourselves."
"You can trust us," Gareth assured him. "We haven't steered you wrong yet, have we?"

Bud cackled. "I tell you, this guy..."

"Hey!" He lifted his rifle. "We can all shoot you right here, right now, and claim the car-jacker did it. But are we? No. Even thought it would save my eardrums. Theresa knows her way around the city. You want her—and us—with you. You said so yourself."

Theresa gulped. "I—yeah. I'm from around here."

"Now think," Gareth said, eyeing the encroaching walkers. "Our guy's not very fond of Saviors and wanted to get away. But then why run into the city? He's looking for something."

"We can't go off of maybes, slim jim," Bud spat. "None of this is your call."

"But it's a likely scenario."

Bud flipped him off. "Oh, you and your 'scenarios!!!"

Alex sidestepped behind him and winked, taking a splintered bat leaning against a truck.

Gareth's eyes darted to his brother and Bud continued, "Look, I know Negan wants to fuck that one." He gestured to Theresa. "But what he wants more than that is it to get to the prick who killed his men. If that takes having to hogtie—" Alex struck the back of Bud's head and he toppled over.

Candy winced. "Y—you..."

"He'll live," Alex murmured, and dropped the bat.

Gareth ran a wrist across his forehead. "That's enough of that."

"You're outnumbered, Candy," Theresa boasted. "Right, boss?"

"Damn straight," he agreed, furrowing his brow at Bud's unconscious form.

Cynthia smirked. "Exactly right."

Candy gaped. "You assaulted one of our lieutenants. Do you have any idea what you just did? I ought to—"

"He was hysterical," Gareth said. "Shouting like a madman with walkers around?" He pointed to the creatures nearing the roadblock. "Reckless and stupid, you saw it. Alex had no choice."

When the verdict came to Negan, Theresa wondered if she'd have to cry—or wear a low-cut shirt.

"Minds clouded with anger can't think clearly," he added. "You were thinking clearly, he wasn't. Are you going to tell Negan otherwise?"

She gave a swift glance to the walkers lined up against the vehicles. "You sound just like my first husband, you know? So what is it you suggest we do with him?"

* * *

"At the end of the day, we're going to be bringing back the guy what done this awful thing," Gareth
proclaimed as they turned the corner of a convenience store. "That'll count for something."

They had skulked their way into town, having helped Candy deposit Bud in the SUV. Theresa could only imagine his reaction upon waking. Alex's face wore the same worry. Either Negan would relish in being rough on Alex, or treat him with mercy for Theresa's sake. Unless he acted fairly. Though chopping off Gina's fingers hadn't earned him any points of trust.

"Oh, bingo," Gareth said, pointing out a deceased walker with a head wound.

"We're getting closer to my neighborhood," Theresa said, recalling stopping for gas at the station they passed.

The part of her that wanted to flee started morphing into a morbid wish to see her home's ruins.

"I'm sure he didn't run off to where you lived," Alex said.

Cynthia gave her a sweet smile and nudged her shoulder. "We'll get outta here in no time."

Theresa chewed the inside of her cheek. "It's just... I know so much. Like that gas station. And this road, I used to take it when I'd learned to drive when I was fifteen—which my parents were against—and head out to the countryside with my girlfriends. And well, any other time we left the city."

"Alright, let's try a car," Gareth said. "We're wasting daylight if we don't. Could also hit the car-jacker in the ass with it. Ah, that one looks fresher than the others."

"Hey," Cynthia said, stomping to his side. "Are you even listenin' to her?"

He peered into a white sedan's window. "I'm listening, Theresa. Sights for sore eyes." He pulled open the door and tore out an adhered body hunched over the wheel. "I never got this. Ones that look like they just flat died. Weren't killed or mauled." He let the body hit the concrete.

"Maybe they died of starvation," Alex suggested. "Or dehydration."

"Yeah, maybe." Gareth turned the keys in the ignition. It wheezed for a few tries before catching. "I doubt this will last long. Most everything will have evaporated. Hey, anyone looked into alternative fuel sources yet?"

Cynthia was the only one who laughed as they climbed in the rank sedan and rolled down the street. Several more head-wounded walkers dotted their path.

* * *

"I have to go back," Theresa said after an hour of fruitless searching. A swarm of walkers had surrounded their sedan and they were again on foot. The last stabbed undead had been a few blocks away, and they now neared a strip mall.

"That's not why we're here," Gareth said. "And where did this come from?"

"Tess?" Alex asked with a raised brow. "Really?"

"Yeah, you said you wanted to avoid it," Cynthia echoed. Theresa bit her lip. "Once I got here, just..." Her attention switched to a restaurant with the fragments of the lunch special still on its capsized chalkboard. One of the specials included her favorite pasta salad. "This is taking too long anyway. Why don't we just look for a fresher body and say it's the guy?"
"Uh, you see any fresh bodies?" Gareth countered. "Besides, it'll be one of the Burleson people and we need to take it back to them to get an idea who it was. A random won't fool them."

"I don't care, I don't care, I don't care who killed them and ran into the city. None of us do."

"No, we don't. But with detaining Bud, we'll be in hot water if we don't give a reason for it. Negan will want this guy's head on a platter."

"Yeah," Alex began, grazing her back, "I don't think you should."

"If it was you?" she asked.

"It ain't gonna help anything. It's only gonna make you feel bad."

Gareth stopped dead. "I'm in charge here, remember?"

"He's right," Cynthia said. "It ain't gonna help."

Theresa shifted on her heels. "And if it was you?"

She glanced down. "I wouldn't."

"No, you'd run off there in a heartbeat. Why are you so fast to agree with him today? Don't you hate him this week?"

Fuck, that was a mistake.

Cynthia's jaw clenched and Gareth stared Theresa down, saying, "Why don't you lay off her and stop wasting time? We don't have the luxury and your problem is with me, not her."

Cynthia had been at his side all day and he'd displayed no objections. A cruel retort formed in her throat, "So does Martin not suck well enough anymore?" but a round of automatic gunfire close by cut it short.

The four secured their firepower and scurried around the strip mall. A short young man in the middle of the street fired into a flock of hungry walkers.

"Excuse me!" Gareth shouted. The man whirled around and faltered backwards. "You kind of did a number on some Saviors back there."

"You don't know!" he yelled as he hopped a retreat and continued attacking the dead. "You ruined everything!"

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

Cynthia stifled a giggle.

That tore it. Something was going on between the two.

The car-jacker fired a few more rounds until all the cold bodies fell still. His chest heaved and he almost lost grip on his weapon.

Gareth propped his rifle against his hip and raised his hand. "Okay, just calm down and tell me why you did that. What's your name? You're from Burleson?"

"Well, duh!" he answered. "Wouldn't let me see him! Let him die!"
"I need your name. And let who die? I'm kind of new, see. I'm not up to speed on all the politics of you and The Saviors."

He sniffled. "It's Randy. And my friend, Brett, he was sick. He had pneumonia or something and the last time we were here..." His chin quivered. "They—you—took us on a run here and he kept getting worse so they just left him! They didn't even kill him because they didn't want to waste the bullets! And Roger would never let me go back to get him because he thought I was reckless."

"Well, that's not very nice of them. Was Bud one of these guys?"

"Yeah, and missed his ass on my way here. Where is he?"

"Oh, he got a little sleepy. So why'd they not just knife Brett in the head? And why are you opening fire on the dead now? Looks like you've done pretty well so far. Your trail was easy to follow."

"Because they're assholes! And... my knife broke off in one of the creepers' heads."

This guy's a moron.

"Alright. Where'd they leave him?"

"Some neighborhood uptown. Oak Pine or Pine Oaks or some stupid shit name."

That's it!

Oak Grove was Theresa's subdivision.

Randy dropped his weapon and held out his arms. "You're just gonna kill me! So do it already!"

Gareth rubbed his temple. "No one's killing you yet. Negan will want to see the guy who wasted quite a few of his men."

"What? No, no, no... kill me now! Not Negan, not—you have to know what he does!"

"Can I ask something?" Theresa inquired. "If you want to get your friend back so bad, why are you willing to die before you get him?"

"Because I know he's dead or he'd have made it back. I just want something to bury before I bury myself."

"Randy," Gareth began, "what if we help you find his body? You can bury him before we take you back to Negan. I know what it's like to have to leave someone without burying them. I wouldn't wish that on you."

He wiped away a tear. "You seem nice, but you're one of them. You're probably lying. You're with Negan for fuck's sake. No, no deal." Randy grabbed his gun and bolted down the street. "Fuck you! You'll have to shoot me running!"

"Oh, fucking hell," Gareth griped as the four chased him.

A fresh burst of adrenaline coursed through Theresa's veins. Visiting her home was becoming a reality. Whether the man lived or died was of no concern, but she hoped he'd make until her neighborhood.

A lurker grabbed Randy's ankle and he plummeted to the ground. It snarled and sunk its teeth into
the back of his hip as he wailed and cursed.

Damnit!

"Stop," Gareth said, signaling his people. He strolled over to Randy as the lurker mauled his leg. "Tsk, tsk, tsk, Randy, Randy, see what happens when you go off half-cocked like that?" He bashed the lurker's head in with his rifle's end, bits of brain matter staining the other's face. "You should've taken my offer."

"Please?" he begged. "I don't want to become one of them. Please, just... just do it now."

The scene resembled Mary's death in the church. A touch of warmth built behind Theresa's eyes she blinked away.

Gareth aimed his rifle between the man's eyes. "Any message you want to give to Negan?"

"Tell him it's his fault." He squeezed his eyes shut.

Gareth fired point-blank into his head. He let out a weary sigh and turned around. "Poor kid."

A heavy cloud hung over them for a moment before Theresa said, "I'm going home anyway and you can't stop me."

Gareth groaned another sigh. "Of course you are. Help me stash him and let's go already. My head hurts."

* * *

Theresa took in the sight of her dilapidated one-story home. The lawn her aunt, Lola, had kept trimmed and green was brown and overgrown. And her cherished garden gnomes lay broken.

"You did live well," Alex said as the four approached the house.

"Yeah," Theresa said. "Can, um, can I go in alone, guys? Just at first."

"Yeah, of course," he replied.

"Just be locked and loaded," Gareth said.

"Good luck," Cynthia added.

Theresa gulped and clicked open the front door. Her feet met the muddied tile of the foyer and she crept into the spacious family room. It had been ransacked and left messy. Though it seemed no one had been there as of late.

Her aunt never kept many pictures on the walls, but the few there were were gone. Theresa wondered if she took them before evacuating. Lola told them over the phone she was heading to a shelter. Perhaps she lay dead somewhere with broken picture frames in her hands.

Each inch of the house swam in memories. Before much of the carpet was traded for hardwood, a six year-old Theresa had crawled down the hallway so fast she skinned her knee.

The large sliding glass door leading to the back patio showcased the empty in-ground pool and former site of her fourteenth birthday party. Her jealous ten year-old sister, Jasmine, had sulked the entire time.
The day Theresa left for Atlanta, she had been the most bratty, whiny, self-centered teenager.

"They like, still in-breed in some parts of Georgia," her sixteen year-old self had protested.

"Oh, Theresa, please," her father, Gene, had replied, waving his hand.

"She just wants to stay because of Davey!" Jasmine had said with a glint in her eye.

"You don't need to see that boy," Her mother, Karen, had lectured.

Theresa had rolled her eyes, planning to sneak off to see Davey that night.

Placing another step forward, she started for her former room Lola had turned into a library. Family photo albums were kept there in a bookshelf, though she figured Lola took them.

Red words written on the hallway wall caught her eye, reading:

\[ \text{GOD doesn't know you're here} \]

\[ \text{BUT I DO} \]

A violent shudder rocked her body, fear rising at possible company. But upon further inspection, the words painted in blood were dry and flaked off in many places. It was old. She pushed her heavy limbs forward and nudged open the library door.

Trashed. Yet the shelf with the photo albums was untouched. The familiar blue spine of one stuck out as if beckoning. She trudged over plucked it off the shelf, her heart pounding as flipped it open. The first photo was of her young mother, about six months pregnant with her and her father patting her belly.

Theresa sunk to her knees. "Mom... Dad..."

The next pages displayed her mother holding her as a newborn, her first birthday, Jasmine's birth, the home's renovation, her aunt, grandparents, middle school graduation... Tears streamed down her face and she fought for breath. A series of ugly whines escaped her lips and a few moments later, a familiar heavy gait came down the hall—Alex.

"I know you said you wanted to be alone," he said, "but I heard—"

"It's—it's okay." She urged him over and he settled beside her.

His brow quirked when he saw the pictures. "You had red hair."

An odd laugh bubbled from her throat. "Y—yeah, for a little bit." She leaned against his shoulder, flipped the page back to her pregnant mother, and laid her hand on the photo. "I—I a—ate her."

Alex wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Hey, it's okay. You know she loved you. She just wasn't cut out for this. If mom—my mom—had... we'd have had to—"

"I know. It would've been better if it'd been like that."

He brushed the hair from her eyes. "Shh, it's okay."

The very idea Alex worried he was a mere convenient companion boggled her mind.

Gareth and Cynthia made it to the doorway, but Theresa was glued to the floor and nowhere near
ready to leave. Yet the two moved over and knelt alongside them.

"May I see?" Gareth asked of the photo album.

Theresa slid her hand from the picture.

"Aww," Cynthia cooed. "She looked even more like you then. Now you can picture what you'd look like if you were pregnant." Her eyes widened. "Or... whatever."

"I'm just here for the awkward teenage you," Gareth jested, tapping her knee. "Hand it over, big sister."

Theresa smiled and gave it to him. He looked through a few pages. "Bad, huh?" she asked.

"Nah, I've seen worse. Nowhere near Alex levels of bad."

"You think I should take it? Maybe I—"

— can show it to my kid someday.

Theresa shook her head. "No. All the people in this album are dead. There's no use."

Chapter End Notes

The message on the wall was inspired by this real bit of graffiti in an abandoned trail tunnel here.
I want to give a special plug to Lucky107 and MintyRick's oneshots about Terminus. If they're me-approved and about Terminus, you know they have to be good hehe.

[x] [x]
[x] [x] [x]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Negan scolded Gareth, Theresa, Alex, and Cynthia for their transgression as he paced around Carson's tiny office. Although he said Lucille would not be "eating" that day, a chill came over Cynthia when he neared the bat. It rested against the wall with a red cloth beneath its barbed end as if it were too sacred to touch the floor. Cynthia fought not to hold herself in fear. She had to remain the confident woman she had been in Burleson.

"Not something I can just give you a slap on the wrist for," Negan said, voice booming through the muggy room. "And tsk, tsk, tsk, Alex. Bud's one un-fucking-happy camper. Still wants your balls strung up." Alex kept his gaze fixed down, his left eye beginning to show a bruise from the strike Bud offered in retribution. "Now, after hearing all sides of this, I'll give you some goddamned credit and say, good fucking going getting the asshole. Good for thinking with your head and bad Bud for having a tantrum. But, but..." He raised his finger. "He is my lieutenant. And you, more specifically, you..." He pointed the finger at Alex. "...knocked him on the head with a goddamned bat! Bet you didn't even give her a name. Should've thought with your head then too and not done that so eagerly."

"I would've done the same," Gareth proclaimed. "He doesn't deserve a punishment worse than us. Group effort."

Cynthia's heart warmed at his willingness to suffer alongside his brother.

"Would you have gone with the bat that soon?"

"Yes, I would have."

"Liar. Fucking liar." Negan stopped before Theresa. The woman's pose was stoic, though Cynthia knew the shove to her shoulder from Bud when intervening his and Alex's fight must be bothersome. "Oh, peach, it breaks my heart to have to do anything that would make you feel even the slightest moment of anything other than pure joy," Alex shot a glare at the leader. "But I got shit to do, and do a certain way. Like I said, no special favors."

Theresa folded her hands over her lap. "Go shove Lucille's barbed-end up your ass."

"Whoa, ho-ho! You kinky little minx. I always had a feeling you were into some weird shit." He cackled and Alex balled his fists.

"Alex knows he did wrong," Cynthia choked out.
Negan placed a hand over his chest. "What? Oh, well then nevermind! He can have my fucking job!"

She gulped. "Y—you know what I mean. Don't it count for somethin'?

"Of course. Not a lot, but some." He shook his head at Alex. "You know, even with the amount of calories your kinky peach must have you burn in the bedroom, you're so... squishy all over. Come forward."

"What are you doing?" Theresa demanded.

"Nope, no talking unless you want a surprise. Alex, I don't have all fucking day." Alex inched forward, his face bright red as Negan lifted his shirt sleeve and Theresa and Gareth cried out. "I said, quiet," Negan ordered, pinching the flesh on Alex's upper arm. "You're soft all over, no muscle tone. See, what you need is some long, excruciating labor. Lumber-jacking or some shit." He released Alex's arm and stepped back. "Alright. I got it. Fourteen-hour days, hard labor. All your points gone. Won't be earning any for three days.

"You three... you can keep your points. But you won't be earning anymore for three days either. Albert, Kaylee, Martin, eh, they're fine. No fucking points sharing though. Theirs are their own. Have fun, guys."

* * *

Cynthia was a woman on a mission. She had finished her work for the evening and learned from Theresa that Gareth was alone in their quarters. Not only could they have alone time, but due to overhearing a tidbit of information, she had an idea for their predicament. Though the prospect of sharing it with someone she felt leagues smarter had her chewing an ulcer inside her cheek.

"Hey, been lookin' for you," Cynthia said to Gareth upon entering their quarters. "How you doin'?"

She slunk over to him on his bed. He didn't respond. "Gareth?"

"Oh, just brainstorming," Gareth replied.

Her desire to touch him clouded her thoughts as she was unable to stop marveling at his features. Chiseled good looks, deep brown eyes, and an amount of facial hair that was around a week away from becoming a beard. The scratch of it on her mouth and her neck had had her shuddering. Would it be too soon to kiss him? He said he wanted to do it again, but how soon?

Suddenly feeling like a lovelorn schoolgirl, she cleared her throat and added, "How are y—I already asked that."

His smile was warm. "I have a headache."

"Oh, well..." She scooted behind him. "I'm real good at massages. I mean, if you want.

"Go ahead."

Her face lit up and she ran her hands across his back, sighing at the warmth seeping through his shirt fabric. "You're really tense."

He exhaled a long breath. "That does feel good."

Butterflies filled her stomach. Whether it was love or infatuation was unclear, but she knew she wanted more of him.
"I have a bad feeling about everything now," he said, relaxing his posture. "Things are not going our way. We're just barely making it along. For every little victory we get, we're tossed an even bigger defeat. Have to keep the game face on though."

"You know, you don't always have to. I mean, have that game face."

*And live on the killing floor.* She recalled her dream but pushed the memory away. Her dream was wrong.

"Like I've seen you act like a real big brother to Alex," she added. "I think that makes him super happy. And he could probably use that right now."

"Not while you're doing this." He leaned against her touch.

She giggled and trailed her nails through his hair. "Yeah, I guess that can wait."

"Martin never did this." He tensed again and her hands slowed. "Oh, I shouldn't have said that. That wasn't helpful."

"No, I mean, it's okay." She restarted her massage.

"I'm not pursuing him anymore, just so you know."

"You don't have to not. I said that."

*But I didn't mean it.*

"No, I don't do that sort of thing. And he doesn't want to continue anyway. I'll be honest: When I asked you to give me and him time alone, I just wanted to tell him he was good for taking advantage of Amber and Mark. But he was clearly still upset about the beating and bruises and whatnot. He tried to 'show me' he wasn't bothered, but I stopped it, he just wanted to prove something."

Jealousy and intrigue mixed at the idea of Gareth and Martin together. She shook it off.

"I'll tell him about this later," he continued. "You can stop that now."

"Oh." She removed her hands. "But when he, um... did you want to? Not that it's a bad thing, you can."

He paused. "Yes."

She slid to his side and saw heavy guilt in his eyes, a sight unseen since the Occupation. "Stop it. I said don't be feeling bad about this. Please?"

"Cynthia, this isn't what good leaders do."

"Like I said, I ain't fragile and you're not all 'bad' for it, so get over yourself. You don't have to be perfect. Don't worry about hurtin' me, just have me. You did that with Martin and he's caused way more problems than I ever have." Her pulse raced as if she uttered a guarded secret. His face softened. "It doesn't always have to be about plannin' for things and bein' the very best. I mean, what else do you think about?"

He was silent a moment. "Right now? Right now I'm thinking..." He sighed.

"Yeah?"
"About touching you in impure places."

She blushed and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Oh, yeah? See, you can think about other stuff. And I can listen. Did um, Martin ever listen?"

"Oh, he... we just bickered. It was therapeutic though. He's always been..." 

"You can talk about it. I'm okay."

"He's always been a lot of fun. Frustrating fun, but refreshing."

"Fun's good. I think it only goes so far though. And I like to listenin' to you. You have a nice voice." She brushed her hand across his cheek planted a soft kiss on his lips. "Would you listen to me if I said I had an idea?"

"For?"

"The mess we're in. I was successful in my calculated seduction attempt, so..."

"What's your idea?"

* * * 

Cynthia's stomach groaned from hunger while she sat on an uncomfortable bench and peered out a rest area's large window. Her target had not yet appeared below like she overheard residents say she was slated to that afternoon.

The impending task had her tapping her fingers on the hard surface and Alex's current arduous task of chopping wood for their fire stoves filled her with pity. She soothed herself with the memory of her second sexual encounter with Gareth in the cliché scene of a broom closet.

"Come on already," she grumbled to herself.

"We were looking for you," Theresa's voice smashed through her grievances.

Cynthia turned to Theresa with an arm around a drowsy-looking Kaylee. "Hey, guys."

"Pain was really, really bad," Kaylee slurred. "I tore some stitches. I got it patched up, but it still hurt super, super bad, like even worse than ever. So I took the Vicodin and this stuff is awesome. So much better than that cold medicine I did just to feel weird and numbed out. Better than everything."

Theresa patted her on the shoulder. "Yeah, she's a lot of fun right now. That's why I'm babysitting."

Cynthia laughed a little. "I never did any kinda drug."

"What was it you said?" Theresa asked Kaylee. "Made you feel like—"

"Butterflies," Kaylee answered. "Makes me feel like a person-shaped flock of butterflies." She twiddled her fingers in the air.

*Kinda like Gareth does to me...

"Well, I'm glad you're havin' a good day," Cynthia said. "Just waitin' for my mission."

Kaylee gave Theresa a quick hug before starting for Cynthia. "One for you too. For luck." She
threw her arms around the other woman.

"Oh!" Cynthia embraced her back as Kaylee sighed into her neck. "Aw, thanks."

"Yeah," Theresa began, taking a seat beside Cynthia, "she hugged Albert and Martin too. Tried with Gareth but he blocked."

Kaylee pulled away and plopped by Theresa. "Ugh, Martin needs to spend his points on a shower. I'm not hugging him again."

"Well, he was right when he said the dosage was too high for someone of your pint size."

Kaylee rested her head against Theresa's shoulder. "When we get back to... you know, we should have girl's night thing. Even with Gina. Celebrate being back together again like we should be, and we will be. But I just feel helpless right now, you know?"

Theresa laid her head against the top of Kaylee's "I know. Alex is self-pity mode. It's hard to get him out of that once he's in. And with being so short on wins lately..."

"We're alive though."

"Yeah, but for what? Being loitered over by a mad king? Being forced to work for the meals we used to just take? Dwight won't budge and Mark is only a drop in the bucket. And who knows if this will work. Besides, this isn't our fight."

"We're being made to fight it," Cynthia said. "So we get stuck in their web."

"That's what Negan wants. To sink his teeth into us. What he does to everyone who gets here. Not so simple as walking away."

"We did the same thing," Kaylee said.

Theresa lifted her head. "We worked in shades of black and white. Either with us or against us. Hunters or hunted. Negan wants to play around with people in a gray area, make them squirm."

Cynthia started to reply when she spotted her target crossing the pathway below. "Hey, I think that's Amber. She focused on the blonde figure. "Yeah, that's her. Okay, here I go." She stood.

"Think happy thoughts," Kaylee murmured.

"I don't think we can see her in that nook from here," Theresa said. "We were supposed to keep watch."

"Uh..." Cynthia failed to form an answer when she absorbed the sight in full—Theresa and Kaylee together. Theresa held Kaylee while the latter lay dozing as if they never separated, as if they had never caused each other such pain. "Oh, yeah. Well, Kaylee probably needs to eat, so you can go, I guess." As tears welled in her eyes, she whirled around started for the bottom level. Theresa called Cynthia's name, but she ignored her and pressed on.

A group of men greeted her with whistles as she passed. She grit her teeth—that had never happened at Sipsey and seldom at Terminus. Shrugging it off and reaching the back exit, she peeked through the door and saw Amber under the umbrella-covered bench. Apparently, the girl liked to venture out of Negan's abode at times. Interruptions were off-limits, but Cynthia's hold over the woman meant she would have to listen. Cynthia pulled open the door just as a brunette woman turned the corner with two full glasses.
"Cynthia?" Amber asked before she could react.

"Uh, hi, Amber.

"You know her?" the brunette asked, narrowing her eyes as she took a seat.

Amber nodded. "Met her last time I was down here."

She set the glasses down beside her feet. "Well, you know you're not supposed to bother us?"

"Yeah," Cynthia said. "I do, but I was sort of a bitch last time and I—I wanted to say I was sorry."

Amber smiled. "Well, thanks."

*What do I do? What do I do? What do I do? This is our only chance to talk to her!*

"What's your name?" Cynthia asked the brunette.

The woman scowled. "Does it look like I want to tell you?"

"Sherry," Amber said. "Be nice."

Cynthia's brows shot up. "You're Sherry? I've talked to Dwight a little and he told me about you. Sorta."

"Okay, what the hell do you want?" Sherry snapped.

Her stomach flopped, fighting the urge to mutter, "Nothing," and flee. Instead, she held her chin high. "I'm in Gina and Gareth's group. I know Dwight wants out, and that you're still with Mark, Amber. You want out and so do we." Her pulse pounded in her ears, fearing the worst.

Sherry bolted to her feet and barreled forward.

Amber stood as well. "Sherry, don't!"

"Listen, Barbie," Sherry began, "I'm not in the mood to be messed with. You're not funny and what I want is none of your business. And don't make up shit about Amber and Mark. Buzz off."

Cynthia imagined her shoes were super-glued to the concrete to suppress her urge to run. "I ain't lyin'. Tell her, Amber."

The blonde was silent.

Sherry looked over her shoulder. "Amber?"

"Why are you doing this?" Amber asked, folding her arms.

"I just want us to help each other," Cynthia said, offering a smile.

"And what if I don't want 'help'?"

It pained her to do so, but she had to use her fail-safe. "Then, I'll tell Negan about you and Mark. I don't wanna, but it's either that or take a chance. You can have the man you really love. I promise."

"You don't know shit, 'Cynthia,'" Sherry spat. "What is wrong with you? You think you can waltz
in here and be our rescuer? You can go fuck yourselves sideways. Gareth too."

The woman's temper resembled Theresa's, and she considered how would she handle Theresa in such a state.

"Sherry, you have the real power here, not me. If we get out, you and Dwight can lead us. We can go our separate ways after we put enough distance between us. I can tell you more if you agree to meet us some place."

"How about I tell my husband what you're suggesting, hm?"

"Then I'll fire the loaded gun I have."

Her face fell. "You're delusional. Get lost before I give you a black eye."

"Think about what I said," Cynthia said before marching back inside and leaning against the wall. Terror froze her body as she worried she damaged things beyond repair. Biting her lip, her stomach growled and she forced herself to the main hall. Eating properly was everything and she had to negate the pit in her gut. Though on her way, Albert and Martin signaled her from the hallway leading down to the warehouse.

She had not yet apologized to Martin and dreaded having to talk to him. At least her tiny crush had subsided. After all, she had the man she really wanted and satisfied her primal need. Or so she hoped.

She hurried over to them and they ducked into the empty hallway away from prying eyes.

"Good news is written all over your face," Martin said.

"Did you talk to her?" Albert asked.

Cynthia scratched the back of her neck. "It, um... Sherry was there."

Albert gaped. "The infamous Sherry?"

"In the flesh." She took a deep breath and whispered the incident.

"Well, I think you did the right thing," Albert said, patting her hand. "You gave them both the option and Sherry can't tattle."

"Yeah," Martin started with a sigh, "you see, Amber's all sweet and sheltered and in need of protection. Bitch will jump at the first thing that makes thing's easiest. And once we tell her about Sipsey? Just have to hope she'll be able to put up with brief discomfort in the meantime."

Cynthia frowned. "You barely know her."

"Sixth sense."

"I don't think she's weak, I think she's desperate. There's a difference. I just hope Gareth won't flip out at this."

Martin dug around in his pants pocket. "Nah, just lick his feet and he'll be fine. He loves that."

Cynthia gave a few nervous chuckles. "Ew, why would I do that?"
"Alright, lick his dick some if you haven't already." He pulled out a lighter and searched his other pockets. "Damn, where did I put..."

Cynthia chewed further on her cheek ulcer and Albert asked, "Is he serious? Are you serious?"

"Yes," Martin proclaimed, retrieving a filtered cigarette. "And yes, he told me earlier. I had to take up smoking again to celebrate. No more messing around with folks I have complicated histories with."

"You're smoking?" Cynthia asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Dudes here waving it in my face and those e-cigs made it too hard." He flicked a flame over the end and inhaled. "I can't believe you didn't tell Albert."

"I—I was gonna, Albert. I'm sorry. I just kinda—" She coughed from the smoke.

"Do you have to do that now?" Albert barked at Martin.

He licked his lips. "What, you wanna schedule it?"

A few people passed them down the hall, tittering about probing them for recipes. Cynthia huffed and asked Martin, "Are you still mad 'cause I bitched at you the other day? I was wrong, and I'm sorry."

"Thanks, but it's fine, water under the bridge. Damn, you need to learn how to be Zen about things. Not everything's a tear-jerking crisis." He flicked the ashes from the cigarette when Albert socked him in the jaw. Cynthia squeaked and raised her hands over her mouth.

"Fuck!" Martin cried. "Albert!"

Albert flexed his hand. "You said I'd get a shot for free that night we got drunk, remember? To try to do better than I did at Terminus?"

Martin stretched his jaw. "Y—yeah, I remember. Alright, fair enough." He inhaled another hit of nicotine. "You get to explain that to Gare, though." He glared at Cynthia and her incessant giggling. "Would you shut up?"

* * *

The group wound down in their quarters as Cynthia sat on her bed and attempted to finger-detangle her hair. Gareth spoke at length over their Amber and Sherry situation before addressing Martin and Albert's "deal."

"And a drunken agreement of consented violence," Gareth said, unrolling his socks. "No more deals like that, please. No matter how much he may or may not be asking for it."

"Please, it was softer than the first time," Martin said as he fired up another cigarette. "Felt like being kissed by baby Jesus."

Liar. Cynthia rolled her eyes.

Albert yawned. "I can try again, you know."

"Albert," Theresa lectured, perched on her knees next to a sleeping Alex and idly rubbing his back. "Martin just got the crap beat out of him, and Alex got a bruise from that biker piece of shit—we don't to be hit by our own people."
Gareth locked eyes with her. "Thanks, Theresa."

Albert inched down his bed covers. "I wasn't thinking that—"

"Hold up," Martin interrupted. "Theresa, it's fine. You know I like to get my comeuppance. Just wish I could've hit back. I'm really itching for a fair fight now."

"Please don't," Gareth said, rubbing his forehead. "Smoking's already bad enough. Try to maintain control of your personality."

Martin scoffed. "Come on, I'm a joy to be around." He blew a large cloud of smoke from his lips.

Cynthia pouted as she recalled Gareth and Martin's sleeping arrangement. A swap would of course be awkward—namely for Albert. As she had the night before, she elected to turn her back and wait for the last person to turn out their light.

A knock came at the door. Perhaps Gina and her new roommate, Kaylee, were feeling lonely?

"Come in," Gareth called.

Yet Sherry stepped through and pushed the door behind her shut.

Cynthia sat up. "Sherry?"

Gareth jumped to his feet. "Sher—Sherry, hello."

"You're Gareth?" Sherry asked. He nodded. "Negan said you were a pretty boy."

"Of course he did." He stepped forward and gestured to his people. "You know Cynthia, that's Albert, Theresa, Martin, and the sleeping guy is my brother, Alex."

Theresa shook Alex. "Alex, wake up." He woke with a start, eyes widening at the strange woman. "That's Sherry."

Alex pulled the quilt to his waist. "Oh, tha—that's..."

"Salutations, Theresa," Sherry said. "Heard a lot about you."

Theresa's expression was stone. "Oh, joy."

"Why are you here?" Gareth asked.

"I want your help."

Chapter End Notes

@zaidelles I hope you don't hate me for separating Gareth and Martin. :(
Smoking again was a bad idea. It made sense at the time; Martin deserved something decadent after denying himself other pleasures. But when Candy walked by with her leather face and gravelly voice, he saw his future. He thought himself too beautiful to squander his looks for a smoke.

Sherry had meanwhile proposed an escape in a week’s time. Amber apparently agreed and Gareth added additional plans to a torn piece of paper. When plans were added, he asked each would-be escapee to apply a tiny image on the note for confirmation. A step Martin though over-the-top, but Gareth insisted.

Martin carried the paper to an outlying building where Alex and others had been working on a wooden shed. Alex was leaning against the back of an outhouse for his break, sweaty and panting. The man was not made for physical labor.

Martin stood in the ajar door to the building and offered a come-hither motion. Alex slogged over and they slipped inside the darkened hallway.

“You sign this yet?” Martin asked, holding up the paper. “I don’t remember which mark was yours.”

Alex wiped his damp forehead with his shirt collar. “Yeah, I signed it.”

“Damnit. Wasted good calories walking here.” He looked the other man across. “You know, uh, I decided to quit smoking after my one whole day. I might be able to use some of my points on crackers for you. If you want.”

“Oh, no. Don’t quit, man. I do not wanna be stuck with your nicotine-deprived bitchiness.”

Martin crumpled the paper into his pocket. “You’re fucking welcome for the offer.”

He bowed his head down and fell against the wall. “I’m sorry, man. It’s—this ain’t any fun. Thanks, I’d really appreciate if you did that. Tess is ready to starve so I can eat and there ain’t no way I’m about to let her.”

“F.Y.I., I ain’t going cold turkey. I got a system.”

“Guys?” a weak voice said as the door inched open. Mark tiptoed in carrying a paper bag.

Oh, great. This fucker.

“Hi,” Mark said, smile faltering as he laid eyes on Martin. “I saw you come in here. I heard what your punishment was and that really sucks. But I managed you this.” He pulled two small loaves of flaky bread from the bag, light red staining each. “I pretended to be a klutz and drop it in roamer innards while I was outside the fence. I’d really just dumped strawberry jam and ketchup on it.”

Alex licked his lips and accepted the bread. “I—thanks, man. You didn’t have to do this.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So you know what’s ‘up?’” Martin asked, making air quotes.

Mark squinted. “About?”
“What do you think?”
“Don’t know what…”?
“Oh, really? Nevermind then. Probably best you hear from someone else.”
“Hear what?”
“Nothing,” Alex said. “Just some stupid gossip. And thanks again.”

Mark pulled open the door. “Well, you’re welcome again.” He gave a small smile before shutting
the door behind him.

Alex took a large bite of the bread and shut his eyes.

“He did have to do that,” Martin said. “He’s just tryin’ to butter you up. You’re the one that holds
his ticket.”

“Yeah,” Alex said with a swallow. “But it ain’t like he gave me a bowl of stomach stew.”

“A what?”

He rolled his eyes. “What’s the first thing you ate when you got to Terminus?”

“Some guy named Fred, right? Yeah, I remember.” A craving for the dish claimed his tongue. It
had been so fatty.

“I took pity on your worthless ass and it didn’t come back to bite mine.”

“What’s your point?”

“I’m just sayin’. I don’t think everyone’s a lost cause.”

“Those are dangerous words.”

“I don’t care. I mean, if Theresa can…”

“Can?”

“Can think of you as an equal then there’s some hope for one or two assholes out there. Not sayin’
Mark is our next friend, but people can surprise you.”

He puckereded his bottom lip. “Hm. Well, she gets me as good as I give, and what with her people
problems, that’s kinda nice.”

“Heh, you think she has people problems?”

Martin’s eyes widened. “My god, Alex, did you just throw a dig at Theresa to me?”

He stopped chewing. “I—I, uh, no, I’m just tired is all.”

“Give me a crumb of that and I won’t tell her. I’m all about blackmail these days.”

He sighed and tore off a tiny piece. “Fine.”

* * *
“I took a shower this mornin’. You wanna hug me again?” Martin asked Kaylee as he swept the kitchen.

Kaylee wiped down the small fridge as Theresa washed the trash can. “No. I only took a quarter this time.”

“Still must feel all kinds of good.”

“You trying to live vicariously?” Theresa asked.

“Eh, maybe a little.” He leaned the broom against the wall. “I quit smoking, so…”

“That was fast,” Theresa said, then whirled around. “Oh, no, I’m not getting stuck in a small room with you and your nicotine-deprived grumpiness. Tell me you’re not going cold turkey.”

“Shit, that’s just what Alex said. And no, I’m gonna ease it up. It’s always been a little easier the less time I’ve been at it again.”

“You saw Alex? How did he look?”

“Adorable as always. Sweaty and exhausted, but adorable.”

She frowned and stood up the trash can. “Okay.”

“I mean, he was doing fine. And Mark pretended to drop some bread in biter guts so he could sneak it out to him.”

Her face brightened. “Oh, that was… considerate of him.”

“But you know, I’ll bet you my hat if we can snag Mark along he’ll end up with a bullet between the eyes.”

“If it comes to that,” Kaylee said, running a hand through her spiky hair.

“It probably will,” Theresa said. “That’s what it always comes to.”

“He’s a nice guy which means he’s also a dead man.” Martin opened the pantry door and swept the rest of the dirt inside. “Well, I’m outta here.”

“Hey, wait,” Theresa said as she gripped his hand.

He paused, the touch making him tense. “What?”

She released her hold. “I wanted to ask if you apologized to Gina.”

He sighed. “Yes.”

She raised a brow. “Really?”

“Yeah, when I first saw her after the chop. Said sorry that I had to, not sorry that I did it. Figured she’s suffered enough though.”

“I never said I was sorry.”

“For what?”

“Looking at her like that. Like a traitor.”
“She made her bed.”

“Yeah, well, when I saw Negan and the knife I thought I wasn’t going to get a chance.”

An awkward silence fell and Kaylee folded her arms.

“What is it, short stack?” he asked.

Kaylee’s jaw clenched. “All we have to do is… get hurt to earn a chance of forgiveness.”

“Hey,” Theresa said. “Pain is what makes us know what’s real.”

“Damn, I hadn’t heard that in a while,” Martin said. “Sounds like something my old man said. Only thing he ever said that wasn’t bullshit.”

“When did he say that?” Kaylee asked.

“At our first camp by Atlanta.”

* * *

“I had a bad feeling,” Marion said, wrapping her arms around Martin and resting her head on his shoulder.

Martin grazed her back, eyeing his mother, Trisha, speaking to Merle across their campsite.

“Yeah, and what’s that?”

“Just a bad one.”

“Well, tell it to piss off.”

“Ugh, you.” She pulled away.

“Go back to the tent.”

“It’s a hundred degrees out here and even worse in there.”

“Just go, please? It’s even hotter with you clinging to me.”

“Ugh, fine. You smell sweaty and gross anyway.” She dragged her feet back to their tent and Martin started for his mother.

“Hey,” he greeted as he reached the two. “What’s goin’ on, y’all?”

Merle laughed. “Oh, don’t be worryin’, now. I ain’t hittin’ on your momma if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Martin,” Trisha warned, wiping a smudge from her hollow cheek. “We’re just having a discussion. Ain’t nothing to worry about.”

A grin claimed Merle’s face. “Mm-hm. This lovely Christian woman needs more than the love of J.C. to get through the night.” He pulled her cross necklace from beneath her shirt. “And I’m a generous man.”


She stuck the chain back inside her shirt. “Don’t tell your father. Merle’s giving me this so we’ll
vouch for him. Tom and Mandy wanna kick him out.”

His father, Don, had sworn to leave her behind if she started up on pills again. They made her slow and clumsy—a risk to their safety. Martin couldn’t say he disagreed. However, unlike her, he felt he could function better with them. And he hadn’t even had a drink since the night they left Savannah.

“Fine,” Martin agreed. “As long as you give me a half of her downers. I’m suddenly having a bad day.”

“Oh, no, baby,” Trisha said, tone imitating that of a concerned mother. “This is oxy. It’s bad for you. Give him somethin’ lighter.”

“I’ll translate that for you, Merle: ‘bad for me’ means ‘less for her.’”

He placed his handless arm to his hip “Ah, like mother like son, huh?”

“Difference is I can hold my liquor.”

“Alright, then.” He focused on Martin’s feet. “Give me your shoes and I’ll drop you three 30 MG’s of codeine.”

“My shoes?”

He held out a leg to reveal a torn boot. “Walker tore a hole in mine, yours are all nice and pretty. Take ‘em off and I won’t sing like a canary.”

“What are you doing?” Marion asked from behind.

Martin forced a smile. “It’s alright, Mare, mom’s just—”

“Getting drugs, isn’t she!?” She whirled around and bolted for their father’s pickup truck. “Daddy!”

“No!” Trisha shouted and ran after her daughter. “You little bitch!”

Martin followed them while Merle sniggered and the camp watched.

“No, no… no yelling!” Trisha proclaimed as she took Marion and Don’s hands. “What we need to do is pray.” She choked up. “It’s been too long.”

“Hell with this!” Don shouted, yanking his hand away. “There wasn’t nothing there to begin with! We’d just be talking to ourselves.”

She sobbed. “I just wanted something for the pain…”

“Pain’s the only thing we got to keep us alive.”

Martin exchanged a glance with his father and pursed his lips.

What’s the point of pain without a little fun for variety?

“Don’t leave her here, please?” Marion pleaded with Don. “I came and told you so we could just talk to her. Please?”

Don placed his hands on her shoulders. “We just need to get that Merle outta here.”
After I get something fun from him.

Trisha stomped her feet. “He has what I need, Don!”

Marion sniffled and shrunk against her brother.

“Come on,” Martin said, urging her away. “Let’s let ‘em bitch and holler until they turn blue in the face.”

“Martin, get back here!” Don shouted. “This is your fight too!” He picked up a piece of the detached fender from the truck, making Martin stop. “Don’t make me. Taken all I had not to whack you upside head the past twenty-nine years, boy.”

He growled. “Likewise.”

Marion whimpered. “Please don’t say things like that.”

Don lowered the metal. “Marion, honey, I don’t mean you.”

Martin wondered what daddy would think if he knew his could-do-no-wrong baby girl was knocked-up. He bit his tongue, keeping it secret for Marion’s sake.

Trisha hopped in front of her son. “Yeah, he wanted some happy pills too. Don’t act like I’m the villain here.”

Marion gazed up at her brother. “Martin?”

“God damnit,” he mumbled.

Merle’s snide laughter echoed as he approached. “Y’all all need some happy pills. Calm your whiny asses down. Shit, it’s the end of the world. Sit back and watch it burn. Get high and watch it burn.”

Merle had arrived alone and angry—until he inhaled the little bag of tricks from his pocket. The man just existed, moving from place to place and doing whatever he wanted. No one else to look after and no one to lay expectations on him. Nothing to do but stay alive and celebrate being one of the lucky ones who got to watch the world burn. Martin envied him in a way.

Marion tightened her grip and Martin’s thoughts reformed. “Nah, get lost, asshole.”

Merle raised his one hand. “Eh, alright. You god wads have a fun rapture party.”

* * *

Martin tinkered with an old truck’s fuel filter while watching Dwight, Theresa, Gina, and Kitrick crossbow train. The walkers were sparse enough to give him a decent view from his place in the parking lot.

“Alex’s mark is the four-pointed star,” Gareth said, smoothing out the sheet of paper.

“Yeah, I thought it was Albert’s,” Martin said, straightening his cramping back. “I’m too old for this shit.”

He folded the paper and slid it in his pocket as a few people neared. “For what?”

“Passing color-coded notes—no, you know what? I won’t complain. The sun’s shining, all is going
“When was your last smoke?”

“Fuck off. Or go fuck Cynthia or somethin’. I’m sick of listenin’ to your flat, effeminate voice.”

Gareth smiled as the few people passed. “Okay, Martin. Glad you’re in good spirits. And I think they’re about done.” He gestured to Dwight and his trainees. “Play bad cop with Dwight a little bit.”

“Gladly.”

“Thank you. I mean that, thank you for your help.”

A genuine smile threatened his lips before he said, “Fuck off.”

Gareth gave a wave and departed. Martin stared under the hood of the truck, thinking how much better half of Kaylee’s painkiller would make him feel.

“What’s that dumb look on your face about?” Gina asked. He turned to see her alone and fiddling with her fingerless gloves. At least she didn’t have to trim them.

The woman wore a brave face—one he knew was fake. Walking around after two of her fingers were chopped off in public must have been humiliating. A gnawing guilt ate at him for restraining her despite his apology, again making him wish for Kaylee’s Vicodin.

“I quit smoking,” Martin replied, pushing the hood shut.

“I didn’t know you started again.”

He shrugged. “Eh. Hey, uh, you ain’t got any soreness on your neck, do you?”

“What? Oh, no. It feels fine.” She rubbed her neck. “Y’all are a lot more forgiving than you should be.”

“Not like Gareth particularly likes you or Kaylee. You should’ve seen how he treated me when he was so sure I was on the edge of taking off right after Terminus. Which I was.”

“Really? All by yourself?”

“Would’ve been a death sentence. But being alone sounded so nice. No expectations, no one to answer to.”

“Martin, you’ve been alone out there. You know how bad it is.”

“Why you think I didn’t leave? Would’ve been suicide.”

*But death on my own terms.*

Gina glanced over her shoulder at Dwight, Theresa, and Kitrick approaching the gate. “At least you probably wouldn’t have humped the leg of the first people who showed you a meal. You know how stupid I feel?”

“Glad you learned a lesson.”

She swaggered to his side. “I did. And… I do need some comfort, you know.” She ran her
fingertips across his wrist. “I’m a desperate, needy, oh-so-horny woman.”

“You gotta have a vibrator.”

She laughed and backed away. “Okay, thought I’d at least try. I’d be careful who stick your dick into next though ’cause they gotta bad habit of losing their fingers. I oughta make posters and tack ’em around the place warning people.”

“Ah, ha-ha. Fuck off.”

She laughed again as the other three arrived equipped with their training weapons. “Hey, y’all.”

“We didn’t need help carrying shit or anything,” Dwight griped as Theresa and Kitrick set their supplies down.

“I only have eight fingers.”

“Gareth seems to use his eight fingers just fine.”

Martin thought Dwight could be attractive if he dropped the attitude. Imagining nibbling his neck formed slight appeal. Though the fact he seemed to share tastes with Cynthia gave him pause. And Dwight seemed to be a eunuch, and Martin apparently doomed all his partner’s fingers.

“By the way,” Dwight added, slinging his crossbow over his shoulder. “I know about Sipsey.”

Nevermind neck nibbling, it seemed he needed a crossbow bolt through it instead.

Theresa backed away. “W—what?”

“What’s Suxey?” Kitrick asked.

“Sipsey,” Dwight corrected. “Still not sure what I’m gonna do about it. And don’t try to deny it, makes you look stupid.”

“Hell do you want?” Martin demanded, flexing his fists.

“Don’t want anything. Be glad I’m telling you this now.”

Theresa cackled. “Oh, well thank you! I feel so much better now!”

“You’d rather me have told you before training?”

Gina pounded on the truck and Kitrick backed away. “You son of a bitch!”

Dwight raised an eyebrow. “You knew too?”

Martin paced around the three. “When did you find out?”

“Sherry told me. Be careful who you spill your secrets to.”

“That little cunt,” Theresa said.

Dwight stepped into Theresa’s personal space. “Shows how stupid you are.”

Martin slid between them. “Why don’t you step off, man?”

“Dwight, come on,” Gina pleaded. “You don’t wanna do this.”
Dwight gulped. “I have to.”

“You know what?” Martin questioned, leaning closer. “I may have literally been fucked in the ass by my boss, but you? Holy shit, Negan’s bent you over like a little bitch and tore you a whole new fuck hole while Sherry jerks him off. You’re pathetic.”

Dwight drew his fist back and aimed downward when Theresa jumped in the way, taking the strike in her clavicle.

That was it. It didn’t matter that Dwight was gunning for him, the little squeak of pain Theresa emitted made his blood catch fire. Dwight was going to hurt.

“Cracked rib’s on the other side, motherfucker!” Martin lied as Gina screamed to stop.

“Get outta the way!” Dwight yelled at Theresa before she shoved him in the shoulder, making him falter only enough to miss Martin’s intended punch.

A crossbow bolt struck by their feet and they froze. Kitrick stood several yards away, lowering the weapon. “Uh, stop it?”
Alex planted his hands on his thighs in an attempt to stop shaking, but it was no use. The eight of them sat on their knees as Negan carried Lucille over his shoulder and paced across the courtyard. Dwight stood with arms crossed by the factory entrance and prevented anyone from interrupting.

*I'll kill you*, Alex mentally cursed Dwight. Accident or not, his strike on Theresa would no doubt result in a bruise.

Gareth promised to show The Saviors to Sipsey, his voice hitching every so often. Alex's throat tightened each time his always clear-spoken brother faltered.

"We *will* take you there," Gareth repeated from the center of the line-up. "We'll help you take it. You can have the whole place. We'll do whatever you want." He licked his lips and held his fists at his sides. "You don't have to prove anything to us. We already know who you are and what you're capable of. I promise we'll never try to cross you again."

"Now that is the shit I like to hear," Negan said with a glint, then started toward Martin. "But, you know..." He yanked Martin to his feet. "This guy just bugs me for some reason."

Theresa lurched forward. "No!"

Martin raised both hands and pressed his eyes shut.

Negan rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. He wasn't even originally part of your group, right? He lifts right out."

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Negan rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. He wasn't even originally part of your group, right? He lifts right out."

"He was aiming for his broken rib."

"Oh, well. Still, not worth fucking worth that. Poor peach." He breathed a long sigh. "You don't understand. This is not bad for you at all. You won the motherfucking lottery! You have all the protection you could ever want. You fuckers have what sounds like the best place I ever heard of and you got me on your side at the same time. What's your damn problem?"

"We want it on our own terms," Alex choked out, immediately regretting his words.

As Negan began to reply, Theresa burst out crying. Alex placed a hand on hers and wished he could wrap her in a warm hug.

"Oh, peach," Negan said, placing Lucille back over his shoulder. He stepped over to her and knelt. "Kills me to see you cry. Whether or not you're faking it to make me feel bad. Please know I never wanted this."

Theresa pursed her lips and let out a sob. "Then don't."

"I don't want to. Not this time. But you have to understand, nothing is on your own terms anymore. Nothing is on any of our own terms. You know that. Holy shit, I know you know that." He stood. "Did you want to wake up every day and eat another person? Did you? Because from what I've heard, you didn't. And you don't have to anymore, promise. Never, ever have to do that messed-up shit again. You said it yourselves."
Until we don't have to anymore.

Alex thought of going back out into the world without The Saviors' and or Sipsey's protection. Would they be forced to turn back to cannibalism? The idea of eating it again was revolting, almost as horrible as the memory of the Occupation. But survival came before humanity, before compassion, and most of all, before pride. None of those things meant anything if he wasn't alive to experience them.

Something inside him broke as he realized they had to sacrifice their pride for survival. Again.

Negan moved back to Martin and focused on Gareth. "I'd pick at random, I often do, but since I already have my formed opinions of you, target's on his head. You have a choice here. You can save him. Or his pretty head will look a lot like poor smiley Mark's." He threw Martin's baseball cap to the ground and ran a hand through his hair, making him grimace. "Oh, so soft. Nevermind Sipsey. Martin, tell me your secret and I'll spare you."

"Y—you know you talk a lot, asshole?" Martin stammered.

"Whoa, the mouth on you. Which Gareth and Gina know all about." He laughed. "Gareth, this is a position you've put countless people in. So you either agree to be protected and fed, or choose to be of your own will and doom yourselves. I'll let him live if you agree to jump through fucking hoops for me. Roll on your backs. Taking Sipsey will need a lot of my men and it'll go smoother if we have you as leverage. So you sell me your souls and you agree to be part of us. I mean *to the bone*. And for that, you can stay at Sipsey. Wouldn't that be great? If not, your boyfriend gets to meet Lucille, and the rest of you are free. What do you say? Join us, or feed Lucille?"

Gareth was silent a moment, locking eyes once with each member of his group before settling on Negan. "Okay. We're part of you."

Negan grinned. "Then tomorrow, we ride."

At the very least Alex could be thankful for having an excuse to void his hard labor. Though the amount of people and firepower under preparation for Sipsey created a knot in his stomach. And they were to travel to an outpost to collect even more. Negan unfortunately ordered Gina to stay behind. Alex wished for her snark to lighten the mood.

"There's always a way, Alex," Gareth said, leaning against a stocked green Jeep. "If there's a will, there's a way. We've been backed into tighter corners than this. Much tighter. And after that, we did what we had to. Like always. This is no different, there's always a way out."

Alex scratched the back of his sweat-stickied neck. "I just want him to leave her alone."

"What?"

"Tess. I don't... it's messed up, but I'll live in Sipsey half-stocked with Saviors up our ass as long as it gets him away from her."

"He can't have her."

"That don't mean I want him to even look at her. Do you even know how that this feels?"

"Feel however you want, just don't show him. Put on a brave face and he won't know how bad he's bothering you. I mean, at the end of the day, you're the one sleeping next to her. He wants to get
under your skin. He wants to get under all our skins."

"No, he wants to get in her pants. I'm an obstacle."

Gareth smiled. "I just think he likes messing with her."

"Don't make it any better."

He patted his brother's back. "It'll be alright. Come on, wear that brave public face. You can do that, I know you can."

Memories of the last time Gareth spoke those words flashed through his head: chopping off one of the Occupier's legs, nausea mixing with weak limbs and hunger pangs. He blinked away the crimson image.

"I think they're about ready," Alex said, attempting to count the people preparing for their mission—at least thirty.

* * *

Anxiety filled Alex's chest like a balloon. He prayed for no bloodshed at Sipsey and no Lucille, no bodies to bury. Though better any number of Sipseans or Saviors die than his own.

After half an hour of driving toward the outpost they had visited before, Alex worked up the courage to speak. "I don't wanna do this," he said to Theresa.

"I know," Theresa replied. "Just breathe. That's what I've been doing."

"Breathe," he murmured, focusing on inhaling and exhaling.

One minute at a time. Like Mary always said.

He had just begun to relax when their line of cars stopped. His heart picked up and he peered out the window. A small herd of walkers gathered underneath an overgrowth of trees shading the rural road.

Oh. Just walkers.

He flinched when Negan rapped on the door, then opened up with Lucille in hand. "Come on!" Negan encouraged. "I want to see you assholes in action again! Alex, Theresa, it'll be romantic. Kill some fucking roamers together. Out, out, out!"

"Can't we just go past through them?" Gareth asked from beside Theresa.

"Where's the damn fun in that? Shit. Come on, guys. Just the happy couple." Alex groaned and heaved out of the car along with Theresa. Negan led them down the line of stalled vehicles. "You probably think I don't like you, Alex. But I do. I really do. That's why I'm letting your continued labor be alongside your pretty peach. Just like singeing Jackie. Oh, yeah, you get to see her again."

Don't remind me.

A grumpy-looking woman handed Alex a machete as they reached Negan's RV.

"No, let Theresa have that," Negan said, stepping inside his RV and reappearing with a smaller bat. "Much smaller than Lucille. Can't have her getting jealous. But you were so good with the one you hit Bud with..."
Alex gave the machete to Theresa and took the bat, wishing he could clock Negan with it instead. Though the sight of walkers ripe for hitting made him feel better. He never took pleasure in having to kill anything, but at that point pounding a moving corpse might not feel so bad.

A few more people joined in slaying the undead, using knives and a few bows. Theresa sliced off a walker's head with a clumsy strike.

"Whoa, fuck!" Negan exclaimed, aiming Lucille at an oncoming walker. "Warn me when you're about to do that shit so I can prepare myself. That was hot as fuck."

Acid ran through Alex's veins and he used every bit of might from his sore muscles to bash in an undead's face. Then he recalled what Gareth said.

He forced his features to relax and bounced over to a short walker coming at him. Raising the bat, he shouted, "Hey, Tess? How sexy do I look?" He swung the bat and hit the creature just before it reached him. Its decayed face turned to mush as Alex hit it a few more times before placing the bloody bat over his shoulder.

Theresa inched away from her own walker and looked at him like he'd grown a second head. Then straightening herself, she cocked an eyebrow and threw a glance at a busy Negan. "Oh, like you wouldn't believe."

Negan seemed not to be paying much attention, but no doubt he was listening despite his grinning and hammering away at the cold bodies.

Once the walkers were all lying motionless, Alex caught his breath, thankful the physical exertion was over.

"Oh, man!" Negan beamed as his people started to move the undead from their path. "I needed that. Some people need a spa weekend, but me? Oh no, I need a good bashing." He imitated his previous swings. "Bam! Splat!" He cackled. "Well, back on the fucking road again. More boring ass shit. Don't worry about moving the roamers, you two. Come with me."

Theresa and Alex followed Negan down the convoy and Theresa cleared her throat. "You ever let anyone touch Lucille?"

Negan scoffed. "Fuck no. Okay, well I mean, I got in this jam once where Paula had to grab her and toss her to me. But touch her just to touch her? No way. Girl's all mine."

Alex's mixture of anger, exhaustion, fear, and jealousy manifested in a fit of laughter.

"The fuck's so funny?" Negan asked.

"Don't know, man," Alex said with a smirk. "I think I'm getting wood for your girl."

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Yeah, thinking of nicknaming her strawberry too."

Theresa went white as sheet as they stopped by the RV.

Negan breathed a laugh. "Damn, where'd you get those balls from? Your old lady loan you a set?"

"I guess they finally dropped."

"Funny. In all seriousness though, don't actually go nicknaming Lucille. None of that 'Lucy' shit
"Why'd you name her that?" Theresa asked, handing Negan the machete.

He took her blade as the grumpy woman from before retrieved Alex's bat. "Why not?"

* * *

"I'm sick of car rides," Martin said as he puffed on another cigarette. He'd smoked three since they set out. Nowhere near cutting down, but Alex couldn't blame him.

Alex refused to get out of the parked Jeep until someone asked him, and no one had yet. Traveling inside the outpost formed no appeal. Martin and Theresa were of the same mind. Theresa rested in the front passenger's seat.

"So what's it feel like?" Martin asked Alex.

"What does what feel like?"

"Just curious how you were doing with all this. Having such power behind us. Don't know, protection feels nice."

"Are you serious right now?"

"Hey, I'm just thinking of all options. You always have to. And you didn't answer my question."

Alex shifted his legs. "Makes me feel like... like cattle being herded."

"Yeah, thought you'd say something like that. But unless we can put heaven and earth between us and them, we're fucked."

"What, you think we need to cut our losses and roll over?"

"Look, we gotta be realistic. What's Gareth said about all this since, huh? Nothing. Just feel-good 'believe in yourself' bullshit. That's 'cause he knows he's lost. I actually feel bad for him."

He breathed out a large cloud of smoke. "Motherfucking hell that is good."

Alex was silent, wanting to avoid an argument. "Don't think you could snap your fingers and make that some green, could you?"

"Be a lot better for me."

Theresa peeked around her seat. "I'd love to be in your room smoking weed on your floor, pantsless."

"Gotta be a patch around here somewhere," Alex said.

"If so, can I burn one with y'all?" Martin asked. "I'll keep my pants on."

Theresa formed a smile. "Sure. Why not?"

"Man, don't the impending cancer bother you?" Alex asked Martin.

He shook his head. "I'll be dead before that happens."

Theresa's face fell. "No you won't."
"I'll live for my emphysema?"

"No, because you'll stop smoking and—"

"Live to a ripe old age?" He laughed.

She stiffened. "If we don't, then what was the point of it all?"

"A good smoke. A nice bed, nice meal, nice talk. Like this. This is nice."

"No, it's..."

"Look, I had an epiphany yesterday. When Negan was rubbing his greasy mitts all over me, all I could think was: you assholes better save my ass so help me god or I will climb out of hell and fuck you up. But after that? I thought, you know I've made it pretty good so far. No better time than now to close to the curtains. I ain't afraid of dying. I don't want to, but if I dropped dead within the next ten minutes, I'd be fine."

Such clarity was something Alex wished he had, though the words troubled him.

"I need to get out of this stupid Jeep," Theresa said, fumbling out the door.

"What's her problem?" Martin asked.

"I don't know," Alex answered. "I'll um, hang on." He popped open the door and followed her to the back of the Jeep. "What's up?"

She folded her arms and glowered. "How can he say... god, after everything."

"You know how he is."

"I mean, I can't... nothing will have been worth it if I die tomorrow."

Thunder roared above and Alex noticed how cloudy it grew. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Hey, hey, you're not dying tomorrow."

"No, I'm not. Exactly. I'm not. And neither are you or that..." She gestured at the car. "...fucking moron who I clearly wasted time caring about."

"You know he talks a bigger game than he means."

"Yeah, but that he means. No, nothing will have been worth it if we die now. Nothing. Everyone we ever... ever killed or let be killed. Nothing. They'll have died for nothing. Absolutely nothing." Her face grew red.

"Tess, hey. Don't listen to him. Just focus on what comes next. Getting through it."

A harsh bluster blew her shoulder-length hair across her face. She pushed it from her eyes. "I know. I'm trying."

"And you know, rain don't last forever. It always goes away."

* * *

The storm kept on for the rest of the day and into the night, quickly flooding low-water crossings due to the ground’s saturation. Negan threw around more expletives than usual as he joined his
people in the outpost's rec room.

"Fucking stupid ass rain, if I could Lucille every damn cloud..." he muttered as he glared daggers out the large window.

Alex sat on a wrap-around sofa, finishing the small meal he was allotted while Theresa, Gareth, Albert, and Cynthia feigned conversation. A few others had taken to playing pool, one of whom included Jackie—complete with a bandaged face. The woman only once eyed their group, something for which Alex was thankful.

Negan whirled around and approached the pool table. "I want to play. Get the fuck outta the way you've been at it half a fucking hour."

"Oh," Jackie said, handing him her cue stick. "Of course, sir."

"And I want to go up against the..." He scanned the room. "The humanitarians. That'll be your team name."

Alex thought maybe if he pretended he didn't hear, he'd pick someone else. Gareth, Theresa, Cynthia, and Albert appeared to do the same.

"Yoo-hoo? Did I fucking stutter? And where the fuck are Martin and Kaylee? I want to play them too. Gareth, where's your boyfriend?"

Gareth sighed. "He's not my boyfriend and never was."

"Oh, what is he with Kaylee now? He is the group mattress, right?"

Alex suppressed a smile at the thought of Martin and Kaylee together.

Gareth placed his hands behind his head. "If that's true, I'll kiss you on the mouth."

"Oh, damn, baby. That is tempting. I sure as hell have been questioning my sexuality since meeting you. Mid-life fucking crisis I suppose."

"I'll play you," Cynthia declared, standing up.

"Love me a fiery redhead. Alright, get your ass over here."

Cynthia threw her shoulders back and marched over to the table as the others made room. "I'm pretty good. Haven't played since Terminus though."

"Does Sipsey not have a pool table?" he asked, putting the balls in the triangle rack.

"Uh, it does, but I never played."

"Okay, well no losing on purpose. I'm sick of that shit. Assholes do it at The Sanctuary all the time no matter how many times I say I'll jam the pool stick up their ass and put them out with the other roamers."

"Heh, yeah. I won't lose on purpose."

Gareth's vision glued to her as they played. Alex had to wonder if something had changed between the two, especially after Theresa shared her suspicions. Though surely Gareth would tell the rest of the group, wouldn't he?
Alex started to whisper about it to Theresa when he saw her staring off into space. He placed his hand on her knee and she stirred a little. After Negan and Cynthia were finishing their game, the door opened and a wet Martin and Kaylee entered. Martin attempted to wring out his shirt as Kaylee merely hugged herself.

"Hey, Lucille bait!" Negan called. "It's pool time." He held up the cue.

Martin sent waves of hatred his way before gesturing his people forward.

Gareth stood. "I think we need a minute. He'll gladly take you on next."

Martin muttered a few swears as his people followed him and Kaylee outside. They clustered together under the small awning as the torrential rain fell.

"What's going on?" Gareth asked over the loud downpour.

"Why don't you ask her?" Martin pointed to a frowning Kaylee.

"What happened?"

Kaylee was quiet.

Martin threw up his hands. "Oh, for fuck's—you know what happened? Mira, bitch with the burned face? Poor thing scraped her burn and it was bleeding. So Kay helped her out. I walk in and she's helping the cunt. Then tells me she gave her last pain med."

Alex's ears burned, half-certain he misheard though the noise.

"You did what!?" Theresa exclaimed.

"Kaylee..." Gareth started through clenched teeth, "do you remember what they did? How she was going cut Theresa's throat? You gave—you gave her your pain med? What part of 'we first, always' did you forget again?"

Kaylee snapped her head up. "Yes! Okay, yes. I did it. Because I—"

"What is wrong with you!?!" Theresa demanded. "She was going to kill me!"

"I'm a doctor, and I saw a patient. That's what we do. We see someone hurt and we help."

Gareth pinched the bridge of his nose. "No, no, no. Mother of god, Kaylee. It would have been so much easier to walk away, to not disrespect us again. Yet you get our trust back and do this? See what I'm doing right now? You might notice I'm not snuggling with Mac and cooing over his burns."

She stomped her foot. "You have no idea—"

"Should've seen her, Gare," Martin interrupted. "Looked at her like she did sweet little Beth. If I didn't know better, she gets her rocks off looking after chicks who hit us where it hurts."

"Stop it," Kaylee spat.

"What if you needed that medicine, Kaylee?" Albert asked.

"It was my choice. My pill. My time."
"Guys," Cynthia began, slipping to Gareth's side, "let's go easy on her. She had a moment of bad judgment. We've all had 'em. Right?"

Gareth locked eyes with her for a moment. "Sweet words aren't going to work, Cynthia. Not this time." She folded her arms and shrank back.

Alex felt himself fading into the sound of the rain as the rest argued, conflicting emotions pulling him each and every way until he yelled, "Stop it! Get off her back!"

The group froze.

"Alex, those people were going to kill us!" Theresa yelled.

"Yeah? And you let 'em go. You get no right to complain that any of us helps 'em 'cause only reason they're here is you. Weren't you, and Martin, the ones who were gonna hatch an escape with Beth and Tyreese? Promised you wouldn't kill 'em? Don't act so outraged when you've done the same thing. You're just arguing against yourself."

Theresa's eyes grew into saucers before she bolted off into the rain.

"This is your fault," Alex said to Martin.

Martin raised his eyebrows. "Didn't know I had my fingers up Kay's ass controlling her like a puppet."

"She was already upset 'cause of your I'm fine with dying' talk."

"Oh, that? Fuck, not everything is my goddamn fault."

"Alex, this is about Kaylee," Gareth said. "Who still just doesn't seem to get it. Once upon a time, we could've treated some other assailants of ours' wounds. We didn't. Just let them fester. Once upon another time, you set on fire the church full of people who burned our house down. Once upon a time, you got it."

Kaylee shook her head. "I'm not going to say I'm sorry for doing my job. You're a leader, a head guy. You do all the decision-making and shut down because of it. I'm a healer, and I'm not giving that up. That's what I do. The same as what you do is lead us and protect us. I'd never expect you to give that up."

"I am giving that up! For you, all of you." He inhaled a shaky breath. "You know... if this had happened right after Terminus, Martin, I would've let you die so we could get out from his hold. No questions. You lift right out. And Kaylee, if Negan had put Lucille over your head back there? I'd have agreed to stay under his thumb because I'm trying to forgive you. And I made a promise that I'd always protect you, even if it hurts. So you have to understand why this is a little upsetting."

"What about them?" Kaylee asked, tears streaming down her face. "Theresa and Alex? They let those three go. And you let them off the hook when you found out. No, this is about me. You did the same thing to Martin. Stop picking enemies with us. Just... stop it!"
The flood waters had receded and the convoy rested a mile outside Sipsey. Theresa wrung her hands and tried to focus on their oncoming siege, but anger at Kaylee, Alex, and Martin consumed her mind. Though she refused to discuss it with them so they would stay level-headed for their mission.

Mira crossed the parked alignment of cars and Theresa’s hand inched toward her revolver. Skin burning red and teeth digging into her cheek, she moved her hand back to her hip. She wanted to strip the woman of her life. The one who found sympathies from Kaylee that she didn’t deserve. Sympathies Theresa once made the mistake of offering herself.

Martin was chain-smoking by the back of a pickup truck while Gareth chatted with Alex. Theresa licked the raw ulcer in her mouth and trudged over to them.

“Take this,” she said, holding out the gun to Alex.

“Why?” Alex asked.

“Because I’ll kill her. Mira. If you don’t take this, I’m going to shoot her dead before we get there. I know I will.”

Alex pressed his lips together and took the revolver. “Okay.”

Martin narrowed his eyes at her and blew a ring of smoke. The near constant smell of cigarette was beginning to make her nauseous. Gareth just leaned his head against the truck and mouthed something she didn't catch.

* * *

The Sipseans thought their security was airtight, though Theresa knew they were lax because they’d never fended off a large threat. And their hidden bunker status made them too confident.

The Saviors circled the complex, hiding among the woodlands close enough to get an eyeful. A few Sipsean guards dotted the outside the expansive fence.

As they had planned, The Hunters lumbered toward the front gate, having made themselves disheveled. A few holes marred their clothes, their hair messed, and dirt stained their skin. The sun-warmed humidity added a sheen of sweat to further illustrate their apparent exhaustion.

“Oh my god!” a young black-haired woman shouted when she saw the group approach the gate.

“We are so glad to see you,” Gareth said, feigning a smile and picking up his pace.

The girl opened the gate and caught up to them. “What… Lucy and Naz?”

They were silent per rehearsal as if remembering something awful.

“Naz is alive,” Gareth said. “She wanted to find Paul and stayed at the community that had him. They didn’t want to come back here after what Naz did. And Lucy…”

“We know about her manipulating Gabby,” the girl said. “Is she…?”

He nodded. “We had to. She was attacking us.”
She eyed them for a moment. “Well, okay. Come on in.”

*Talk about naivety.*

They followed her inside and Theresa’s pulse went wild. And the familiar landscape struck her with longing. She wanted it. She wanted hers and Alex’s own room and a roof over their head.

Once they neared the entrance, Gareth tapped his hip five times, signaling The Saviors. A shot flew over their heads and the girl spun around just as Martin pressed his gun against her temple.

She raised her hands with a squeak. “What’s going on!?”

The plethora of Saviors showed themselves from the fences, a few holding Sipsean guards hostage. They shouted for others outside to gather by the entrance.

*Stupid,* Theresa thought. *You never go out somewhere vulnerable unarmed.*

Numerous people, many wearing sunhats, raised their hands and started gathering by the entrance.

“We’re sorry about this,” Gareth said to the girl. “We were kind of forced into it. Met these nice people on the road. They busted us out of the place Naz is at and saved Kaylee. Who you see out there aren’t even half of them. Now if you all just play along no one has to get hurt.” He nodded toward the gate. “And looks like bossman is coming. What’s your name? I don’t think we ever spoke. And...” He furrowed his brow. "Who’s in charge here now?"

“It’s.... my name's Taylor. And it’s um... we sort of... have a team of three people who d— decide.”

*Three?* Albert asked.

“Y—yeah.”

“Well, someone go get ‘em!” Martin shouted at the crowd. “Tell ‘em to come out unarmed with their hands up or this chickie gets it. No, all y’all out there get it from our snipers. And see those guys over there? They got three RPGs aimed at the solar panels and those dudes over there got another three pointed at the garden.” When the group stayed still he pulled Taylor against him. “Go now!”

A man rushed toward the entrance and fled inside.

Finally, Negan and Lucille sauntered from the gate Taylor left open. Theresa swore the man was imagining a smoke machine surrounding him from the way he approached. “Motherfucking hell this place is the balls,” Negan said. "But you all trust so way too easily. This is like shooting fish in a barrel.” He grinned and stopped beside Taylor. “I didn’t catch your name, doll.”

“T—Taylor.”

“Taylor. How old are you?”

“Nineteen. I think.”

“Hm. I might feel bad giving Lucille a taste of you. You’re too damn cute. But, *but,* you’d make some damn good insurance.”

Her eyes grew. “Insurance?”
“You’ll be fine,” Theresa assured her. She brushed a strand of frizzy hair from her brow and grimaced at the pain it caused her collarbone.

“I hope Dwight’s thinking long and hard about what he did to my peach,” Negan said.

“Yeah, I’m sure he feels so bad.” She wished the three leaders would get there already.

Many minutes passed, Negan sighing and pacing. “Motherfucking fuck this is taking a long time. This was not so anti-climactic when I played it out in my head. Place must be huge, huh?”

The entry shed door swung open and two men and one woman crept out. All were of middle-age with varying degrees of greying hair.

“Taylor!” the eldest-looking man shouted. “That’s my daughter. Please don’t hurt her.”

“Ain’t up to me, padre,” Martin replied. “All the guy with the bat’s choice.”

Negan pointed Lucille at Martin. “I think you’ll call me by my name, huh?”

Martin forced a smile. “Yes, Negan.”

He turned back to the three leaders. “Theresa, you search the chick, Gareth you do the guys.”

Gareth and Theresa obliged and moved over to frisk the three. "You know, you assholes are lucky, getting these beautiful specimens to feel you up. So anyhoo, you three decided to jointly run the place? Sounds lame.”

“You want supplies?” the female asked as Theresa patted down her quivering form. “I—I—we can give you that. Sure.”

“Fuck yes, we want your shit! Harvestable crops, food, blankets, medicine, clothes, condoms, asswipe. Yep. And we’re going to take it. And I'm sure you see my men with guns to some of your people’s heads. And I sure as hell don’t want to waste your tasty fucking garden or pretty, pretty solar panels. But RPGs are amazing things.”

“We’ll do it,” Taylor’s father mewed as Gareth frisked him. “We swear.”

“What’s your name, daddy-boy?” Negan asked.

“Uh, Nate.”

“See, Nate, you don’t fucking know that I will. That’s the thing. You have to know. These people know I will.” He motioned to the Hunters. “Why do you think they’re here? They’re smart fuckers who know whose team it’s best to be on. And you will too.”

Theresa moved to Alex’s side despite her lingering anger. She wanted the comfort of his presence for what was to come.

“We said we’ll do it!” the other man cried as Gareth finished searching him and stepped away.

“Ah, but you still don’t get it. I can’t have you calling my bluff. Words are just words. But actions? Like a banshee screech. Oh, fuck, I didn’t even ask the other’s names. What bad manners. Names?”

The woman’s lip trembled. “Tamara.”

“Henry,” the other man murmured.
Negan raised a finger. “Aha! I got an idea. The three of you pick a number below one hundred. No closer to each other than ten. Closest to the one I’m thinking gets the smash.”

“Please,” Nate begged.

He held a hand to his ear. “Was that a number?”

“We’re not doing this!” Tamara exclaimed.

“No? Then pretty Taylor here gets Lucille’d right here on the spot and trust me, I’d really rather not. Pick a fucking number.”

Theresa glanced across her group, their faces blank as the inevitable drew nearer. She inched closer to Alex and heard the calming whir of his breathing.

“Tamara, Nate, Henry,” Negan began, “in that order. Pick a number. Now.”

“F—fourteen.”

“Seventy-two.”

“Ninety-five.”

He breathed in a hiss. “Ooh, fuck. One of you is just three away from what I was thinking. And that person is…” He raked Lucille across the three for several agonizing moments. He stopped on Nate. “Ding, ding, ding! I was thinking sixty-nine… for obvious reasons.” He winked.

Theresa wouldn’t close her eyes, but she would do her best to go somewhere else. Look to the future after Negan left. Nate meant nothing to her, but unlike Mark, his death would never be something she derived satisfaction from.

“Everyone step back—and shut up!” Negan ordered as many people pleaded. “Nate, step forward and kneel like you’re about to give some guy in a truckstop bathroom the best BJ of his life.”

Nate started to hyperventilate as he complied. “Th—this isn’t… isn’t how the world h—has to work now.”

Negan’s jovial expression faded for the first time. “You stupid motherfucker. The world has always worked like this and always will. We just kidded ourselves into thinking it didn’t have to.”

He wasn’t wrong.

Screams of horror and grief tore through the air. Another death, another body, and another ripple of nausea in Theresa’s gut. But Negan was right; that was how their world worked and how it always had. Butcher or the cattle.

After he finished, he backed away and flung the gore off Lucille. “We’ll be back after I take a nice long look. After that, we’ll be snatching Taylor so you don’t get any bright ideas about starting some kind of revolt. And Martin, get your greasy mitts off her. Taylor, go to daddy.” Martin released the girl and she flew into her weeping father’s arms. “If you do get any of those smart ideas, you will lose and lose severely. This?” He held his arms out. “This will look like child’s play. Now, this is a big place, not the usual shithole we deal with, so I’m stationing a few of my men here for the next week to oversee shit while you gather your shit. But I’m a nice guy, so I’m going to do something else for you.” He turned to Theresa.
Theresa looked behind her, certain he was looking at something else. “What?”

“The keys. For you, peach. You head this place for me.”

“What!?”

“What!?” Gareth echoed as the others called out.

“Oh, oh, I know, Gareth, this hurts. But I like her better. And some places, eh, their heads are alright. I can deal. But for this place? Look at these driveling morons.” He gestured to Tamara and Henry. “I need someone good. Someone who’s seen the shit out there. If you refuse, I’ll get some other asshole to do it. You’d rather it be you or someone you don’t even like?”

“I… I’m not a leader!” Theresa protested. “I—I… he’s—Gareth is our leader. \textit{Not} me!”

"Don't make her do this, man!" Alex urged.

“This is what you wanted! You wanted your own house. You got it. I’m making you an ally. I’ve giving you the moon and New York City. Show some gratitude.”

“Gratitude!?” Theresa's voice rose to an uncomfortable wail. “I’m not a leader!”

“Oh, but I think you want to be. Deep, \textit{deep} down you’d love to hold the reins. No more having to bitch to Gareth. Just you in charge.”

“I don’t want that.”

“You became one of us. And as a Savior, you do what I say. No fucking arguments. In time, you’ll come to realize how lucky you are.” He stepped back to face the heartbroken Sipseans. “And you fuckers! No whining! My pretty peach is the head bitch in charge. And I think she’ll do you good.”

* * *

Theresa recalled the line of replacements if Gareth were to die at Terminus. If he passed, Mary would be in charge. And if she passed, Greg would get it, then Devin, and so on. Theresa was nowhere on the list of fifteen and she knew why. Gareth said she was too volatile, impulsive, and hot-headed.

What Negan was doing was brilliant. Nothing but punishment and misery always led to rebellion. That was why The Saviors didn’t claim every community as their own or rob them blind. It was why they offered protection. They wanted allies, not enemies.

And at last they had what they wanted. How could they turn down the offer? One that was ripe with so many genuine benefits they had no choice but to accept. But it wasn’t right. Gareth was who led them and even through his misgivings, he was who they needed. The hurt in his eyes was apparent as they toured Sipsey alongside Negan. This was supposed to be his house. She considered letting him whisper to her how to run things, but his signature was easy to spot. Clean, organized, and stringent was not her style.

“I need water,” Theresa said as they finished their inspection of the first floor machinery.

“I’ll come with,” Cynthia offered.

She shook her head and backed away. “No… no. I need to go alone. I just need to be… alone.”

“Hang on,” Negan said, blocking her path. “Did I say you could go?”
“My mouth feels like sandpaper and I’ve been on my feet for—”

“Oh, lighten up. I was just fucking with you. Go.”

She huffed a sigh and hurried off, feeling the other’s strong stares on her back.

The nearest lavatory was on the same floor, but she wanted to be at least one level away from Negan. She ignored the additional looks from people as she passed through the halls. Reaching the door of the women’s restroom she had been given her bloody bath, crying from inside almost had her turning to leave. But leaders were supposed to face things head-on.

Taylor was sitting on the pristine white tile hugging her knees. Theresa wondered why she was allowed to roam free when she was insurance. Though where would she run to?

The two locked eyes and the girl’s features turned fierce.

“You!” Taylor yelled, bouncing up.

“I’m not him,” Theresa responded, tiptoeing forward as if she were a wild animal. “It wasn’t our decision to do this. Negan twisted our arms. Martin, he was going to kill him with that bat if we didn’t bring them all here. And Martin didn't want to kill you, I promise. We've all be forced.”

Her face softened. “We’re going to… half of everything. We spent so long… so long…”

“I’m not going let us go hungry.”

Though Negan ordered, “none of that nasty cannibal shit.”

“I’ll do my best,” she continued. “Just know I’m not a monarch. No iron fist, no barbed-wired scepter.”

“We were just starting to get back on our feet!”

“I know.” She made it to the sink, switching the faucet and cupping the cool water in her hands for a sip. “I’m not Gabby, and I’m sure as hell not Negan. So just know that, um… you’ll be okay.”

*How the hell does Gareth do motivational speeches so well?*

“I just can’t stop picturing poor Nate. He always bugged me, but that’s not… Wait, what’s it like there? The Sanctuary?”

She splashed a helping of water on her face before turning back. “Honestly? Grimey. Factory surrounded by impaled walkers. An earnings system. But Negan said you won’t be on it. And you’re probably wondering… you’re not going to be forced into anything sexual. They at least have that going for them.”

"I guess that's something."

"It's everything."

The door swung open and Martin came through.

“This is the women’s bathroom!” Taylor cried. “You can’t be in here.”

“*This is the women’s bathroom,***” Martin mocked. “Theresa, you’re wanted. And hey, this is *her* decision. Boss, can I be in here?”
Theresa sighed, feeling a headache come on. She was starting to see why Gareth got them so often. “It’s fine. What am I wanted for?”

“Speak to your people.”

She leaned against the sink. “My... my people. Okay. Taylor, uh, hang in there. And come if you want to.” She started down the door alongside Martin, but she had something to care of first.

“You’re gonna really get some folks feeling better with your—” Theresa took him in a one-armed hug and he shrunk back. “What the hell, woman!? Get the fuck—”

She gripped him tighter and got a nose full of cigarette scent. “Look, you are not dying today. Or anytime soon. None of us are dying and I don’t ever want to hear you talk like that again. Everything we do is so stay alive. Do you understand?”

“Y—yeah. Now let go.”

“I mean, do you really understand?”

“Yes. Let go.”

She released him and he grumbled under his breath as they headed toward the conference hall. A sizable amount of Sipseans gathered inside and she froze, stomach catching in her throat. She cared little for them, how was she supposed to lead them?

Pretend.

* * *

Theresa and Alex's room had barely been touched since their time away, the sheets still tangled from where she sprang out of bed at Martin's knock. She sat on the bed's foot while her hands tingled from the pounding she gave the pillow. Though Negan had taken the reigns and delivered most information, the glimpse she got of life as a leader was overwhelming.

A rap came on the door. “Can I come in?” Kaylee asked.

“No,” Theresa answered. Kaylee came in anyway and Theresa threw up her hands. “What did I just say?”

“I came to talk,” Kaylee said, slipping inside.

“Not in the mood.”

“Theresa, it’s just... you were the one who saved her. And—”

“Right. That’s what Alex said. I have no right to be pissed because if it weren’t for me, she wouldn’t be here for you to take pity on the first place.”

“You know that’s not what he meant. He just meant you’ve done the same thing. Shown mercy. You’re as pissed at yourself as you are me.”

Theresa buried her head in her hands, the words reverberating inside her skull. “What happened to me?”

“What do you mean?”
“Everything used to be so clear. At Terminus, it was crystal. Now there’s this and that and I… I can’t decide these things! I’m not Gareth. I can’t decide coldly and be on my way. I don’t know what to do.” A sob crept up her throat.

Kaylee stepped over and placed a light hand on her shoulder. “We’ll figure it out. We always do. And I have to say that I never wanted to hurt you with her. Mira.”

“But it’s your job, right? A healer. And mine? My job is… not this!” She bolted up and raced out the door, running into Alex. “Oh, you!”

Alex backed up and glanced at Kaylee behind her. “Hey, I know this is a lot to take, but we’re all here now, so I wanted to say I was sorry. Again.”

She folded her arms. “But I’m still just a big old hypocrite, right?”

“You’re overwhelmed,” Kaylee chimed in. “We all are.”

“Can I talk to him alone?”

Kaylee nodded, her face falling a tad. “Yeah, of course.” She dragged her feet down the hall and around the corner.

“Mister ‘no right to complain,’” Theresa said. “I’m not over that.”

He pursed his lips. “I didn’t mean no right to be mad, and I could’ve worded that different I guess. I was just feeling sorry for Kay ‘cause you were all ganging up on her.”

“Well, thank you then.”

“It’s just that you… Tess, I could’ve been mad that you let those three live. I mean, they were gonna kill you in front of me and kill me. But I wasn't mad at you.”

“Well aren’t you saintly.”

He sighed. “You know what I mean. I just mean… think about why you let ‘em go and why she helped Mira.”

She reflected. “I still don’t know why I did. That’s why everything is so unclear.”

“I know. But like I said, rain don't lasts forever.”

“This is a monsoon.”

“Even those end.”

She half-smiled. “Thank you for explaining. But just so you know, I’m not… I need some time before we can totally be—”

“I know. That’s okay. And um, I actually came ‘cause Gareth wanted me to get you. He ain’t taking this well.”

She scoffed. “How could he be?”

Theresa followed Alex down the hall to the small break room and found Gareth sitting on the loveseat.
“I’m so sorry,” she blurted out. “I never wanted this to happen. I want you to lead us.”

“I know,” Gareth said without turning his gaze. “And it’s not your fault.”

“But it’s—”

“Stop. Sit.” Theresa perched beside Gareth and Alex took to the recliner. “I want you to listen to what I have to say,” he continued, picking up a glass from the coffee table and sipping. The scent of whiskey wafted over.

_Gareth drinking? And drinking whiskey?_

Her eyes found a half-full bottle of Jack Daniels by his feet, meaning Martin was likely the supplier. She tried to recall him ever drinking before. He may have had a sip of wine at a few social events at Terminus. She thought she recalled him doing so at the funerals for those who died after their flu outbreak. Didn’t he?

Gareth ringed his hands around the glass. “If you’re going to do this, you need to know how to put on a public face. What you did out there when Negan was laying down the law, you were clearly nervous, flexing your fingers. Classic sign of nervousness.” He placed the glass down and stood up, wobbling slightly. “Stand like this. Straight posture, still hands at your side. See? You try.”

She stood and emulated him. “Uh, like this?”


“Gareth,” Alex began, “is this really what she needs?”

“Yes. Part of it.”

Theresa scratched the back of her neck. “Yeah, don’t you maybe want to do this later? Or tomorrow?”

“You want my help or not?”

“I do.”

“Then shut up and listen.”

Alex rose to his feet. “Man, stop bein’ a passive aggressive jackass.”

Theresa stepped in front of him and murmured, “Alex, it’s fine.”

“Lesson two,” Gareth almost shouted. “People are going to disagree with you. And you’ve never been good at taking criticism.”

She whirled around. “Excuse me?”

“Case in point.”

She wanted to snap back, but the pain in his eyes gave her pause.

“Dude, she’s right,” Alex said. “Let’s do this tomorrow when you feel better. Want some coffee or somethin’?”
He shook his head and took another swig of whiskey. “Caffeine doesn’t actually help you sober up.”

Theresa sat on the coffee table across from him. “Hey, it’s going to be okay. Just think about right now instead of everything at once.”

“Yeah, drink away your sorrows if that’s what you want,” Alex added. “We can all talk about this tomorrow. Ain’t nothing we can do now that’s gonna change anything. It’s past nine o’clock. Remember what dad always used to say? After nine o’clock, put everything aside for tomorrow ‘cause there’s nothin’ you do after nine that’s gonna make a difference.”

Gareth was silent a moment. “Well, he’s not here, Alex!” He slammed the glass down beside Theresa, causing it to shatter. She hopped up. “And for good reason.”

Theresa blinked away the tears starting to blur her vision. “Don’t say that.”

Alex stared at the broken glass and drink dripping onto the rug and bit his lip. “No, no, you ain’t pushing us away and doing this shit again. I ain’t letting you.”

Theresa placed a hand on Alex’s wrist. “I agree, but let’s just leave him, okay? For now?”

“No, he—”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Albert asked as he came in beside Cynthia.

“Family meeting,” Gareth deadpanned, removing his sock and wiping up the spilled whiskey.

Cynthia’s eyes bulged at the broken glass. “You’re… drinkin’?”

“Was drinking. Sort of broke my glass.” He laughed. “And I’m not drinking from the bottle like some sort of… Martin.”

She frowned and sat down next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. “It’s gonna be okay.”

Cynthia confirmed Theresa’s suspicions when Gareth didn’t push her away. Though Theresa disapproved of Gareth taking advantage of her feelings, now was not the time to discuss it.

Gareth placed the wet sock on the table. “Thanks for telling me. Now I know.”

She gave him a light smack on the wrist. “Don’t be an asshole.”

“Gareth,” Albert began, “no matter what, you’re our leader. You’re the guy we’re going to come to no matter what. Whoever runs Sipsey doesn’t change that.”

“Yes, it does.”

“No, because you’re the one I trust. My family. You remember after the Occupation when I wanted to do myself in?” Gareth nodded. “You were the one who brought me back from the brink. No one else could’ve done that. So fuck Negan and his games. He can’t ever take away what you mean to us.”

Again, Theresa’s vision blurred with tears, but she let them fall.
Gareth lay on his bed beside the dim lamp light, trying to numb himself. Yet being made worthless was not something he could tune out.

Cynthia rested at his side, stroking her hand down his chest and stopping at his fly. “I bet I can make you feel better,” she said with a twinkle in her eye and started to unzip his pants.

Gareth gripped her hand. “Not even remotely in the mood for that.”

Her smile faltered and she refastened his pants. “Okay.”

Cynthia was another failure. Going from sleeping with Martin to Cynthia within a week’s time was shameful. What kind of proper leader did that? Regardless that the two were okay with it, he wasn’t okay with it.

“It’s okay, baby.” Mary’s imaginary voice cooed. “Albert’s right. Negan can’t take away what you mean to them.”

“‘Meaning’ is nothing,” he replied in his head. “I meant a lot to you, but you’re still dead and I’m still demoted. And I still use people in my group for my own selfish purposes.”

“Oh, look at that girl, she’s crazy about you.”

Cynthia laid her head on his shoulder and shut her eyes.

“She lives on a pink cloud and wants a loyal, affectionate boyfriend and lots of Valentine’s gifts. That’s not me. This is going to fail and she’s going to be really hurt.”

“What are you thinkin’ about?” Cynthia asked.

Just talking to my dead mother in my mind.

“I’m thinking… I want to sleep.” For once, sleeping sounded blissful instead of a chore.

She sat up. “Oh, well, I can go or... I can... whatever you want’s fine.”

He needed to tell her to leave. Sleeping in the same bed with her not out of lack of room or following sex screamed boyfriend. But what was the point of trying to be the responsible guy anymore? It was over.

* * *

Gareth stared at a walker pressing itself against Sipsey’s fence. The sound of the Saviors’ convoy coming and going attracted a few to their perimeter. He raised his hand just enough for its dirty claw to graze his fingers.


“You gonna kill that thing or not?” Alex asked from behind him.
He lowered his hand and kept sights on the walker. “How’d you sneak up on me?”

“Why are you even out here?”

“I’ve just got some… stuff to think about.”

“Okay, well, when you’re done with your ‘stuff,’ Tess wants to talk to you.”

He laughed, unamused. “I bet she does.”

Alex sighed and grabbed the knife from Gareth’s holster. “Don’t know why…” He impaled the creature through the head and it slumped against the fence.”…you’re just gawking at this thing.”

“Didn’t want to have to clean it up after I killed it. Guess that’s on you now.”

Alex wiped the blade on the walker’s tattered clothes and placed it back in his brother’s belt. “I’ll do it later. You gonna talk, or just sulk?”

Gareth forced a smile and rubbed his hands together. “So, you and Theresa moving into Gabby’s old room?”

“Haven’t talked about it yet, but I guess we should. Like hell we’re taking her old bed though. Probably move the one we already have in there.”

“Fascinating.” He and Alex started through the grass toward the bunker’s entrance. “How long she been waiting for my presence?”

“A little while.”

“What is she up to this morning?”

“Running around like a chicken with its head cut off. They’re bleeding again.”

“What?”

He gestured to his left hand. “Your stubs—I mean, where your fingers were.” Gareth glanced down at the congealed blood dotting the formerly sealed wound. He hadn’t even noticed it hurting.

“Where’s the metal thing?”

“It was itchy.”

Alex chewed his lip. “Cause you probably got an infection. Man, don’t let yourself bleed.”

“Fine, fine, we can stop by the infirmary. No need to bust a gasket.”

Alex muttered under his breath as they walked wordlessly down the bunker tunnel and to the infirmary. The sick bay was unoccupied to his surprise.

“Mourning time, I guess,” Alex said as he rummaged through drawers. Gareth cleared his throat and pointed out the obvious box of gauze on the counter. “Oh, right.” He pulled out the equipment and started treating Gareth when he pulled back.

“I can do this myself.” Gareth began disinfecting his wound.

Alex’s jaw clenched and he nodded. “Mm-hm.”
He tended it in silence, letting himself miss the two digits for a moment. After tidying up after himself, he said, “Let’s go.”

Alex raised his hand and blocked his path. “Hang on, just listen a minute. This is gonna sound harsh, okay? But it’s not to hurt you, it’s just… you… you need to cut this shit out. You’re seriously pissing me off with this moping.”

“Alex, I love it when you get all snappy like that. Makes me tingle.”

“Dude, I’m serious.”

Gareth’s expression firmed. “I know you are.”

“Look, it’s just when you get all distant you get—we lose you, man.”

“What, you afraid I’ll go off the rails again?”

He shrugged. “Be lying if I said no.”

“I’m fine. I just need time to process.”

“You don’t gotta ‘share and care,’ but being around people helps. Kay used to do that at Terminus. She’d come play cards with me and Tess and whoever. It helped her get out of her head.”

He scoffed. “She certainly doesn’t need help now, she got what she wanted.”

“She didn’t want this, you know that. She wants you to be the guy who she knew when all this started. That’s why she left, you weren’t being that guy.”

“She left because she disagreed with eating people. If that were still the case, she’d be moaning and groaning about it no matter how cute and cuddly I was being.” Gareth passed the exam table and Alex blocked his path again.

“I’m not done here.”

Gareth gnashed his teeth. “Alex,” he began, trying to keep his voice level. “I really appreciate watching out for me. I do. And thank you, but this is it for me. I’m not like you who can sit back and enjoy just being above ground. Being a leader is who I am. And being your ‘leader in my heart’ is meaningless. Okay? It’s meaningless.”

“Oh, well, great to know what you really think.”

He smacked a hand on table’s headrest. “This is who I am and now it’s been taken away. Forgive me if I don’t want to bounce back. There’s no point.”

“There’s always a point. You always find one, man. That’s what you do. What Albert said, you helped bring him back from that edge. That was you. Not being the one dotting I’s and crossing T’s don’t change that.”

“Do what Theresa said last night and leave me alone after we see her.” He circled around the table to evade Alex but he was too fast, stopping him with a hand on his chest. “Alex…”

“I said, I’m not letting you do this. I’m not just leaving you to sulk.”

“What is it you want?”
“To be pissed about this! Just feeling sorry for yourself ain’t gonna do any good. It’s fine to be pissed, I want you to be.”

“You need to take your feel-good crap and shove it. There, I’m pissed, happy now? Let me by.”

“No.”

“Damnit, Alex—”

“Please just listen, remember after Terminus? You were so strong for—”

“After Terminus? I was weak after Terminus. And we all suffered for it. Don’t patronize me.”

“Okay, fine! You know what? Fuck this! Treat us like dirt because your little feelings are hurt and don’t do anything. Maybe that’s your problem. You won’t do anything.”

He didn’t see it coming, he didn’t even feel his arm move, but like a streak of lightning Gareth found his fist connecting with Alex’s nose. Time froze as his brother stood stooped down, clutching his nose with his eyes squeezed shut.

Gareth flexed his throbbing hand. “Oh god… Alex, I—I’m so sorry. Alex?”

He thought it impossible to feel worse about his actions as a leader, but then he struck his own brother. He wished for a moment he was somewhere far away under a mountain of cool sand. Somewhere he could avoid looking into Alex’s eyes once he opened them.

A choked breath climbed Gareth’s throat. “Alex, are you okay?” He placed a light hand on his shoulder.

Alex finally opened his watering eyes, Gareth certain the tears weren’t entirely from the blow. “Yeah,” he replied with a gulp. “Yeah… I’m okay.” He straightened himself and grimaced. “I’m still not leaving you.”

“I didn’t mean to… I’m so sorry.”

Mary’s voice returned, but not as one of comfort.

“He was just trying to help you! What is wrong with you!? And to think I felt bad for smacking you when you left him in Atlanta!”

“I can’t believe I raised this!” his father echoed. “You should’ve been the one to get a sword through the neck!”

Alex moved his hand down and revealed a sliver of the bright red mark. “I shouldn’t have said—”

“No, no, no, no. Don’t… don’t apologize. Don’t ever.” His chin quivered. “You see why I’m here? See what I do? You’re all delusional to think I’ve done you so well.”

Alex shook his head. “No, we’re not.”

He held his arms out. “No? Look at me. Look at what I’ve done to you. I used Martin a chew toy slash sex toy, made Kaylee take off, took advantage of Cynthia.” His fingertips hovered above his Alex's wound. “Hit my little brother. It’s not… it’s not…”

“It’s gonna be okay.”
A series of sobs shook his shoulders and he collapsed against his brother, Alex wrapping an arm around him. “Look what I did to you. This is why... this is why you’re a better man than me. You’ve always been the strong one.”

“What? No, man, that’s—”

“Isn’t that the kicker? All along I’ve been the weak one. There’s a reason why you were mom and dad’s favorite.”

“Okay, they did not have favorites.”

“They did. They didn’t know it, but they did. Look at you, this is why you’re the stronger one. I fucking hit you and you’re still here. You don’t let this crap eat you up. You understood why Kaylee helped Mira. I’m too weak to do that. Alex, that’s the strongest and bravest thing anyone can do is to move past it. I could’ve done that with Beth, but I was too weak to let it go.”

“I ain’t perfect. I mean, I hit Albert.”

He sniffled. “What?”

“After what Lucy said in the van, the bruise on Albert’s face? That was me. And I killed Lucy, remember? It gets to me too.”

“But you always come back. You’re able to come back. God, and Theresa? You need to tell her, tell her letting Mac, Mira, and Jackie go wasn’t weakness or cowardice. It was strength.”

He gave a nod, wiping his tearful eyes. “I will.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have that strength.”

* * *

“That’s a pretty little spot,” Martin said, analyzing Alex who held a cold pack over his face. “Neither of your whacks was near as hard, Albert.”

Albert stayed quiet, leaning against the counter with folded arms.

Gareth heard only the tick of the clock on the wall until quick footsteps echoed beyond the infirmary—Theresa. Alex told her what happened over the intercom and her voice spelled rage. Gareth wouldn’t stop her if she struck him. In fact, he hoped she would.

Theresa burst into the room, face wild as she settled on Alex. “Oh god...” She pushed down the ice pack and trailed her finger across a dried trickle of blood from his nose.

“Tess,” Alex began, “before you—“

“You!” Theresa lunged at Gareth and he hit the exam table. A sting radiated throughout his lower back and he accepted the pain he deserved.

“Tess!” Alex grabbed a hold of her and pulled her back while she struggled. Albert and Martin stood by and remained quiet.

Theresa tugged on his arms clutching around her waist. “Will you let me be upset about this!?”

“Yes! Be as pissed as you want, but don’t be wailing on him! Please. Please. We don’t need this.”
She let out a sharp huff and calmed.

Gareth fought the urge to rub his hurting back. “If she wants to wail on me, that’s fine.”

“No, it’s—he can’t possibly feel any worse,” Alex said, releasing his wife.

Theresa stepped away and glared Gareth dead-on. “Try.”

Gareth gave a salute. “Yessir.” Her face softened a tad as he realized his eyes had welled with tears. He cleared his throat. “Didn’t see Kaylee or Cynthia?”

She shook her head. “Didn’t bother looking. Ran straight here.”

Cynthia thought the world of him and her disappointment would singe. And Kaylee would see the man she fled. Neither were two he looked forward to confronting.

Though despite their absence, he had to explain himself then and there. “I promised I’d never hurt you and I’m a liar. Someone who berates and abuses their men when they see fit. You remember who else used to do that?”

“Oh, please,” Theresa said, much to his surprise. “You’re nothing like him. Don’t ever say that.”

“Too late. For a lot of things.”

“She’s right,” Albert added, meeting his gaze in earnest. “You’re not him.”

Martin pulled a flask from his large pants pocket and handed it to Gareth. “I think you need this more than I do.” He hopped up on the exam table beside him, swinging his legs off the end.

“You had any?”

“A sip.”

Gareth accepted it and took a mouthful. “Thanks.”

“You’re acting like me, you know.”

He resealed the flask. “You finally rubbed off on me.”

“Heh, you're in a bad way, so I won’t make the dirty joke I just thought of.”

Gareth tried to smile but it failed to reach his lips “Alex, take some.” He held out the flask.

Alex shook his head. “You know I don’t like that.”

“It helps dull pain. Please.”

“I took some aspirin, and the cold pack’s helping.”

“Does it still hurt?”

“Yeah.”

“Then please... please.” He leaned his head back, exhaling a shaky breath. “I can’t—knowing you’re in pain because of me... Please, I can’t do it.”

Alex nodded, stepped forward, and took the bottle. “Okay, okay.” He had a drink.
“This is just gonna make you feel worse, Gare,” Martin started, “but you don’t even know how lucky you are to still got family alive.”

“Yeah,” Albert agreed. “I miss my older brother and little sister. Damien and Tori. You remember them?”

Gareth nodded.

More people I couldn’t save.

Theresa stole the flask from Alex and helped herself. “I hadn’t said anything, not even to Alex, but I’ve been thinking about my sister like crazy ever since going back home.” She quirked a tiny smile at Martin. “She would’ve dated you. Oh my god, she would’ve dated you.”

Martin’s brow twitched. “Oh yeah? What’d she look like? Wait, she didn’t look like you, did she? Ugh.”

She rolled her eyes. “A little. More like my grandma on my dad’s side, though. Yeah, she moved from guy to guy and there was always a crisis with her. I used to get so annoyed by it.” Her features stiffened and her grip tightened on the flask. “Sometimes I start to think, ‘why haven’t I gotten a call from Jasmine lately about her boyfriend drama? Haven’t been woken up at three A.M. by a phone call in a while.’” Her eyes glistened.

“My little sister used to annoy the crap out of me,” Albert said. “Sneak in my room and move things around just to get me mad. She did that at Terminus too.” He pursed his lips. “Now my room stays exactly how I leave it.”

“I don’t remember the last time I heard you talk about your family,” Gareth said.

He shrugged. “Don’t see the point.”

“That’s why I try not to ruminate on Marion,” Martin said, staring off into space. “Some days go by where I don’t think about her at all. And sometimes, bitch won’t get outta my head. All or nothing.”

“How can you not think about her?” Alex asked. “I think about my family every day.”

“Just gotta train yourself. Focus on today, not yesterday. And it helps when it feels like it never really happened. Like life before all this was a dream and now you finally woke up.”

Yet they were still haunted by those dreams and the people in them regardless if they were no longer real. But wasn’t he lucky? Alex wasn’t a ghost, he was flesh and blood. He could touch him, hug him, and hit him. While those before him could only touch their families through bittersweet memories.

“Any of you ever wonder why it was you?” Gareth asked. “Why you’re the one left with a warm body?”

Albert nodded. “I think about it every day. And still don’t know why.”

“Was just luck for me,” Martin said. “Least with how it started. It’s what you do with that luck. Why did the biters manage to chomp on my entire group while I escaped? ‘Cause I was almost done cleaning one of the rifles and happened to be furthest away from where the horde came from. I managed to put it back together quick enough to take out ones that got closest to me. But what got me out alive was I didn’t try to save anyone. Heard my mom calling for help while she was
swarmed and my dad was on the ground. It was hopeless. No way me or her would’ve gotten out alive if I’d have gone after her or anyone.”

Again, Gareth envied the pragmatism Martin had even in the beginning. The Terminants had done the worst possible thing with their luck: offered it freely to others.

“What did your parents do after you killed Marion?” Gareth asked. “You never said.” Martin was silent, his jaw tightening. “Unless you don’t want to say…?”

He was sure he wasn’t going to reply when he finally answered, “They went totally catatonic. Didn’t cry, didn’t yell at me, nothing. Honestly, that was worse than their usual melodrama. ‘Course I was totally numb too.”

Numbness was how to both survive and be a good leader. But he wasn’t a leader anymore. What was he now?

Chapter End Notes

Pretty much a character chapter. But I felt things needed to take a pause while Gareth went through all this.
Theresa led her crew inside a rural country store in southern Virginia. Runs had become more frequent as summer ended and they needed more supplies to last the winter. She often went on runs and scouting missions in the three months she had been in charge. People wanted her in the field and she was pleased to oblige, not wanting to be a leader who sat idle while others did her bidding.

The shop bell chimed as they opened the door and Theresa raised her hand. “Careful,” she said. “That bell might still be there to alert people of company. Guns up.”

It was still a mystery how Gareth did it. Every decision could have unforeseen consequences and could result in a death no matter how foolproof it seemed.

“Eh, looks like it’s been untouched a while,” David said, the lone Savior in their group of nine.

“Looks can be deceiving,” Martin said, checking out the disordered aisle in front.

“Tom, Margaret, Peter, that way,” Theresa ordered, pointing to the store aisles on the left. “David, Samantha, Bryce, there.” She gestured to the right side. They obliged and moved in tow. Theresa had to admit she liked seeing people move when she commanded.

Martin spun a cheap jewelry display by the window and took a packaged green heart necklace. “Hey, think my girl will like this?”

“She like gifts?”

“You could say that.” He smirked. “Every time I get her something special, she lets me—“

“No, nobody wants to know what she lets you do. Ever. At all.”

“Alright.” He stuck it in his pocket. “But when we get back, I’m gonna g—”

“Nope.”

“Fine, be a prude.”

Theresa noticed something large and black on top of a freezer display against the wall. She stood on her toes for a better look, but the object was obscured in darkness. “Martin, can you tell what’s up there?”

“Looks like something under a black tarp. I’ll give you a boost and you check it out.”

“Just hop up on the counter there.”

“Aw, come on, let me toss you up there. Team Maresa.”

“Since you called us that again, definitely not.”

Martin heaved a sigh and climbed on the cashier’s counter. “Yeah, it’s something under a black tarp. Hooray.” He hopped down.
David wandered up holding his arms folded and revolver across his chest. While the sullen man had said nothing contemptuous about her or their mission, his affect made it clear he didn’t like having to take orders from her. Whether it be because she was female, her Terminus history, a personal distaste, or all of the above, she didn’t know. But thus far he had obeyed so she wasn’t about to toss him in the dirt.

“David, will you watch by the window?” Theresa asked. “I’m still not sure no one’s held up here and they won’t be back.”

He uncrossed his arms. “The window? Seriously? I’ve been stuck doing bullshit this whole trip.”

“Non-negotiable.”

“No,” he said, barreling a little too close into her personal space. Her muscles tensed. “I’m sick of this shit. Having to carry dead weight on this run behind you. I am done taking orders from some uppity little bitch.”

Theresa’s temper flared as Martin acted like a bolt of lightning, gripping David by his neck and pushing him against the wall beside the entrance. David’s gun clattered to the floor. “Hey, man,” Martin said, tightening his hand around David’s throat.

“Martin,” Theresa started, “I don’t need you to—” She laughed in surprise when Martin lifted him an inch off the ground. The rest of the team crept over and watched in silence.

Martin’s arm quaked under the strain as David glowered and tried to pull free. “You want me to tell Negan you’re disobeying orders and insulting his appointee, huh? ‘Cause that’s exactly what I’ll do. Or maybe, just maybe I should keep squeezing until I hear a pop.” David sputtered out a vowel.

“What’s that? You say you gonna be a good boy?”

“Y—y…”

“Need a whole word.”

“Y—yes.”

“Good. Because believe me, talk to your run leader like that again and next time I won’t give you a choice and I will keep squeezing because no one’s gonna miss your worthless ass. You think Negan’s gonna get bent that I capped some uppity redneck piece of shit who’s already scraping the bottom of the barrel? Nah, I don’t think so.” He dropped him and David stumbled against the wall, gasping for breath and clutching his neck.

“Go to the window and watch,” Theresa commanded. “Without your weapon.” When he stayed still and glared at her, she added, “Now!” David obliged and trudged to the window. “Everyone go on doing what you were doing,” she told her crew, crouching and taking the revolver with her free hand.

Martin shook his head and flexed his fingers. “Little guy’s heavier than he looks.”

She half-smiled. “Thank you, really, but next time—”

“I know, I know. It’s your authority and you could’ve handled that with a gun to his balls. But I’ve been just waiting for an opportunity to bruise that guy.”

“I don’t blame you, but next time I can handle it.” She winked.
“Oh, god, I’m so sorry,” Theresa said, sharing a tight hug with Alex in one of Sipsey’s ample corridors. “I didn’t know you were expecting us back this morning.”

“Scared the crap outta me,” Alex said, releasing her and placing a kiss on her lips. “Well, I imagine you’re pretty ready for dinner. Pasta primavera again. Unless you wanna shower first?”

She wrapped her arms around his waist. “We can shower later.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh? We?”

“Oh, yeah. Two nights away, sleeping alone, all this grime to wash away... I have plans for you.” Her hand massaged him in a choice place.

“That’s—that’s, yeah. Okay, you oughta stop doing that ‘cause I see my brother and Cynthia down the hall.” She pursed her lips and turned around. “Stay standing in front of me.”

She suppressed a giggle as Cynthia ran up to them and Gareth kept a modest pace.

“You’re okay!” Cynthia beamed, throwing her arms around Theresa and squeezing too hard.

“Okay…” Theresa breathed out. “You need to let go, amazon.”

“Shush, you.” She let go as Gareth joined them.

“Good to see you back in one piece,” Gareth said.

“You like being back in charge for a few days?” Theresa asked.

“Yeah, it felt good. Sure Negan won’t like it though.”

“Well,” she began, patting her backside, “Neegsy can pucker up and find a spot.” The others laughed.

“Since he’s coming tomorrow, he’ll want to know who you had oversee things in your absence. Just have to hope he’ll be in a good mood.”

“Oh, great,” Alex said, rubbing his eyes. “I forgot the jackass was coming.”

Gareth raised a finger. “Also in the news, Brandon and Laura were out hunting for deer this morning and came across some signs saying ‘Wilson’s house’ with an arrow.”

“‘Wilson’s Home?’” Theresa questioned. “How far out?”

“About ten miles north-west.”

“They follow it?”

“No, there were just two of them, so they figured they’d need backup before inspecting it.”

“Hm. I’ll let that wait until after Negan leaves. Last thing I want is him tagging along.”

“I ain’t having you until you wash off that ‘skeeter repellent and sunscreen,” Alex said to Theresa in their steamy private shower.
“That’s rude,” Theresa quipped as she used a shower poof to spread suds across her body.  

He snaked around and placed his hands on her shoulders. His lips peppered her neck with kisses. “Missed a spot, you still taste like sunscreen right here.” She moved the poof up and gave him a face full of suds. “Now that’s rude.” He stood back and rinsed his face in the water stream while Theresa grinned. “Hey, what happened here?” He ran his finger across a cut on her hip.

“Rusty nail in a feed store.”

“You’re getting as clumsy as me. Mm, you know, I’d have loved to have seen Martin choke that asshole who shit-talked you, but even more I’d love to have seen you boss the dick around. Sounds hot as hell.”

“I’ll reenact it for you if you want.”

“Can you do it while wearing that black lingerie piece with the garter belt?”

“Absolutely.” She turned around and crossed her arms around his neck. “Hey, you been wearing your contacts?”

“Yeah, hate putting ‘em in, but I do.”

“Good, because if you start wearing glasses, I’ll divorce you.”

“Been looking for a way to get rid of you.” They shared soft laughter and he ran his hand through her wet tresses, stopping below her collarbone. “I love how long your hair’s getting.”

“Cynthia makes me jealous. Plus with all this conditioner…” She pointed at the bottle on the shower rack.

She hummed and laid her head on his shoulder, listening to the soothing sound of running water and shivering when his hands slid across her slick skin. It was their own slice of paradise far away from bullet shells, walker snarls, and Lucille’s barbed wire. Her thoughts went to the locket he gifted that sat in a drawer beside their bed. The one she found herself staring at when she searched for her contraceptive.

Theresa lifted her head and looked into Alex’s eyes, imagining a child with his eyes and her nose. His wavy hair and her freckles. His artistic talent and her temper.

Before she could consider her words, she spoke, “What if we… if we stopped not trying?”

“Not trying what?”

“I didn’t put my diaphragm in before I got in here.”

His eyes widened. “Oh.”

“I saw the locket earlier and I got to thinking about putting a picture in it. Do you… do you want to put a picture in it?”

He grazed her lower lip with his thumb. “Yeah. Yeah, I really do.”

* * *

“This whole me coming once a month thing makes me feel like your second period or some shit,” Negan greeted as he and a gaggle of Saviors met Theresa outside the bunker entrance.
“I think I prefer the first one,” Theresa replied.

Negan cackled and smacked his hands together. “There’s that salt! Been looking forward to it the whole trip here. So, so, so, what’s been going the fuck on, my lady?”

Theresa started to reply when Dwight revealed himself as part of the group, carrying a bag over his shoulder and nasty burn on his face. He had never visited Sipsey before, but with the mark of shame, she presumed Negan was making an example of him.

“Hello? Peach? I asked you a question?”

She snapped back to attention. “Huh? Oh, yeah. Well, I just got back from a supply excursion down south. Map revealed a little road that we hadn’t ever hit before.”

“You went yourself? Good for you. Nothing like a leader who gets out there in the field with their guys.”

“How’s Gina?”

“No, not ready to come here yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because I fucking said so. And she’s fine. Untwist your thong.”

“What about Bud? You find who killed him yet?”

Negan’s face tensed. “Work in progress. Now what’s been going the fuck on here?”

She filled him in on business as they moved inside the bunker, the whole time fighting the urge to stare at Dwight’s melted skin and meet his dead gaze. They and another three male Saviors eventually reached the busy operations room. Six people worked at tables full of an array of papers while one wrote on the dry erase board. The seven whipped around and stood at attention.

“Hello,” Brandon said. “Theresa, Negan—er, uh—sir. Good to see you. Will you be joining us on our away mission?”

Negan squinted. “Away mission?”

No!

She thought Gareth would have told him to stay quiet.

Brandon scratched his head full of messy brown hair. “Oh, I thought you knew. Someone put up signs for a farm and we were sending a team to check it out.”

Negan faced Theresa. “And you failed to mention this because…?”

“I didn’t think it was pertinent,” she replied.

He sighed. “And you’d gotten an A-plus so far. I don’t appreciate lying by omission.”

“Look, it’s… I just like to man my teams myself and—”

“And don’t want me tagging along and cramping your fucking style. Well, too goddamned bad, peach. This sounds like a great idea to remind you all who’s got the chain around your necks.
“Anything else you want to share?”

She gulped. “I left Gareth in charge while I was away the past few days.”

“Hm. How often you done that?”

“Just twice, including this time. Other times I gave it to Tamara. Like keeping the matriarchal tradition here, you know.”

“Alright. Not like I never expected you to not throw the guy a bone every now and then. But no letting him back seat drive, remember?”

“Yes.”

Susan—Martin’s girl—slid forward. “Sir, Theresa, if I may, can I go on this mission? I haven’t been out anywhere in over a month because of my shoulder and I’d love to get out.”

“Sure, whatever,” Negan said. “I don’t give a singular fucking fuck.”

Susan smiled and brushed her light brown hair back. The girl wore the heart necklace Martin gifted along with a baseball cap of his worn sideways. Theresa thought it was cute. Martin vehemently denied she was his girlfriend, but the woman had sunk her claws into him and it was hilarious.

Though god help the woman who was smitten by Martin.

Theresa put on a sunny expression. “I’ll put together a party and we can head out in a few—”

“Tomorrow,” Negan interrupted. “My guys and a few of yours to go ten miles? That doesn’t take days of goddamned planning, does it?”

She suppressed a growl. “No.”

“Oh, I’m fucking excited now.” He rubbed his hands together. “Peachy-peach pie, pick three assholes along with what’s-her-name there and we’ll soar.”

* * *

Theresa sat in a truck and chugged her coffee in hopes a caffeine rush would negate the dread in her gut. She had chosen Alex, Gareth, and Brandon for their voyage. Alex because he hated the thought of Negan having access to her far away from him being there. Gareth because he calmed her which she needed with Negan around. And Brandon because he had seen the signs.

Gareth climbed in the back beside Theresa and Alex, a smirk plastered on his face. “Talked to Dwight…”

“And?” Alex asked. “What happened?”

“He took Sherry and Tina and ran.”

“Dumbass,” Theresa said. “We offered him a much better plan and he shot us down.”

“Tina’s also dead,” Gareth added. “Got bit while out there on the run. So yeah, he should’ve taken our offer. Sherry should’ve taken our offer—who’s back with Negan, by the way.”

Alex grimaced. “Seriously?”
“It was either that or go back down to living on a flimsy points-system.”

“He actually told you that?”

“I pried it out. Guilt tripped him while running my fingers over my flawless, unburned face.”

Theresa smiled and rested her head against the seat. “You know what’s funny? Just absolutely ridiculous? I pity the guy. I don’t like him, but I pity him.”

“Yeah, after we talked like we did that day,” Alex began, “I can’t help but feel sorry for him either.”

Gareth placed his hands behind his head. “That’s actually worse. Pity is much more insulting that scorn. Especially by one’s enemy.”

The group loaded up and started out toward the site. Voluminous hills and fall foliage dominated the landscape as they neared the ten-mile mark. When they turned onto a gravel road surrounded by thick forest, Brandon told them to stop and they climbed out.

“There you go,” Brandon said, approaching the sign tacked to a tree. “’Wilson’s house.’ Wasn’t here two weeks ago.” A narrow trail into the woods lay beyond.

“Has trap written all over it,” Gareth said.

We should know.

Negan held Lucille over his shoulder and passed the three male Saviors. He stepped in front Gareth and earned a scowl from the younger man. “Hm, what you think? Follow it balls-out or put on our fucking ballerina shoes and tip-toe?” He looked to Theresa.

The spotlight made her mind go blank. She exchanged a brief glance with Gareth who appeared to mouth the words, “Tiptoe.”

“Let’s slip on our ballerina shoes,” Theresa answered.


They strode down the path and found no signs of recent foot traffic apart from deer hoof prints.

“Can we stop?” Susan asked after a minute. “My eyeballs are floatin’.”

Negan gestured off-trail. “Sure, shoot that jet stream. I need my H2O anyway.” He took a long drink from his canteen as Susan trekked off-trail.

“Shouldn’t someone go with her?” Dwight asked.

“Contrary to popular belief,” Theresa began, tilting her head, “it’s not that hard for chicks to piss in the woods. And I know where she is.” She nodded toward the direction she went.

Negan eyed Gareth up and down. “You put on weight, Adonis?”

“A little bit,” Gareth replied, lips barely moving.

“How’d you do that? We took half your shit.”
“That’s the question, isn’t it?”

“You wearing a necklace under your shirt? The fuck happened to you?”

“Oh, hurry up, Susan,” Theresa muttered.

“It’s Cynthia, isn’t it?” Negan continued. “She have you eating better and wearing a sweet fucking promise ring around your neck?”

Gareth heaved a breath and pulled the chain out, revealing a black gem. “An opal was my mother’s birthstone. She absolutely adored them and would wear them any chance she got. She used to have an opal necklace a lot like this that she wasn’t able to grab before we evacuated our house after the outbreak.”

His face dropped. “Oh.”

Theresa waited for an additional smart remark from Negan, but none came.

The other Savior man discussed the weather with his leader and Theresa’s mind wandered to the biology book she read in Sipsey’s library. Conception on average took a few hours to a few days and actual pregnancy a week or more. Her hand grazed her lower stomach and she wondered if it had already happened. A bit of fear hit her system at the thought until she glanced at Alex beside her, instantly soothing her worry and replacing it with delight.

After several minutes, Negan asked, “The fuck is she?”

Theresa inched over to the trail’s edge. “Susan?” The others joined in calling and received no response.

“Oh-uh, spaghetti-o,” Negan said.

She had stopped monitoring Susan’s direction and allowed her attention to drift. Her blood ran cold as she started into the woods while the others followed.

“I thought you were able to see her?” the Savior male asked.

Theresa pressed her lips together and clutched her pistol. “I was.”

“Man, this is a trap if I ever saw one,” Alex said, pursing his lips.

“Should get outta here,” Dwight suggested, blinking a watering eye on his burned side. “Step back and get an idea together.”

“Are you kidding?” Theresa shot back. “She’s one of mine, we’re not leaving her.”

“We’re walking right into their trap. Can’t just walk in blind.”

“No one’s walking in blind.”

“Whatever you say.”

Negan wagged a finger at the two. “Dwight, peach, be nice. Now tell me, when you humanitarians hunted, how’d you lure and trap?”

“We’d start by taking one,” Gareth answered. “It’d make the others paranoid and scared which made them made them stupid. Then they’d follow our trail half-cocked.”
“And how would one find a way around that shit?”

“Lure us out instead.”

A faint sound of footsteps alerted them and they raised their weapons. Eventually, Susan’s red cap showed through an assortment of brush.

“What happened?” Theresa called. Susan didn’t reply. As the other woman lumbered forward, she revealed a bloody wound on her neck and hissed.

“She’s—she's turned,” Alex said.

_I did this..._

Brandon sheathed his firearm and pulled out his knife. “She didn't wander off and get bit. She’s not stupid. Someone did this!”

“How? We didn’t even hear anything,” Gareth said.

“I wasn’t watching her,” Theresa mewed.

“No, you weren’t,” Brandon spat, launching forward and stabbing Susan’s walker in the head.

Alex stepped to his wife’s side. “Hey, back off, man.”

“No, he’s right,” Theresa said, then pounded the oak tree beside her. “Damnit, damnit, _damnit_!”

Gareth wouldn’t have made that mistake if he were in charge.

“Doesn’t feel too good, huh?” Negan asked, eyeing Susan’s limp body. “Making the mistake that leads one of your guys to their death.”

Alex placed a hand on her shoulder. “Tess, hey. Cool down.”

She heaved through breaths and stilled, her knuckles stinging and beading with blood.

“Not my fucking job to watch your people,” Negan said. “I look after my guys, and you look after yours. I’m not responsible for your mistakes. Hell, I was curious. Wondered how hinky of a situation we were in and wondered if I could avert your attention while she was out there. Now you know never to do that.”

Theresa started shaking. “We’re one of you, and part of the deal is protection for Sipsey!”

“For Sipsey itself while they’re in city limits. Nothing about while out _here_. You, Gareth, Alex, the rest of the humanitarians, yes. I’ll be looking out for you. You Sipsey fuckers? Out here, not my problem.”

“You could have told us you weren’t gonna look out for us!” Brandon cried.

Negan stared the man down and held the tip of Lucille before his face. “Watch your _tone_. And I thought it was implied.”

Alex scoffed. “Yeah? How do we know you didn’t set up this whole thing? You got Saviors out there leaving signs to give us a training course. Time’s right.”

“Oh, please. I saw an opportunity when we started tiptoeing and I took it. Only people you have to
Theresa slogged to Susan’s body and knelt as the others argued. “Martin really liked her.”

No Sipsey residents had been lost during her time in charge, and she realized she had grown to care for them. They counted on her for safety and she let them down. How could she be a mother if she was unable to keep an eye on one grown woman taking a bathroom break?

No wonder it was so hard for Gareth to accept failure. It hurt.

Chapter End Notes

Another reminder that the timeline is NOT perfectly in sync with the show. One reason other than "because I say so and I suck at syncing" is Beth and Tyreese are alive, thus butterfly effect ensues.

Also, since April Billingsley's role as Theresa was two lines and under an awful wig, you should really appreciate her in her true majesty in these short clips:

https://vimeo.com/180353103
https://vimeo.com/85291047
Alex stood by Theresa while the others loaded Susan's tarp-wrapped body in the truck bed. He hardly knew the girl, but he was shaken by her loss.

"I never realized," Theresa said, arms crossed and leaning against the adjacent truck.

"Realized what?" Alex asked, lolling his head to the side.

She watched Gareth speaking to Brandon. "How much of a burden this is. How like this—" She snapped her fingers. "—it can all be over. How awful it is when you make the wrong call. Alex, it happens so fast." Her hand grazed her lower stomach.

His gaze lingered on her hand for a moment. "Hey, one mistake doesn't mean you're gonna be a bad mother. And it ain't all on you, I wasn't watching her either."

"Kind of weren't supposed to."

"I think she'd have been okay with me catching a glimpse of her drawers down if it meant she was alive." He chewed on the mouth ulcer he'd made during their voyage. "Tess, I'm terrified. All this does is remind me how brutal it can get. How fragile it all is and..."

She nodded. "I know."

"And Negan? I don't want our kid to grow up in his kingdom."

"Do you still want it?"

"What? Oh god, of course. Of course I do. It's just it's gotten a lot scarier now. Was easier when we were safe underground and in a nice shower."

"Yeah."

He watched her fingers still hover over her stomach. "It's too late anyway. I already love 'em."

A trace of a smile touched her lips. "You know it's not possible for he or she to exist yet, right?"

"Don't have to exist yet for me to love 'em. And I do, don't know how, but I love our 'em so much already."

Her face illuminated and she brushed her thumb across his jaw. "I thought I was crazy for loving something that didn't exist yet."

"Nope. Not crazy at all. I loved 'em even at Terminus. After that dream I had where you were pregnant, I started and couldn't stop. And when we said it was never gonna happen, that it was too cruel, it was too late, I loved our kid then too."
She cupped his face in her hand, making him tingle and forget where he was until she looked over his shoulder and said, "Gareth."

Alex cleared his throat and turned. "Hey, man."

"I was talking with Brandon," Gareth started as he met them, "and he said he'll stop griping at you as long as we find Susan's killer."

"Good," Theresa said, folding her arms and scraping the pavement with her boot. "Hey um, I owe you an apology."

His brow furrowed. "For what?"

"I never knew how hard this was and never thought to sympathize with what it might be like for you. I never understood how hard it was to fail like this. To lose someone because you made a mistake."

He was silent a moment, eyeing Negan cackling to Dwight. "Do you remember Matt?"

"Yeah, he was out putting up signs with Cora and Greg and got bit."

"And when they didn't come back within a day, I went with you, Mike, and Chuck to find them. When we found Cora and Greg, you wanted to leave. Matt was a newcomer, you didn't care if he lived or died, he was dead weight to you. But I ordered us to keep looking no matter how much you bitched and moaned. And when I found him bitten and turned, I felt just like you're feeling. You never saw it on me, but it was there. He wasn't one of the original us, but his life was still in my hands and he slipped through my fingers. I kept thinking if I'd just sent more on the mission, there'd have been more to keep everyone alive. I felt like I might as well have pushed him into a walker myself."

"I'm sorry. Sorry that I bitched and moaned about it."

"Apology accepted. So what do you do now?"

She straightened herself. "Persevere. Face the threat head-on. Stop feeling sorry for myself."

The words struck Alex too. Licking the wounds of loss, and fear for their future child would do nothing to ensure their safety. Tracking Susan's killer and eliminating the threat would.

Theresa took a deep breath and set her sights on Negan. Her features grew fierce and she cocked a brow. "Game face."

"Go get 'em," Alex said, holding back the 'mama bear' he wanted to tack on. Though he was eager to tell Gareth their news, he thought it best to save it for their return to Sipsey and tell him alongside Theresa.

She squared her shoulders and marched over to Negan and his men, saying something to them he couldn't hear.

"So how you doing?" Gareth asked.

Alex buttoned up his overshirt due to the chilling air. "Is it shitty that I'm glad I don't have to be the one making these decisions?"

"Not at all. You know, sometimes, I—"
"Me and her are thinking about having a baby." The words flowed without his intention. "And what I mean by 'thinking about' is 'already trying.'" He squeezed his eyes shut. "Damnit..."

Gareth gaped. "You... really?"

"Man, she probably doesn't wanna tell anyone, I don't why I said that. Just forget it."

"Well, if she didn't say not to tell..." An odd mixture of surprise and perplexity hung on his face. "Alex, that's incredible." Alex muttered an affirmative and started circling the truck. Gareth grabbed his hand and pulled him back. "Wait, talk to me. Why are you running off?"

"'Cause I..." He lowered his voice. "'Cause I'm scared. And what you said was right, game face and I'm gonna do that, but..." He watched Theresa talking to Negan and his men. "That guy at the helm?"

"Want to know what I think?"

"Please."

"You have to take the victories as they come. And right now, we're somewhere where having a family is possible. At Terminus, it wasn't fair. Children couldn't choose to join us, but Sipsey?"

"Negan."

He edged closer. "And in a year's time, who knows what'll happen. If Dwight had the sack to run, I think others will too."

Alex was quiet, waiting for him to add the cons. "You're being way too optimistic. Don't be glass half-full. I don't wanna be coddled. I come to you for the god's honest truth. Not back pat and a gold sticker."

He chuckled. "True. Everything could crumble to pieces next week. Hell, we could all be dead within the hour. But the god's honest truth is I don't think we will. Life's way, way too short to not do things based on the probability everything will implode and explode."

"That why Cynthia's worn a groove in your mattress?"

"Something like that."

Alex threw a glare at Negan. "Yeah, but what if he punishes her? Demotes her for being pregnant? Says she can't do her job 'cause she had a kid or somethin'."

"Nah, he likes her too much to not give her maternity leave."

"Way too much." He again gnawed on his the ulcer.

"Ah, there's that face again. The 'Negan's into my wife and I'm twitchy about it' face."

"What? I don't have a face for that."

Gareth rolled his eyes. "If I had a mirror on me, I'd prove you wrong."

Alex laughed and shook his head. Talking to Gareth like his actual brother was another thing impossible at Terminus. Michael and Mary wanted their sons to be brothers as well as siblings. They also wanted grandchildren desperately and always prodded the two before the turn with questions of kids.
Mary would be ecstatic to hear the news. Alex had many times, including at Terminus, pictured her going through pregnancy books with Theresa, discussing odd cravings, and warning her about having a miniature Alex to deal with. Michael would be building a crib from scratch and handing down the same toys from when Alex and Gareth were toddlers.

It broke his heart that his future child would never know their grandparents. But they would know their parents and uncle, which was more than most children could ask for in the new world.

* * *

Something familiar was in their midst. The trails, the signs, and the missing person. Though the world 'cannibal' didn't fit, shooting past the kind of darkness they once touched. Eventually, the woods thinned and showed a clearing ahead. A nearby tree held a sign that read the familiar words, 'Wilson's House.'

Theresa's face turned murderous and her throat clenched, but she said in an even tone, "Looks like we're here."

Alex exhaled a relieved breath that she remained cool.

"I think there's a house over there," Brandon said, squinting through the trees. "Wasn't anywhere on the map that showed a road to get there."

"Might've been too rural," Alex commented.

"We need to skirt the whole perimeter of this place, look for its weaknesses," Negan said.

"That's a good idea!" called a bell-like female voice from someplace unknown

Adrenaline rushed through Alex's system and he braced himself for action.

"Oh, yeah?" Negan called back, inching forward. "Why's that?"

"Because you never know what we're trying to pull here," the voice replied. "Sort of suspicious with our signs, you know?" Her tone was too light for comfort.

"What do you want?" Theresa asked.

"The question is what you want," the female replied, and several pairs of footsteps revealed three previously hidden armed women in camo gear. The one in the center looked in her mid-thirties with short blonde hair and the two beside her were of a similar age but shorter and black-haired.

"Whoa," Negan said, letting Lucille fall to his side. "Did we stumble onto an island of beautiful sirens?"

*How many chicks do you need, asshole?*

The blonde rolled her eyes. "Oh great, a charmer."

Theresa tilted her head. "There's three of you and eight of us meaning we can drop you dead right here. And since someone from our group was just killed and we didn't see who did it, we're a little suspicious of you right now."

"It wasn't our doing, we swear. We've had some unfortunate people skulk around here and do awful things lately." Her face fell. "To some of ours too. We're sorry about your loss."
"Not buying it."

"Whether you believe me or not, it's the truth. Why do you think we're out here? We're waiting to see who shows up. Now, you don't look like the type who's in search of refuge. Actually don't look like you're bad off. Ones we've come across recently were pretty thin and dirty."

"Why you leaving signs?" Negan asked. "Just be luring these evil nasty people to you. Seems pretty fucking stupid."

"We've lost many of ours to an illness and there's not enough people for work. My mother can't do it all."

"Wait, are you all chicks? Oh, please fucking tell me you're a house full of hot at shit Playboy bunnies who lure men here, determine which ones are most virile and keep them for sexual gratification and reproduction. I've been waiting to find a place like that for the whole fucking apocalypse."

"Eh... heh, sorry to disappoint, but no. We're people just like you, trying to stay alive. No reason to hurt each other."

Liar.

"No offense," Gareth began, smacking his lips, "but your story's pretty thin."

"Yeah, what gorgeous there said," Negan added.

The woman to the blonde's left scowled. "We're out here patrolling. Separating the good from the bad. We're not stupid."

"Eh, debatable. Now, my being a friendly fucker and you being some hot friendly fuckers aside, I'm not fucking around here. If you are killing folks, I'm going to have a problem with that. The chickie that got popped wasn't one of mine so I don't give a shit. The lovely Theresa, however, gives many a shit because she was one of hers. Thing fucking is though, is if you're out there killing people, that means you could've killed one of my men. Not acceptable."

Theresa smirked. "I won't bat an eye. I'll leave a bullet in your pretty little faces. Just below the brain so you can turn like Susan. That was her name, by the way."

He mock shivered. "Trust me, you don't want to fuck with this one. She'll eat you for dinner."

The opposing leader remained unphased. "I get it. You're trying to find retribution for your friend, and I hope you do. We're in the same boat here. So what about names? I'm Eleanor."

"Oh, little old me? Call me Negan."

Eleanor and the other women's faces went white. "Y—you're Negan?"

"See my reputation precedes me." He grinned.

"We've heard about you, yeah," said the woman from the right.

"I'm sure only good things."

Eleanor's mouth formed a thin line. "Yeah, we heard you steal people's goods and leave them with either a bullet in their legs or dead."
"Ah, that was Bud, may he rest in pieces. Poor fucker. But we're not all so bad, don't be like that. I haven't killed you yet, have I?"

"Hang on a minute, you said Theresa has her own people?"

"Yep," Theresa confirmed. "I have my own house, he has his. He oversees my original group but I have my own people. Fun, right?"

Negan's grin turned affectionate. "Yeah, she's still my girl though."

Alex shook his head, a tremor bubbling in his throat. "No, no, no, no. She's not his girl. She's my wife."

One of the Savior men laughed under his breath and Theresa pressed her eyes shut. He knew she hated displays of territoriality, and he had learned to be calm around Negan's comments most of the time, but saying she was 'his girl?' Well, then she could be annoyed. No way was he letting that slide.

Eleanor furrowed her brow. "Right. Well, there's thirteen of us in all and we can—"

"Oh, honey," Negan interrupted, lifting Lucille, "there's about a hundred of my people and forty of Theresa—who is not my girl and is Alex's wife—'s people. So, you want to try and see what happens if you fuck with us? Huh? Not going to end well. Oh, Dwight?"

"Yeah?" Dwight returned.

"When those lovely ladies unload their weapons, you take the ammo."

Eleanor shook her head. "We are not—"

"Hey! I'm being nice as fuck. Keep your guns, give us the ammo. Then let us see your house you so proudly advertise."

* * *

Alex had to admit he loved the kind of country farm home that was Wilson's house. Though the warm, cozy, and inviting atmosphere was too welcoming. Unsettlingly so.

The opposing group's leader, a grey-haired man dressed in plaid named Thomas Wilson, poured the eight each a splash of bourbon in clear glasses. They, along with Eleanor and one of the women who met them on the trail, Sandy, joined them on the sofas and chairs in the homey living room.

"See? I'm not the big bad evil everyone says I am," Negan said, eyeing his bourbon. "Lot of guys would torch you just for this good shit."

"They've tried," Thomas said in his booming voice, leaning against the ticking grandfather clock. "Nice to see we can find some common ground." The man's initial hostility faltered the second Negan's name was uttered.

Theresa wrapped her hands around the glass but didn't drink. Neither she nor Alex believed the people were innocent of Susan's murder, but with no proof, their hands were tied.

Alex realized he hadn't stopped to think what he wanted in answer to Susan's death. His throat went dry when he questioned if Susan had been his daughter. No doubt he would seek blood. He had fixated so much on the good things about having a child he forgot the bad. For one, what would
they tell him or her about their past? How could they explain to their child what they did at Terminus? Parents were supposed to be heroes in their child's eyes, not the monsters in their bedtime storybooks.

Alex shot back the bourbon he planned on not having, and forced his thoughts outwards. "How you keep the walkers out?"

"You mean eaters?" Eleanor asked. "Yeah, the assholes that ended the world."

"Good location, fence holds, and we keep it airtight. Hm, never heard them called 'walkers.'"

"It's an Atlanta-area thing, I think."

"Oh," Sandy chimed in, her face brightening. "Are you from Atlanta?"

"Around there."

"I'd always wanted to go to Georgia."

"Ew, why?" Negan said, plunking his feet on the coffee table and earning a dirty look from Thomas. "Heard their idea of Southern comfort food is eating people now. How fucked up is that?"

Alex threw down the dregs from his cup.

"Terrible what people can do," Sandy said, brushing a strand of loose hair from her face. "But my boyfriend before the change was from up in the mountains and wilderness in northern Georgia. Said it was some of the most beautiful land you'd ever seen."

Alex reflected on hiking trips with his family on said land—something he'd never be able to do with his own child. "Yeah, it was beautiful."

He had recently filled his sketchbook with depictions of places in Georgia he missed. Such as Stone Mountain, the creek outside his childhood home, and the lodge his family stayed at during their hiking trips. While Theresa wished to avoid reminders of her home, Alex enjoyed bringing his back to life. Not to pine over the past, but to resurrect beauty that was once real. Pictures he could one day show to his child to remind them that fear and walkers weren't all there ever was nor ever will be,

Theresa broke him from his thoughts with a loud slurp of her bourbon. "Ugh, I much prefer Jack."

She grimaced and set the glass on the table.

"Alex," Thomas started, effectively ignoring Theresa's comment, "you should come see my 'stash.'" He winked.

Did he mean what he thought he meant?

"What? What stash?"

"Those socks just a fashion statement?"

He was confused as he glanced down, noticing his pants leg had ridden up and showed his black socks with marijuana leaves. "Oh, those. Uh no, not just a fashion statement."
"Dwight mixed some green into his cigs for the pain from his unfortunate injury," Negan said. "Should've asked me to bring you some, cutie-pie."

God help him he did want it.

"Yeah okay, Thomas," Alex said, standing up as Theresa's eyes turned to saucers. "It's alright. You can talk logistics with Negan. You still got stuff to sort out."

She rose to her feet. "No, I like getting high too."

"Me three," Gareth announced as he joined them.

" Fucking fuck, just go," Negan said, raising his hands. "It's just weed. Shit."

The three hunters followed Thomas into a cramped, windowless room lit only by candles. A wealth of bottles occupied a wall of cubbies all with random numbers scribbled on the caps. Alex attempted to count the bottles. "That is a lot of..."

"How'd you end up with so much?" Gareth asked, lips parted.

"And why?" Theresa added.

Thomas shrugged, pulling out a bottle from the top. "Why not? And why not have a sip of wine to top off that bourbon?" He flashed a tiny sneer at Theresa. "Or wash the taste of it from your mouth."

"Why you want us to drink so bad?" Alex asked.

"When you have so much you need to put it to use. Relax, we're not trying to get you drunk. This one's alcohol content is below ten percent. You'll be lightly buzzed."

"Didn't we come in here for your stash?" Gareth questioned.

"Alright, fair enough," Thomas said with a sigh. He set the bottle on a desk and dug through one of its drawers before finding a green-packed Ziploc bag. "Here's the ganja. Grow it in our gardens ourselves."

Too good to be true. Gotta be oregano.

Gareth quirked a brow and poked the bag. "Forgive me, but I don't see why a small establishment like yourself would waste water and effort on pot plants."

Something clicked in Alex's head. "You drug dealers or somethin'? That why you brought us in here? That why you got folks killed lately? Deal gone bad?"

Thomas was silent, a still smile on his mouth. "A detective, huh?"

"Answer the question," Theresa demanded.

"Well, we don't advertise it. We'd have people kicking down doors and taking what we got. Instead, we decided to lay a few breadcrumbs and see who wants to make a deal."

Her jaw clenched. "And Susan?"

"A few guys weren't too happy we denied them merchandise on account of their lack of payment."
Probably thought the girl was one of us or didn't want anyone else getting any of our supply.
Gareth pursed his lips and hummed. "That just doesn't add up, Tom. Why just take her out?"

"Look, there was only two of them and we weren't able to catch them. And I prefer Thomas."
Theresa crossed her arms. "Well, Tommy, I'm not interested in whatever it is you want in return for that weed. Sorry, Alex."

Alex wanted to pout like a kid denied candy, but scoffed and said, "No problem. Not that desperate either."

Thomas raised a finger. "Oh, oh, oh, but you see, now you probably want to find those two guys who killed your girl. We want that too. Hell, you do that and we can give you a share. Painkillers aren't just for fun, and marijuana can be medicinal. You're already going to dish out some just desserts, why not do it and get something in return? I know Negan and his won't, but since you're your own agency..."

"We're not guns for hire," Theresa said. "If you wanted them dead so bad, you would've done it yourself. Two guys?" She breathed out a laugh. "You can't catch two drug-desperate guys? Bullshit. What do you want us for? What is it you really want us to do?"

"Oh, that's a shame you're so distrustful of us. A damn shame."

"We'll find them ourselves, and if it turns out you killed Susan, you're dead too."

* * *

"You are kidding me, right?" Theresa asked as hers and Negan's group started down the woodland path back to their vehicles. "All this way for nothing?"

"Listen, this is a tiny family of drug peddlers, not worth any more than a few crackers." He patted Dwight's backpack full of a few choice goodies, mainly candy bars and fruit.

Alex was relieved to be leaving for Sipsey to regroup for an offensive mission, but the slight chance of Theresa becoming pregnant their first try made him want to spin her in bubble wrap and stick her in the vault.

She stopped in her tracks. "Why, why does Lucille not get to eat here, but it was totally necessary at Sipsey? Why?"

Negan and the rest of the group halted. "Look, this is a tiny place, a few dealer assholes. All I had to do was wave my dick around and they gladly sucked it. Nothing here worth getting Lucille wet over or sending out more of my men."

"That's not it. That's not—"

"Fair? Yes, it is." His face tightened. "Contrary to your belief, I don't go around hoping to find people to bludgeon. Just like when you say you didn't love the grisliness of eating people and just did it to stay alive, I believe you. In fact, I'm finding it a little hypocritical I get judged so harshly by you fuckers. You are some lucky motherfuckers you didn't try that shit up here. I'd never let potential Saviors get chowed on and like hell I'm taking your special meat. You'd have been fried, peach. It's amazing as fuck Sipsey's so tolerant with what they know. Be grateful. Now let's go."
Alex hated the man, but he hated even more that he was right.
Gareth and Martin stood outside the morgue, and the former wondered why they kept the hallway lights so dim. It was as if they wanted to make the atmosphere depressing. Or felt it would be disrespectful to the dead to illuminate the hallway properly. His teeth gnawed on his tongue—it wasn't his place to manage the bunker's lighting.

He cleared his throat. "You should know Theresa's feeling like it's a hundred and ten percent her fault."

"Great," Martin griped. "Now I gotta deal with her tearful apologies? Look, I'm just glad I got to know Susie, you know? Nothing sadder than dying and there being no one left to miss you. And I'll miss her but the deed's done. No going back now."

"Tell her that." He nodded at Theresa and Alex making their way down the hall.

"Martin!" Theresa called, jogging up to the two. "I'm so sor—"

"Don't," Martin interrupted, raising his hand. "It's fine, Gare told me everything and I don't blame you. Deed's done. Just glad I got to know her."

"You should blame me. You absolutely should."

"At least it wasn't you or Gare or even Alex. Whatever, I'm over it." He brushed past Gareth and elicited an unwanted shudder.

At that point, he doubted Martin would invade his personal space on purpose, but Gareth had noticed his presence more as of late. He cursed his eyes for wandering.

A splash of reality came in the form of Cynthia streaking down the hall. She threw her arms around him and nearly knocked him down. "I got so worried," she said, and planted a series of kisses on his mouth.

His body was just reacting to basic stimuli with Martin, Cynthia was who he wanted. Her faint floral scent and the warmth of her skin through her sundress were many times more alluring than Martin's grinding and questionable musk.

Gareth pulled back. "I'm all in one piece." He lifted his left hand. "Except for... you know."

She giggled and set sights on Martin, her face dropping. "Oh, Martin, I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," Martin replied. "I got my eye on that blonde who does the cooking anyway. Melanie or Mallory or something."

Theresa huffed and slapped his arm, earning an indignant 'ow.' "Don't be a pig."
"And Melanie is gay," Gareth added with much pleasure.

Martin did a double take. "What? No she ain't."

"Yeah, she is," Alex said. "Sorry, man."

Cynthia got a glint in her eye. "Yep, she mentally tears off my clothes whenever she sees me."

Martin slid forward. "Like... totally gay?"

"She ignores my flawlessness," Gareth said, gesturing to his face. "So clearly. And I know these things, you never do."

"Alright fine, but I'm not whining over Susie. I'm gonna celebrate her."

Theresa placed a hand on the morgue door. "I don't know if that's appropriate."

"No, he's right," Gareth said. "We celebrated our fallen's lives at Terminus. No black clothes, no fake 'I'm sorry for you losses' which actually means I'm glad it wasn't me or someone I loved.' Negan's kill with Lucille here was swept under a rug, they didn't want to mourn at all so they just pretended it never happened. Can't do that now. This is an opportunity for you, Theresa. Show them how to celebrate life."

Times like those he felt himself naturally click back into place as their leader. Theresa never argued in those moments because she sought his guidance. He was their leader no matter what, something Negan could never steal.

* * *

Gareth and Cynthia strolled through the crisp, chilly air outside the fence. The peppering of trees allowed them a bit of privacy while remaining close enough to the fence. It had been where Saviors stood while aiming their RPG at the solar panels.

"So glad Negan wasn't there for it," Cynthia said of Susan's wake gathering the previous night.

"He could not have cared less about Susan," Gareth replied.

"In a way, I'm kinda glad. Less we have to see him, the better." She reached for his hand.

He pulled her into a kiss and she whimpered into his mouth. Showing affection was something he most often forced, but for her sake, he managed. Martin was the furthest thing from cuddly and Chelsea shared the same opinions on physical affection as Gareth. Yet neither of the two were insecure like Cynthia, so Gareth deepened the kiss as if it were the first time they locked lips. There was no doubt he loved her pouty mouth, the way her tongue licked along his teeth, and the way he felt when they were alone, but the question remained if he loved her.

The two separated and her eyes sparkled as if he hung the moon. But with the same breath she held for their kiss, she said, "If you wanna go see Martin, that's fine."

Cynthia brought up the man at the oddest and most inappropriate times.

"Is it weird going from kissing someone with whiskers to a smooth face?" she had asked several times, the last not even a week before.

Gareth wrapped his hands around her waist. "I don't want to see him. Besides, having people come to comfort him is just going to piss him off. You know he hates people feeling sorry for him."
She gave a nod. "'Kay."

"I'm only thinking about you, alright?" Guilt nudged him from his thoughts of Martin, but those things happened. Not even the most devoted couples thought only of each other while intimate. He shrugged it off and whispered, "Only you, sugar honey. Now that secret nickname's still a secret, right?"

She beamed. "Yes."

"Oh, I meant to ask if you wanted to come to the map room after lunch. I know it's not exactly fun, but Theresa needs all hands on deck planning our mission."

The warmth drained from her face. "Are you going?"

"Have to."

"Yeah, but—"

"It'll be okay, I'll be fine. You can come too."

"No, no." She backed away. "I don't want nothin' to do with killin'."

"That's not an option you have the luxury of choosing."

"Yeah, but when I can avoid it? I mean, what are y'all gonna do? Kill 'em on sight? Or…"

He laughed. "Try them? This is Theresa we're talking about, those guys will be dead the moment she knows it's them."

"Just dead, right? No… extra?"

"Extra…?"

"T—turning 'em. Or worse."

"No eating of anyone, I promise. Turning? Depends on what Theresa wants. If it bothers you so much, talk to her about it. See how well it goes."

She scowled. "It won't change anything."

"So why are you complaining to me? You were the one who—" He made a throat-slitting gesture. "—Skylar?"

"You… you know that was an accident!"

*Damnit. Mistake.*

He rubbed his temple. "You're right, I'm sorry. Let's not fight, okay?" He placed his hands on her shoulders and her features softened.

Then she winced. "No, no. You don't get to be an asshole and then look at me all sweet and sexy and pretend you're sorry. No."

"Cynthia, I am sorry. That was insensitive. I won't say that again, I know Skylar was an accident."

She was silent a moment, shifting on her feet. "Okay."
"It's a beautiful day, we should enjoy it."

Footsteps sounded from the woods which struck Gareth as odd since he presumed they were the only two out there. Worrying it was a walker, he grabbed the knife from his holster and raised a finger to his lips. Cynthia nodded and kept quiet.

The figure revealed itself as Naz—at least ten pounds thinner and fifty times filthier than when they left her. They had asked The Saviors to keep an eye out for the woman, but she and her husband, Paul, had never been seen at the Samaritans' stronghold or elsewhere.

Gareth's stomach plummeted and he held his knife up. Cynthia edged closer.

Naz scratched her disheveled head of hair. "Look what we have here." Her voice was weak.

Gareth needed to kill her and hide the body. Abandoning her was still kept secret from Sipsey. But did she have a gun? He didn't see a weapon, but she had to be armed and he had to know before acting.

"You look the worse for wear," Gareth said.

"That it? That all you have to say? Huh?" She held out her stick-thin arms before bracing herself against a thin oak. "This… this is incredible. I find my way back and see you two here. You made it. And what's this? You look so happy! Yay!" She applauded.

"Naz," Cynthia began, "we're so sorry. Really. I wanted to—"

"Oh, well nevermind! Cynthia's sorry. Better forgive you assholes for leaving me for dead." She shut her eyes. "Well, you want to know? Want to know what happened at the Samaritans'? By the time I got there, they were in shambles because of those... people you met on the road. They didn't even notice when I walked in. When I walked in and found Paul." Her eyes grew misty. "He was dead in some cell! Just left there! They forgot about him and he was so injured and mistreated, he died!"

Gareth bit his lip. "What do you want me to say, Naz? 'Sorry?' 'Not sorry?' Say if I could change it, I would? Because I wouldn't. Sorry, not sorry."

"Hm. Do you even know what it's like to lose someone, mourn them, then find out they're alive, then lose them again? Huh!?" She pulled a pistol from her back pocket. Cynthia gasped and Gareth raised his hands.

"You don't want to do that, they don't take kindly to resident-on-resident murder."

She cocked the gun. "That why Skylar's still a secret? Yeah, I heard your conversation." She took a deep breath, and shouted, "Cynthia killed Skylar! Hell-o, Naz here! Cynthia killed Skylar and they covered it up!" She laughed and bounced on her feet.

Gareth's heart was almost beating out of his chest. "This will end badly for you, just put it down." He slid an inch forward.

"Don't move! And shut up, just shut up! You know what else? I'd been debating whether to come back here and finally grew the balls to do it. I came here hoping to find Theresa and Alex. Make that lying sack of shit called your brother watch as I kill the bitchy little twit so he knows what it feels like. But this? You and her are a thing now? This is better. I'll die happy if I get to see that smug look wiped off your face."
"N—Naz," Cynthia stammered, her chin quivering. "Please don't. This ain't gonna bring Paul back."

"Oh, so you think you can use and abuse me, and bend my people to your will and come out on top? No, doesn't work that way. That's not how this story ends." She turned the gun toward Cynthia and Gareth sprang forward right as she pulled the trigger.

The two toppled to the ground and he knocked the gun from her hand. Naz was laughing as Gareth settled ontop of her, pressed the tip of his blade to her throat, and jammed it in with a grunt. She spat a string of hot blood in his face as she gurgled and shook.

His lungs expanded in relief and he moved to his knees when he realized Cynthia was quiet. Climbing to his feet, he turned to her lying flat on her back. He blinked, figuring he was seeing things, but the sight stayed the same. He pushed a heavy limb forward and scoured her body for the wound, hoping to find it on her arm, her stomach, somewhere it could be treated when she woke up, but the blood pooled beneath her head. A ruddy, oozing puncture was just above her left eyebrow. Above her lifeless half-lidded eyes.

One minute at a time, he told himself.

He trembled and his knees turned to jelly, but he turned back to Naz's stilling form, contemplating how to rid of her body. That shot had no doubt sent people on their way if they weren't already coming from her yelling. But they knew Naz's voice and she said her name! He couldn't pass it off as some lone loon even if he tried. What story would be good enough to explain why Naz killed Cynthia? He could hide Naz, take her gun, and pass it off as an accident on his part, but the weapon was unlike any Sipsey had in their inventory. They would know it came from outside.

It was too late to cover his tracks. Taylor and an older man named Mick burst in with guns raised. They screeched to a halt.

"Oh my god!" Taylor exclaimed, eyes darting around the scene. "Naz? What…?"

What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?

Cynthia...

His only choice was his to wear his game face. There was no time for shock or mourning. He had to act.

"Naz killed her," Gareth said, steadying his weak knees. "She was aiming the gun at Cynthia and I jumped at her just as she fired, stabbed her in the throat."

"What?" Mick asked, scrambling to Naz's body. "Why would she do that? Why would she attack you?" He knelt and yanked the knife from her throat. "What did you do to her? She looks… what happened?"

Gareth was silent, struggling to avoid the sight of Cynthia's body. "The Saviors made us leave her behind as an act of trust."

"Wait," Taylor started, "what was that yelling we heard? Something about Skylar?"

The world shattered around him and crumbled into a million shards. Much like the fiery explosion that destroyed the last home they built. Only this time their undoing was their own fault.

Would could he do now? Try to kill them both and make up a story? No, he had to go the safest
"What happened? To Skylar?" Taylor asked again as more fast footsteps neared.

"Cynthia killed him."

Six more people appeared in their midst, two of whom were Kaylee and Albert.

"Albert, no!" Gareth grabbed hold of the man and pushed him back.

A furor of voices erupted and Albert protested, "What are you doing? What's going on?"

The kid had seen too much and lost too much. Gareth recalled trying to get him away from his family's bodies at Terminus after the Occupation. As chaste as Cynthia's body was—a simple bullet wound to the head—he wanted him to remember her when she was alive. He had to keep Albert's head in the game.

"What happened!?" Albert demanded as Gareth pushed him behind a few gathered people. The names 'Cynthia,' and 'Naz' repeated and Albert's mouth dropped open. "Cynthia!?! What happened!? What—" Gareth clocked him in the jaw, hoping to distract him from his panic. Albert pounded his fists on Gareth's chest and knocked the wind from him. "No! No! I have to see her!" Tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Albert, no," Gareth said. "You have to keep your head together. Don't." "What happened!?"

Gareth shoved him as hard as he could and they both hit the ground. His fists met Albert's face again and Albert finally punched back. He was unsure if the blood on Albert's fists were Naz's or his own, but and he didn't care. His need to protect one of his people drowned out the intense pain from the blows. But it was no use—two people pulled Gareth and Albert apart and a placid Kaylee helped Albert up. He bolted for Cynthia's body and harrowing cries struck Gareth's ears.

One minute at a time wasn't working. Everything was laid out in front of him: Their end.

Time went from slow motion to fast forward. The next thing he knew, he was by Sipsey's grand entrance. Naz's body and the human-sized doll that resembled Cynthia both lay on the walkway with jackets over their faces. Albert sat motionless on his knees beside his fallen friend, drying tears and blood marring his face. Kaylee stood beside him, her arms crossed and face emotionless.

Gareth had to become the leader of Terminus again. The man set he had aside for so long wax the only one who could get any of them out alive. Cynthia was just some resident killed during round-up and now he had to talk some nice newcomers into calming down. That was all.

"We're sorry for Cynthia," Laura said from the crowd of around thirty. "But you lied to us. Twice. Naz was a pillar of this community. One of our very strongest, our very best. I can see why you covered up Skylar, but why didn't you tell us about Naz? We could have gone looking for her after Negan left."

Gareth blew a breath from his lips. "Look, we asked The Saviors to keep an eye out for her and they never saw her. She told me before her attack that the people in the Samaritan's town were so distraught after Mark died that they couldn't put one foot in front of the other. She was practically a ghost."

One of the former leaders, Henry, raised his gun to Gareth. "I don't care. This kind of thing don't
get forgiven. We put up with you leading Negan here and didn't blame you when he killed one of ours, because you were forced and we sympathized. And Theresa's done good by us all these months, but you're liars. You're manipulators. We radioed Theresa, Alex, and Martin. They should be up here soon and we're gonna deal with this."

"Just think about this, Henry. That's all I ask is that you really think about what you're going to do. You don't want to wake up in a week and regret it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just think. It's the only way you'll be able to get through this."

The bunker doors flew open and Alex and Theresa burst forth. Her hand flew to her mouth and she let out short whimpers before stumbling to the ground beside Cynthia. Alex joined her and grabbed a hold of his wife's shoulders as they both wept. Their sounds of anguish threatened to break through Gareth's thickly laid armor and pierce his heart. Yet it remained intact and their laments were only white noise.

Seven other armed Sipseans emerged from the bunker escorting Martin. His eyes bugged out at the tragic sight before creeping to Gareth's side. He was grateful for Martin's unflappability as they needed it more than ever.

"No, no, no, no..." Theresa sobbed, shaky hands inching down the jacket.

"Don't," Albert rasped. "You want to remember her how she was."

Theresa launched for Naz's body and started pummeling her covered head. Two Sipseans lurched and pulled Theresa back as she cursed them.

"All you!" Brandon shouted at the hunters as he stepped to the front of the crowd. "Stand up, move over there! Now!"

They obliged and arranged into a line. Albert had trouble standing and Alex propped him up.


Gareth answered, "Skylar said something that triggered bad memories. She's been raped before and he happened to say something that one of her assailants did. She lost it. It was an accident. She's—or was—fragile."

"So she accidentally stabbed his insides to mincemeat? Bullshit excuse if I ever heard one. And what's this about Naz, huh? You lying motherfuckers. To think I gave you—" He pointed to Theresa. "—a sliver of forgiveness for getting Susan killed. You've killed three of us now. No, wait, four. Lucy was a manipulative bitch, yeah, but it doesn't even phase you people. You kill when it's convenient."

"I have broken my back for you," Theresa replied through heavy breaths. "I am sorry we lied, but I care about you. Believe me, it gives me no joy to have any of you dead. And I am the only reason we've gotten along alright ever since Negan. If it weren't for me, he was going to put in charge one of his men. This place would not be the same."

"You're only sorry you got caught," Henry said.

Brandon raked his vision across the Sipseans. "What do you think everyone? What do we do?"
A chorus of 'kill them' and 'kick them out' erupted, the latter vote slightly higher. The smithereens of their shattered world turned to dust and blew away, but Gareth stood tall.

"We will bring them to you," Theresa said through her teeth. "Negan will destroy you."

"Then let him come!" Brandon yelled. "Fuck this! We'll fight them all off. No more. No more liars and manipulators. First Gabby, then you? No, we're on our own now."

"At least let us bury her!" Albert begged.

A tall female came up and stood beside Brandon. "We throw her to some stragglers. She's fresh enough."

Clink.

A piece of Gareth's armor fell away. His stomach churned at the thought of Cynthia devoured like Mary had been.

Albert shook his head. "Oh god, please no…"

The Sipseans liked to think themselves civilization's return, but Gareth had always known better. Known that deep down they were as much residents of the new world as those who thrived in its grittiest corners.

The female then whispered into Brandon's ear for several long moments. He nodded along before saying, "Theresa, our illustrious leader, and Kaylee, tiny doctor, step forward."

Chip.

Another piece of his shielding clattered to the ground.

"What are you doing?" Alex demanded.

"Brandon, I think this is overkill," Gareth said, struggling to steady his pitch. "Think about this."

"Quiet!" Brandon exclaimed, aiming his gun at Gareth. "Ladies, step forward." The two took a few tentative steps and Brandon stared Theresa down while she burned him with her glare. Kaylee held her eyes shut as the female Sipsean moved before her. "You and Kaylee, same thing happen to you that happened to Cynthia?" he asked, sheathing his gun and pulling out his knife.

Crash.

Gareth's heart leapt in his chest and smashed through the shield protecting it.

Theresa gave a small nod, the color draining from her face.

"I guess this will 'upset you.'" He grabbed the hem of Theresa's shirt and cut it up the center, exposing her bra. The female did the same to Kaylee who wore nothing underneath. Her arms flung up to cover herself.

"You motherfucker!" Alex screamed at the top of his lungs and sprang forward. Two Sipsean men pushed him back and held him in place. Gareth tasted bile.

"Do that again—any of you—and I'm cutting off her pants." Brandon ripped off the sniffing Theresa's shirt and grazed her chest in the process. "See? You're not accidentally killing me now,
"What about you?" the woman asked Kaylee, cutting off the remains of her top. "Well?" Kaylee gave a semblance of head shake.

"Now turn around and leave," Brandon ordered. "Don't touch, just walk, and tell Negan we're waiting."

The six shuffled toward the gate as residents hurled insults. Gareth flinched when the gate slammed shut behind them.

"Don't stop until we can't see you anymore!" Henry yelled.

Gareth was aware of the sound of Kaylee and Albert crying, but the pulse in his ears pushed out all else. Making their way down the stretch of smooth pavement and around the curve seemed to take ages. Finally they made it out of sight and Martin shrugged off his plaid coat and placed it over Kaylee's shoulders. She hurriedly buttoned it and hugged herself. Albert offered Theresa the short sleeve shirt he wore over his long sleeve and she accepted before bursting into tears and flying into Alex's arms.

"It's gonna be okay, princess," Alex mewed to her. "I gotcha."

"She's gone," Albert said, bawling and falling to the ground. "Oh god, she's gone."

It hit him for the first time: Cynthia was dead. Sweet, beautiful, perky, downright batty Cynthia was gone. Not an hour before he had been kissing her, joking with her, and arguing with her. They were supposed to be enjoying the beautiful day. He never got the chance to say he loved her or even find out if he did. A serrated knife ripping the innards from his chest was preferable over the pain from his realization.

"No black clothes, no fake 'I'm sorry for you losses' which actually means 'I'm glad it wasn't me or someone I loved.' Negan's kill with Lucille here was swept under a rug, they didn't want to mourn at all so they just pretended it never happened. Can't do that now. This is an opportunity for you, Theresa. Show them how to celebrate life."

There could be no celebration because there was nothing to celebrate. Cynthia's life ended because Naz decided she didn't deserve to have it.

"I mentioned Skylar to her," Gareth murmured. "And I wasn't armed with a gun. It's on me."

"No," Kaylee said, eyes planted on the pavement. "It's Naz's fault. She's to blame. Her and her only."

"No, I failed you. Again."

Martin was biting his cheek and flexing his fingers when he spoke for the first time since the
ordeal, "Knock it the fuck off. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and moping about your wounded pride or so help me god I will beat your ass into the ground, you hear me? Do your job and provide!"

"Martin!" Alex bit.

Gareth gulped. "It's okay, Alex, it's okay. He's right. It's not about me."

"You're damn right it's not!" Martin kicked a plant up such force he let out a noise of pain and shook his foot.

For the first time, Gareth wanted Negan. He wanted to see his rage. Wanted to see his reaction when they told him they stripped Theresa and Kaylee of their shirts. He wanted to see the jovial maniac turn Brandon's head to mush and be by his side while it happened, cheering him on. It was times like those, Gareth felt Negan understood 'butcher or the cattle' better than he did.

The Savior leader had given them the world and been more generous than they deserved. And they had sulked about it and pined for life beyond his control. But now Gareth knew they must remain by his side. Terminus was the way things had to be then, and The Saviors were the way things had to be from then on.

Chapter End Notes

You might hate me now, but that death has been one I've been planning for a very long time. And trust me, this was NOT an easy decision to make nor was it easy to write. Gareth and Cynthia were star-crossed lovers from the beginning regardless whether she lived or died, so if you liked them together, I am realllllly sorry. And sorry I did this after Glenn and Abraham's deaths on Sunday, but I've been feeling sadistic lately.

While Team Rick must escape Negan to survive, the hunters must embrace Negan to survive. I felt the contrast would be especially powerful as of now because it is Negan's world, period. If you're not on his side, you're going to lose.

And since my storyline and the canon storyline are so close, seeing one or two of Rick's crew (other than Beth and Tyreese) is certainly on the table! Nobody will be dying or whatnot, but a brief meeting at The Sanctuary is a big possibility.

Thanks to everyone who read and I hope you don't hate me! :p
It wasn't the kind of rage that made Theresa want to scream. Nor the type that had her wanting to hit things or even cry. It ran deeper, seeping into her bones and keeping her focused. Sipsey's people had become important to her and they cast her aside like she was nothing. She and Brandon had worked well together and while he had his issues, he never seemed the type to strip and humiliate one in public. Make someone feel a slimy violation they hadn't felt in years. But she knew what seemingly decent people were capable of.

That anger and humiliation was acceptable though, Cynthia's demise was not. A swarm of familiar trembling grief cried out inside for release. She wanted nothing more than to curl into a ball and wail. Naz was already dead for her action leaving nothing to do but mourn. Nothing to do but recall the many times Cynthia knocked on the door to her room or office for relationship advice. Her blush when Theresa gave her blunt counsel on sexual questions. Theresa again thanked herself for not pulling down the jacket down to see her lifeless gaze.

"There's an outpost about fifty miles from here," Gareth said. "We need to reach it, tell them what happened, and get to The Sanctuary pronto."

His voice quaked on every other word and his eyes welled with unshed tears. Theresa wanted to tell him it was okay, that he could break down for a moment. Yet she knew once you started to fall apart there was no telling when you could glue yourself back together.

"We're unarmed," Martin said, as stoic as he was after Terminus fell. "There's no cars along this stretch to the outpost. Last time we took that route it was cleared out by our lovely Saviors. Fifty miles on foot is gonna take days and we'll die of dehydration before then."

"Not going to happen," Gareth said, moving to the side of the road and snapping branches from a tree.

Alex, Martin, Theresa, and Kaylee assisted him and they fashioned themselves wooden shivs. They were sharp enough to puncture the softened skull of a walker at least. Albert still knelt on the ground and didn't budge when Gareth offered him his weapon.

"You have to take this," Gareth said. "We need to get going."

"What was the last thing she said?" Albert asked through barely parted lips.

"Albert, we can't do this now."

He made eye contact, revealing his swelling face from Gareth's blows. "Tell me and I'll get up."

"She said, 'this ain't gonna bring Paul back.' Now take this."

Albert nodded and took the shiv. "Okay."
Theresa's hunger pangs grew sharper and her throat stickier as they trekked on, making the rage seep further into her bones. Though some relief showed itself in the trickling creek off-road. Martin recalled spotting its high banks through the trees when they first brought The Saviors to Sipsey.

The six knelt and Theresa's first instinct was to wash where Brandon's hands grazed since the sensation was still fresh on her skin. Remembering she wore the bra he had touched, she fumbled with its clasp and pulled it out her sleeve before casting it aside like a dirty rag. She felt eyes on her as she heaved a few breaths.

Kaylee's comforting arm found its way across her shoulders. "It's only the weak ones who do things like that."

"You know," Alex began, picking up a stone, "I would've at least thought some of the chicks there would take issue with that." He hurled the rock into the stream with a loud splash.

"Mob mentality," Gareth said, rubbing his hands together in the water. "I wonder if they'll all stand tall or if the few who were tucked away inside won't want a part in fighting them."

"A few of them knew," Theresa said, edging closer to Kaylee. "They knew going against them was suicide. If they all band together to do this, then I was leading a house full of stupid fucking morons this whole time."

The familiar and dreaded hiss of a walker came from downstream. A few of them grumbled and they stood at attention.

"Alright, let's do this," Gareth said, clutching his shiv.

Martin stormed it, kicked it in the center, and it fell to the leaf-littered ground. Theresa and Gareth pinned either if its hands with their feet. Alex tried to impale its head with his shiv but it splintered. Groaning, he stomped on its head until it was mush and shook off his messed boot.

Theresa imagined Brandon's head looking the same as the undead and she licked her lips.

Each time a fresh wave of pain washed over her from Cynthia's death and their expulsion from Sipsey, she imagined Negan and felt comforted. She pictured his rage over losing Sipsey and his fury at Brandon and the other woman, Lana's, actions with her and Kaylee. It was unlikely he would be without ill feelings toward the hunters, but with the bunker on the line, that ought to be the least of his concerns.

"It's got something for us," Martin said, searching the walker's pockets. He pulled out a few packets of aspirin along with a wad of bloody tissues with a whole tooth inside. "Reckon this guy had bad teeth?"

"Probably what killed him," Kaylee said. "If it was an abscess that already caused sepsis, pulling it wouldn't have saved him."

He let the tissue fall and put the medication in his pocket. "Then we better get that goddamned bunker back 'cause my gums are all itchy like that infection's coming back."

Sipsey had some of the best working medical equipment Theresa had seen post-turn. It was designed to treat the very ill in case of emergency and even had an ultrasound machine.

A lump formed in her throat.
She shook it from her head and focused on collecting water.

By the time they had a suitable amount of water, evening was falling and they settled by the creek. They decided against building a fire as the temperature was only chilly and they couldn't afford to draw the least bit of attention while equipped with meager weapons.

There was nothing but darkness and hunger.

Theresa laid her head on Alex's chest as he sat against a tree. She used his heartbeat as a replacement for the background noise at Sipsey while she imagined they were in bed. Teasing each other and laughing before sliding under the cozy covers, or drifting off together after making love. Or when she fell asleep to the sound of him scribbling away in his sketchbook. She vowed they would get that book back. Leaving it behind at Terminus was one of her deepest regrets.

Eventually, muffled sobs came from Kaylee and Albert.

"Don't lose it too much, guys," Gareth said.

Martin sighed. "Don't you dare imply they shouldn't cry a little. Remember, me beating your ass?"

Gareth was silent.

* * *

Theresa only grazed unconsciousness a few times before finding herself wide awake in the early morning. Her head rested on Alex's thigh before she sat up, finding herself dizzy with the awful, familiar feeling of morning hunger-induced weakness. She regretted having had little to eat before their ordeal the previous day. Standing was difficult and she took short breaths to keep herself from getting light-headed or worse—panicking at the sensation that had twice tried to claim her life.

Martin stood parked by a tree, dark circles beneath his eyes telling her he hadn't slept a wink. "Should've left you people when I had the chance," he muttered.

"What?" Theresa asked as she and Alex helped each stay steady. Martin started for the stream.

"What? Martin, what?" Her legs wobbled, but she followed him down.

"I said," he started, crouching by the stream across from Kaylee as she had a drink, "I should've ditched y'all a long time ago."

Theresa knew what he meant and her shoulders dropped. "How inconvenient it must be for you to hurt about Cynthia."

"Should've never gotten attached to you assholes. You were just a means to an end. Should've done what my instincts told me after Terminus went belly up, and left."

Kaylee stood and dried her hands on her shirt. "Then you'd just be another walker like you were when you got to Terminus."

Martin rinsed his face. "I'm gonna ask for placement at an outpost."

Theresa sighed and no one else acknowledged him. She figured it best to let whatever distress he was having stew for the time being.

A car engine echoed from the nearby road before coming to a halt. Gareth shushed everyone
before pointing Albert and Kaylee to the edge of the woods.

They slunk to perimeter and Kaylee gestured for everyone to come forth, saying, "I think we've been Savior'd."

The others joined them and peered out the woods to a Jeep parked ten-odd yards away, a man seemingly urinating, and a woman on the other side of the Jeep. A woman who seemed familiar when Theresa realized it was Paula.

**Paula!**

Theresa let out a relieved breath and they crept out to the road with their hands in the air. Gareth whistled to draw their attention. The two alerted and the man whirled around, giving Theresa a sight she would later need to scrub from her eyes.

"I have never been more glad to see you," Theresa said as she sped up beside Gareth, she was supposed to be team leader after all.

"I could kiss you, Paula," Gareth beamed. "Thanks for taking this piss break..." He squinted. "...Donnie, great to see you."

The doors to the back of the Jeep opened and a younger woman along with an older one stepped out. Theresa racked her brain trying to remember them, but came up short.

"What... the hell are you all doing out here?" Paula asked, looking them across. "Oh, no. Don't tell me... do not tell me—"

"Mutiny."

"Mm, no, no, no... not now. Not Sipsey. That place is one of Negan's prizes. What did you do?"

"What did we do?" Theresa asked, placing her hand on her chest. "Are you implying this is our fault?"

"You must have done something to piss them off. I spoke to Negan yesterday and he said all was peachy keen. What happened?" She did a double take. "Where's that flaky redhead?"

She allowed Gareth to tell most of the story as he had been there when Naz arrived. Her heart fractured a bit more hearing Gareth recall the events so matter-of-factly.

Paula's face grew red as the two finished. "No, not now. We have our hands full with these attacks on our outposts lately. We cannot deal with Sipsey of all places going under. Good job."

"Regardless of whose fault it is," Gareth began, "we need to get to Negan. Is he at The Sanctuary?"

"Yes, but we're already wasting time standing here talking to you. We can't turn around."

"Paula, Paula, Paula, which does Negan care more about? The attacks? Or the magic bunker? The attacks? The magic bunker?" He gestured his hands like scales.

She scanned her own group before replying, "There's a small town ten miles from here. We'll find you a beat-up Volvo and hotwire it. Then you go on your way. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

* * *
The drive was long and Paula did nothing but grumble. At least The Saviors gave them a bite of bread to nibble. Though the older woman, Molly, did not want to share.

If Theresa had been capable of a smile, she would have when they found an actual Volvo capable of running.

"Hey." Paula stopped them as Gareth climbed in the driver's seat. "I'm sorry about your girlfriend."

*Code for 'glad it's not someone I love,'* Theresa thought, but appreciated the sentiment.

The drive to The Sanctuary took place in complete silence. Theresa had dozed off when Gareth announced they were almost there. She perked up and filled with adrenaline. This was it.

"It's us! It's us!" Gareth shouted as he approached the compound, waving his arm out the window.

Guards around the perimeter wore concerned faces as they allowed them through. Theresa held her breath. She had not looked forward to the walker stench. Upon entering, a few people stared and their escort asked them why they were there since they had no planned visits. Gareth told them 'something happened to Sipsey.'

"Gareth," Theresa whispered as they walked. "Remember, I'm the—" It caught in her throat. "I'm supposed to be the leader."

He nodded and gave a low affirmation.

Theresa and Gareth again took turns explaining the situation to Carson when they reached his office.

"Oh…" Carson's face dropped. "Well, that's… you have to understand, no one gets to see Negan upon request. He still turns me away."

"Like I told you, they're ready to fight," Theresa said. "They said Sipsey is theirs again and that they will fight us. Don't you think that's urgent? That he'd want to know about that as soon as possible?"

He pushed up his glasses. "Yes, he would." He stood. "Follow me." He led them to the elevator and told them to wait. "No one steps foot on his floor without an invitation. Even now. I'm not technically allowed to even do this."

Carson went up and they waited for what seemed like an eternity. The whole day had felt like weeks. Theresa chewed her lip.

The elevator opened and Carson was alone. "Theresa, he wants you up. *Just* you."

"Uh, just me?"

"You head the place for him. Said you're the only one who's important."

She half-expected dissent from her people, but they had her reassuring nods. Even Alex. "Okay," she agreed, and entered the elevator as Carson stepped out. "Wait, you're not going w—"

"Wants you alone."

Her initial desire to see him mixed with tight fear as she operated the gear for the elevator. Once it brought her to the top floor, she stepped inside a lavish foyer like nothing she had seen post-apocalypse. Polished hardwood floors, a burgundy Victorian rug, the sweet scent of a burning
candle, and plush lounge chairs surrounded by filled bookshelves. Sipsey was well-maintained and comfortable, but it wasn't *lavish*. Hers and Alex's room was decidedly modest.

"You look like shit, peach," Negan's voice boomed and she flinched. He stepped out from an alcove she had somehow missed. "*Hot* shit, but still shit." She expected unadulterated rage, but he seemed as jovial as ever. She braced herself for impact. "Nice place I got here, huh? Let me tell you, this lazily thrown-together shithole you see here is nothing to compared to in there. Shame you ended up as one of my many hydra heads and not my wife."

"You said I wasn't the stay-at-home type."

"And you're not, I'd be being selfish if I let your non-fleshly talents go to waste. Feel like I was pulling the wings from a butterfly."

She fought a shudder. "That not something you enjoy?"

"Please, you know what they say about people who do that shit." He raised a hand as if to whisper. "They have violent tendencies."

She folded her hands behind her back. "So what did Carson tell you?"

"Who, four-eyes? Said some shit about Sipsey being misplaced. Not saying it's fucking 'lost' because we do not *lose* places."

"It was Naz, who Gina and Preston had us leave behind and was MIA. She found Cynthia and Gareth outside the--"

"Yeah, he told me the story, I got it. And hey, I'm sorry about Cynthia. Truly, I am. Seems to me you should've popped the vengeful little bitch before she could get back."

"We couldn't go out looking for one person who was probably dead without having Sipsey know."

"I'm not interested in excuses. I mean, you people, shit. You trip and fall and a Sipsey-Dippity croaks. Starting to reconsider my placement of you." He stroked his beard.

"Well, if it hadn't been for Naz, Skylar would've never been revealed. She was as good as dead."

"Adonis should've shut his damn mouth about the big, big secret. Which he just couldn't keep to himself while outside the fence!"

Her breath hitched. It was time for her ace in the hole. Gareth had omitted Brandon and Lana's actions since Theresa said earlier she wanted to tell Negan herself. "Brandon elected himself leader looked like. Carson tell you that?"

"Yeah. That the whiny little prick who came along on our away mission?" She nodded. "Fucking great."

"Thinking he was fit to take the place wasn't all he did. Before they kicked us out, he mocked Cynthia—whose body just feet away, remember? Mocked her for having the flashback and killing Skylar since we had to tell him why she killed him. So Brandon and this other woman, Lana, decided it'd be poetic justice somehow to try and trigger the same reaction out of Kaylee and me." His eyes narrowed and she continued, "So he cut my shirt down the middle with a knife and tore it off. Lana did the same to Kaylee who unlike me wasn't wearing a bra. I thought at least someone would object, you know? At least another woman with more sympathy than Lana. I thought those assholes respected me and they made Kaylee and me walk out topless."
He blew a breath from his lips. "Whew… okay." He paced a moment, rubbing his beard again before prying a lamp fixture from the wall and hurling it across the room. "Son of a fucking fuck!"

Yes!

Being alone with an enraged Negan would normally be terrifying, but this anger was on her behalf and she felt nothing but empowerment. The corners of her mouth quirked.

"Whoa, and here I thought…" He raised a finger. "I thought going in a little more heavy-handed with them would make them get it. Fuck, do they not get it."

"Clearly."

"You and your humanitarians, get something to fucking eat on the house. I am not dealing with you biting any of my men's asses thinking it's brisket. Then take a shower and make yourself look not so shitty. I have an announcement."

* * *

Theresa had a full stomach along with a new shirt and washed body as she stood among the crowd outside. Every Savior able to step away from their work had joined them. Negan arrived and the crowd knelt on one knee, including the other hunters. She hated it, but it was the least she and the others could do for the man who would literally be their savior. When he ordered them to stand, Theresa caught Gina at the end of the crowd and wondered why she was unfindable earlier.

Gina's cheeks were fuller and Theresa's eyes widened when she noticed the billowy top she wore in contrast to her usual figure-hugging wardrobe.

*She's not… is she?*

She glanced across her group and noted their attention on Gina as well.

"Alright, motherfuckers," Negan began, "we have some fucking work to do. A certain bunker of little shits decided they were on their own. They said 'let us come to them! We'll fight them off!' Now, unless they are even bigger pussies than I thought they were, they'll be waiting above ground. What is it we do, men and not-so-much-men?"

A chorus of 'fight,' 'take it back,' and 'fuck them up' erupted. Theresa found herself cheering along. She hurt when she pictured Cynthia's body, her former people's scorn, and Brandon's stripping her, but when she looked at him she was soothed. Like all would be right.

"Lucille is upstairs, she's going to need her rest before what I think will be a bender. And…" He looked to Theresa and gestured her and Kaylee forward. "As an extra reminder, you all remember what I do not tolerate and that's harassment and rape of women. Touching them without a loud 'god yes, please.' And two of these pricks, one of them a chick themselves, thought it'd be divine justice to cut off these strong as shit ladies shirts off. Now, that pisses me the fuck off. Not only did they do that in general, they fucked with my appointed leader. Someone they know I like." He pulled a serrated knife from inside his jacket and handed it to Theresa. "A gift."

Theresa narrowed her eyes. "A little knife?"

"Thought you might want to, uh…" He turned his hand upside down and waggled his fingers, then pretended to cut them with the blade. "Off with his balls? You've done it before."

His eyes locked on hers and she knew what his intention was behind the knife. He wanted to bring
to the surface the darkness, violence, and anger that bled into her bones. It was what he wanted from all of them though she was the favorite. They were pawns, a good hand in a game of cards, people with a hinky past who would get their hands dirty if it meant staying alive.

They were useful. They were his.

Knowing his intentions were impure, she accepted the weapon anyway and imagined lopping off the fleshy appendage from Brandon. As long as she got hers, Negan could have what was his.

"Thank you, sir," Theresa said, holding up the blade for the crowd to see. They gave a few cheers and Gina offered a smile before obscuring herself in the crowd.

Negan grinned. "Only found one of those things, Kaylee. Might have to share if you each want to take off one nut. Don't know what you'd want to do about that chick though."

Kaylee gave a one shouldered shrug. "Bullet's fine."

"I wanna cut his second nut off," Alex interjected.

"Alex! That's my boy!" Negan slapped him on the shoulder and he jerked. "Been waiting for you to speak up. Well, there's the dick. So you three can split it. Ha, literally." Theresa couldn't help but smile despite herself. "Hey, real talk for a second, I'm sorry about your girl, Cynthia."

"Thank you," Gareth said with a nod.

"This ought to be therapeutic for you then."

* * *

Theresa and the others settled in fourth floor rooms due to her status as a subsidiary head. The rooms nowhere neared the luxury of Negan's quarters, but they were leagues beyond the tiny hovel they had shared floors below. Hers and Alex's room resembled a wood cabin like the one they spent their 'honeymoon' in, and the one from their hunting trip. Yet her churning emotions made it impossible to enjoy its atmosphere.

"I looked for Gina," Alex said, perching on the end of the bed. "Couldn't find her. If she's pregnant, she don't want us to know."

Theresa stood before him with folded arms. "I don't know why she wouldn't want us to know. Or why Negan didn't tell us. Kind of hurts that she's avoiding us especially since what happened to Cynthia is public knowledge."

"Yeah, well I'll bet he didn't tell us about her 'condition' 'cause he wanted to see our reaction or something."

"You're probably right." She grazed his knee. "Hey, I think Gareth needs his brother."

"He say that?"

"No, but I can tell. You should go."

"You sure you'll be okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Go, he needs you."

He rose to his feet. "Can I just tell you one thing before I go? This pain, this awfulness, it ain't all
there is. This isn't it."

"Then why does it seem like that's where it always ends up?"

"It's doesn't. I swear to you it won't always end up here. Look, we're gonna do this, what Negan says, and then we're gonna live. You and me are gonna have that baby. Gina's kid's gonna have a playmate."

"Alex, that… that's…"

"It'll be good. And we already got enough paternal experience, what with having to raise Martin and all."

How did Alex do this? How did he manage to find a sliver of hope in the wake of such devastation? How was he able to make a joke?

"You know Cynthia'd be cheering for it," he added.

_Oh god._

Cynthia never knew they were trying to conceive.

Theresa's face flushed with heat and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Alex took her in his arms. "Shhh, it's okay. It's okay."

"We talked about that. How she—she'd love to babysit. How she'd actually ask to. Ask if we wanted some time alone even when we were okay just so she could…" She lost control and bawled against his chest for a minute. "You still need to see Gareth. Talk to him."

"He can wait."

"No, we have to take turns falling apart, and it's my turn now. Once you get back, it'll be your turn." She let go of him and met his glassy eyes. "Trust me."

He sniffled and kissed her forehead. "Okay. If you're really sure."

"I am."

Alex gave her wrist a reassuring squeeze before trudging out the door.

Quiet.

She figured she would use the time to lament, but her tears dried for reasons unknown. It _was_ a day she was supposed to exercise. Three times a week, sometimes four when she had extra stress to burn. At one point she had gotten all members of her group to exercise somewhat regularly except Albert and of course, Alex. Cynthia had not enjoyed the task, but used the spinning machine as a way to sneak in girl chat with her, Kaylee, and whatever female was there. At one point, Lana had shared a joke with her. A joke with the same woman whose body she suggested be thrown to walkers.

Theresa wanted to cry again when she wondered if they had really done that.

Sipsey already seemed like ages ago. Even if Negan put her in charge again, which she expected him to do, things there would never be like they were.
"The glass is going to break sooner or later. Nothing lasts too long anymore."

So with her body running behind on sleep, she opted to preserve her energy. Yet her need to weep was still held back by something—Albert. She had to check on him. And Kaylee! The woman internalized her feelings to a degree that no one ever knew was happening inside. Martin, however, was in a state of repression, and she elected to leave him be for now.

Taking a deep breath and smoothing her hair, Theresa headed out the door for Albert's room. Kaylee stood outside it holding a water bottle.

"He locked himself in," Kaylee said. "I said I'd get him some water, and when I came back it was locked. He won't answer."

Theresa marched over and rapped on the door. "Albert, it's Theresa. Please let Kaylee and I in." No answer. "Or just say something."

Kaylee huffed and banged on the hardwood. "Albert! Come on, you're scaring me."

"Say something and we'll leave you alone. Promise."

"Think the two of us can kick the door down?"

"Only one way to tell. Okay, on three. One… two… thr—" The doorknob clicked and swung open.

"Come in," Albert said in a flat tone, stepping back and revealing he held the serrated knife Negan gifted Theresa.

Kaylee dropped the water bottle and she and Theresa rushed inside. "Albert!" they yelled in unison.

"Put that down!" Theresa demanded.

He shrugged. "It's stupid, really. I stole it thinking I was just going to cut my wrists, but then I thought, I can't leave you all here. I should take you with me. Kill you in your sleep, maybe."

"Jesus fucking christ, Albert…"

Kaylee held out her hand. "Give us the knife."

He shook his head. "I wasn't going to actually kill any of you, relax."

"Listen, I know where you are. I know. But look, I'm still here. I—"

"You don't get it! I don't want to hear your 'it'll get better' speech. I don't want to grieve, I don't want to move on, I don't want to think about 'what Cynthia would want.' I don't want to remember her ten years from now and think of how much I loved her. I want to skip to the end. It's where I'm ending up anyway."

Theresa's mind went blank. What could she possibly say to counter that?

"Then you're killing her all over again," Kaylee said, then placed her hand over her heart. "She's right here. She's such a part of you, that you'll kill so much of her by killing yourself."

"I don't care."

"You've been here before," Theresa said, inching closer and reaching for the knife. "It's been so much worse and you lived." Her fingers grazed the handle when Albert moved back.
"Oh, don't. Don't act like you wouldn't be ready to slit your wrists if Alex had died yesterday. Naz wanted to kill one of you, Gareth said so. You know you're glad it wasn't you or Alex."

She gritted her teeth. "Don't try to pit us against each other."

"All you care about is Sipsey! Losing your precious respect and leadership position that you didn't even earn!"

Her vision went red and she smacked him across the face, hitting an already sore spot from Gareth's strikes.

"Theresa!" Kaylee cried.

Theresa took advantage of Albert's shock to grab the blade from his hand. "I could care less about that! I'd rather they'd have shoved me down and raped me right there than her be dead. Sipsey can cave in and burn for all I care. This is about payback for what they did. I don't even want to lead them again, how could I? So don't do this. We're not letting you go and we're not giving up. You'd be doing the exact same thing if were in the same shoes as you."

"You have to let me go, I'll just be one more tally mark. I have to see her. I can't do this. She was my best friend. I can't..." He choked up.

"Look right here," Kaylee said, stepping forward and placing her hand on his heart. "She's right here, with you right now. All that love and all she ever was is still here. That's not going anywhere as long as you're still alive. I promise."

Clapping resounded from the hallway and Theresa tensed as Negan appeared in the doorway. **What is he doing here?!**

Kaylee backed away toward the wall. "Ne—sir."

"That was a fucking beautiful speech," Negan told Kaylee as he sauntered in and stared down Albert. "If only I had some heartwarming music to play and I'd be a puddle of tears. So, Albert, hear you want to kill yourself?"

"He's not killing himself," Theresa stated.

"If the kid wants to off himself so bad, he should get to. Right, son?"

"He isn't serious..."

Albert sputtered. "I, um..."

Negan rolled his eyes. "Tell you what, I'll give you a garden variety of ways to go lights out. Wrist-cutting is one, but if you don't want that, you could shoot yourself, hang yourself." He imitated a noose around his neck and made choking sounds. "And shit, I've never fed Lucille with someone who wants to have their brains smashed into hamburger meat. So, what do you say? Pick your poison. Oh, poison! Want me to pour you a nice big glass of bleach? Heard it burns like a motherfucker on the way down."

Theresa's heart was racing.

**Please no...**

Albert shook his head. "I... I..."
"Pick your way to die. Come on, kid. And don't forget if you go the poison or wrist-cutting route someone's got to do cut the wire in your head. Want to be Kaylee? Theresa? Hm? Or we could skip that part and put your reanimated corpse on a pike with the other roamers. Your nasty ass rotting in the sun where we can see and smell you every day. Pick. You can only make the choice once, obviously. You got ten seconds."

"N—no… I really don't want any of those."

He raised his hands in feigned shock. "What? Well, I just wasted a fuckload of time. I thought you wanted to die." He gripped Albert's jaw and tugged him closer. Albert let out a whimper. "You think this is all about peach and messing with Gareth's ego? Fuck, no. You're one of my men and I don't just let my men off themselves over one measly lost friend."

Theresa exhaled the breath she didn't know she was holding.

"She was my best friend. Best friend I ever had."

"Well, fucking sucks to be you. Sucks to be all of us, actually. Not one single miserable soul here hasn't lost someone. And another someone. And then someone else. So tell me, what makes you so special? What makes your case so unique that you get to say goodbye? What makes your situation so horribly fucking one of a kind that the answer the rest of us chose to deal with it isn't good enough for you?"

"N—nothing," Albert whispered. "I'm not special."

"No, you're not. You are damn fucking right you are not special." He let go of Albert's jaw.

Albert stumbled back, his chest heaving, before giving a curt nod. "Yes, sir."

Kaylee stood planted against the wall and Theresa mulled over a response. Should she thank him? Be angry at him for being so rough and insensitive? The look in Albert's eyes was fear, but if he was afraid, he wasn't ready to die.

Sometimes leaders had to be callous to do their job—something she learned from Gareth at Terminus. Something she had judged him for.

"Anyhoo," Negan began, his affect softening, "I didn't initially come here to play therapist with Albert."

Theresa straightened herself. "I didn't think you'd come here at all."

"Did you want something?" Kaylee asked with a forced smile.

"Oh, once in a blue-balled moon, I pop in just to make people go, 'oh fucking shit! It's Neegs! What is he doing here, oh fuck! Ahhh!' Hilarious."

"That really why you came here?" Theresa asked. "To freak us out?"

"It wasn't for you, if that's what you think. Not everything is about the way your ass fills out those cute little shorts you got on. Nah, see, you fuckers are just a little bit more important than the average bear what with the super bunker and all. Got to drill it in as hard as I can and with as many groans and thrusts as possible that you need to be at the top of your game."

"We got it," Albert said, pursing his lips. "We will be."
"We're going to do fine," Theresa assured him. "I'm ready, we're all ready. We've gotten through worse." She shared a knowing glance with Kaylee.

"You ready to lead Sipsey once we get it back?" Negan asked. "Because you said in no uncertain terms you do not want to."

"If I have to, I will."

"Who says you have to?"

"If you want me to, then I have to."

"True, but who says I want you to?"

"I assumed—"

"But you hoped maybe I'd be so kind as to not make you lead a bunch of assholes who think it's divine justice to strip you in public. Mm, I'm thinking about it."

The thought of living somewhere else saddened her since she had grown fond of the seeing the same thing each day. Though as long as she had what she truly needed, they could get by. They could live.

"Whatever you want."

"By the way, it's 'I couldn't care less.'"

"What?"

"Your speech before, you said you 'could care less' about Sipsey. That's in-fucking-accurate. That implies you do care a little. What you meant was you could not care less."

She held back a growl. "I know. Gareth's explained it to me multiple times and I could care less if I'm saying it wrong."

"So you do care a little."

Against all instincts, she laughed.
Martin, Theresa, and Alex stood arguing near a smattering of trees by Sipsey's garden. A high vine wrapped around one of the trees held several ripe butternut squash and Alex pouted over Martin's accusations that he was too weak to lift Theresa so she could fetch them.

"Alex is having a crisis of masculinity," Theresa said as Cynthia approached with an empty wicker basket.

Alex gave Theresa a look. "No, I just hate that Martin thinks I ain't strong enough to pick up my own wife."

"Well, no offense, Alex," Martin began, "but she needs to reach those and I am taller."

"Don't matter, I can still pick her up."

Cynthia giggled and Theresa groaned, saying, "Alex, oh my god. Martin, help me up then Alex can manishly take me and carry me back to his cave."

Alex imitated her in a mocking tone and Martin hoisted up Theresa. She leaned against the tree and pulled out her pocketknife, severing a few squash and tossing them down to Cynthia who gathered them in her basket. Folding her knife and replacing it in her pocket, Martin shifted her across his arms. The ease of it had him smirking. No way could Alex hold her like that without his muscles quivering.

"Damn, woman," Martin started as Theresa adjusted her legs, "you're heavier than I thought. How much you weigh?"

She smacked him on the chest. "Asshole. Put me down."

"Give her to me." Alex held his hands out.

Cynthia set the basket by her feet. "Keep holding her for thirty more seconds, Martin, then try me. Then Alex can try."

"Alright, fine," Alex agreed.

Martin bounced her in his arms, feeling them quake a little, but ignoring it. "I bet I can play horseshoes with you."

Theresa inched up to his eye level and peered out. "My god, so this is what it's like to be Martin. I have a sudden urge to poison my body with cancer sticks and dark liquor."

"Glad to hear it. Feels amazing."

"Oh no." She jiggled her pants fly. "I can't keep these zipped!" Alex and Cynthia burst out laughing.

"You done?"

"Hasn't been thirty seconds yet. All I need with the first person who'll have me."

"Alright, that's enough." He handed her to Alex who stumbled when he accepted her. "Alright, red, you ready to mock me too?"
“Yes.” Cynthia beamed and Martin picked her up. It was a bit awkward to have her against him due to their rocky past, so he elected to swing her around a little and she laughed.

"Remember when I was into you? That was weird."

"Ew."

Theresa wrapped her arms around Alex's shoulders when he lost his grip. She landed her feet and he grimaced.


Alex let out a low noise and puckered his bottom lip. "Yeah. Martin, you won."

"Thank god," Martin said and set Cynthia down. "My back's killing me."

* * *

Martin was a fool to think for a moment it could be like that all the time. Out of everyone, he knew that the most, yet he had slipped. Became someone who missed one who died rather than shrug it off and get on with his day.

Susan was cannon fodder, but he missed her. A mere hook-up who happened to be palatable outside the bedroom, and found his crassness amusing and grisly past a nonissue. That was rare.

Even harder was Cynthia. Granted, he had only just begun to get along with her and she was clearly hung up on his and Gareth's former relationship, but she was a part of them nonetheless. Albert's spiral of pain was heart wrenching and Gareth's hidden devastation tragic. And god help him, Martin had had twinges of happiness for Cynthia and Gareth's coupling.

But it didn't matter, he was going to leave them. Growing attached to the crowd had only made him weak. He'd beg Negan to be placed at an outpost if he must. Although there was no avoiding them at breakfast. It wasn't as if he could abandon them then since he signed up to help reclaim Sipsey.

As he took a seat at their table, the swath of Saviors moving and conversing around them, he wanted to flee. Accidentally glimpsing Kaylee's chest when she accepted his jacket had him avoiding her gaze. He needed to wipe the image from his memory before he could look at her again. And her and Theresa's humiliation made him want Brandon and Lana's blood.

He couldn't be the type of guy who did things for unselfish reasons. Those were good guys and they never survived. Cynthia was the closest thing to a good person and she paid the price. Because she was loved, her demise hurt.

It wouldn't be him.

Martin chugged his glass of water and picked at his bread roll as Gina appeared seemingly out of nowhere and sat at the end of the table, burying her face in her hands.

Not feeling sorry for my avoidant, pregnant ex neither.

At least the stupid kid wasn't his.

Though when she lifted her head it was clear she had been crying and he wanted to reach out to her. Make some joke about her maternity wear or ask if her milk was coming in and if he could honk her breasts for calcium. Things he knew would make her laugh. But he stayed silent. He had to
"I'm so shitty," Gina said. "I'm sorry I didn't come see you. I just didn't want you to see..." She gestured to her stomach.

"Why?" Theresa asked. "Why not?"

"Because it was... it was for Cynthia. For Cynthia that I was keeping this kid. I was gonna give it to her."

"Really?" Gareth asked.

"Negan wouldn't let me go to Sipsey. Says he wants one of us here, but I can't be working for points with a kid. I mean, moms get some shit for free, but not enough. And no one gets to go live at a subsidiary. Y'all have an excuse 'cause you came from there." She paused. "So I take it he never told you I was knocked up?"

"No, he didn't," Alex said. "Guess he didn't want us to press him to get you there."

She nodded. "Yeah, he insisted I should keep my kid and have it on my own but I can't deal with having a ticking time bomb. Something I'm just gonna lose. And the daddy, he was with Bud's gang that got blown to bits. Not a bad guy, might've stepped up, but I'll never know now. Cynthia wanted kids so, so bad and I just know I could've convinced Negan since he gave me a very vague maybe on it."

Albert sniffled and wiped his eyes. "She would've been happy to take it."

"What are you going to do now?" Kaylee asked.

_You'll be the funnest, coolest, hottest MILF ever, Gina. Keep it, _he wanted to say. But no, he didn't care what happened to her. He couldn't.

Gina's face crumpled. "I don't know."

Theresa leaned forward. "Gina, um, Alex and I were—well, we are—we're trying. For a baby."

_They're_ what?

"It's too soon to know if it's happened," she continued and locked eyes with Alex, "I doubt it, but..."

Alex nodded. "I think she means we'd be happy to adopt him or her if you think that's best."

Gina waved her three-fingered hand. "No, no, you want one of your own. You don't have to do that. If you're pregnant then that's too much to take on at once."

"We don't even know where we're going to end up," Gareth said. "I don't think you should be making promises like this. At least not yet."

Theresa scratched her head. "Well, Negan did say he wasn't sure about our future yet."

"Negan's always sure," Gina said with a snarl. "He knows exactly what he wants to do with you. Just likes you to dangle on his hook."

"Gina," Kaylee started, "have you had an exam yet?"

She nodded. "Steph gave me one. Said everything's fine." She broke down and sobbed. "Oh, god,
all I do is run away and hide. Wait for people to save me, then treat them like garbage."

Theresa stood up and gave her an embrace. "None of us are perfect."

She wiped the tears from her face. "Shit, I am so sorry. All I've been doing the past four months is whining like a bitch over every damn thing."

"It's okay."

"I don't deserve you."

"No," Gareth said, shaking his head. "These people don't deserve you."

Martin took a slice of bread along with his apple and rose to his feet. "Yeah, I'll see y'all later." He bit into the granny smith as he walked away.

He felt Theresa's quintessential look of outrage on her 'Martin setting' boring into him as he moved past tables. Her rising voice rang as he made it to the exit, "—way to deal with things is to be an asshole!"

* * *

"No," Negan said to Martin as they stood by the front gate. "This ain't gonna fly. I'm not having the intense suckiness of the Detroit Tigers infect my men and suckiness spread like a fucking plague. I'll get you a new hat with a non-sucky fucking team on it."

"I'll just turn it inside out," Martin said.

"No, not good enough."

"Alright." He suppressed a growl and took it off. "Better?"

"Eh, I just lost interest in this conversation, so sure, whatever." He yawned. "Fuck, how long does it take for Paula to get here! Shit, should've brought Lucille to wave at them when they finally fucking arrive. Also, why the fuck are you standing next to me? What the hell? I'm already in a bad enough mood and your face is bumming me out."

He forced a smile. "I was just curious, sir, will Theresa be back in charge of Sipsey? And if—"

"Let me stop you right there. All of you are staying together. I know that look, you want to distance yourself from the assholes who made you all misty-eyed. Well, tough shit. First I deal with Albert wanting to off himself, then you wanting to run away. Stop being such a pussy and stand with your people."

The words rang hard. Arguing with Negan was impossible as well as stupid. Begging seemed pointless as well. "Yes, sir."

"Another thing, stop calling me 'sir' every two seconds. Please remove your lips from my ass. Your pathetic excuse for facial hair is giving me a rash."

Martin gulped and bit his cheek. "You got it."

"That's better. Heh, hey by the way, you know when a chick's baby milk comes in? Thinking about asking Gina for some calcium." He winked and gave him a playful elbow.

That made him laugh. "No idea, but I know new moms kinda..."
"'Kinda...?'"

Negan of all people would appreciate this story, no one in his group did. Though Susan found it amusing. "Alright, so once when I was hooking up with my ex-wife who'd just had her second kid with the same guy she cheated on me with—"

"Oooh, I like this story already."

"Okay, her tits were full of milk, so full that just hearing her baby cry made 'em wet. So I was burying my face in their glory and I must've been making some whiny baby-like sounds 'cause she lactated all over me." Negan was hanging on his every word. "Kinda watery, but tasted sweet like cream. Half disgusting, half oddly good. She got super pissed at me, 'got dangit, Martin! That's all for Henry! Don't never do that again! As if I did it on purpose."

Negan grinned, his entire effect brightening. "Motherfucker, that is a beautiful story and it made me so happy. Martin, I'm a little less bothered by you now."

"Aw, nicest thing anyone's ever said to me. Still find it funny though, folks always wanting to hear about some dead guy's life."

"Got any good ones from this lifetime?"

"You bet."

* * *

"Kaylee!" called the woman whose name Martin recalled as either Mallory or Melanie.

Fifteen people from Sipsey showed up outside The Sanctuary, laying down their arms and declaring their disgust at Brandon's actions. For some reason, the kitchen worker threw her arms around Kaylee like they were good friends. She also said she and the others buried Cynthia and refused to allow her to be thrown to walkers.

"Bullshit," Martin said from beside his own people and Negan. "Don't lie to make yourselves seem like saints."

"Melanie wouldn't lie," Kaylee said, an arm still wrapped around the much taller woman's waist.

"I am curious," Negan began, "you've made your record spotless here, miss perfect heroine."

"She's telling the truth," Kaylee insisted. "I know she is."

"How?"

Kaylee and Melanie shared a look. "We're... together. Have been for the past month."

"Why didn't you say so?" Gareth asked.

"I didn't want to ruin it," she replied. "It's just you lose people so easily and..."

"I knew," Theresa said. "I kept it secret."

No one gonna mention the fact Kaylee's with a chick?

"Holy fuck, you are all some gay ass cannibals," Negan said. "Something about munching on your own kind, eh? Eh?" He elbowed Martin. "Oh come on, no laugh from my new fucking best
"friend?"

He half forced one—it was funny. "Yeah."

"Well, alright humanitarian fuckers, you're all dismissed." He fluttered his hand. "I need to talk to these Sipsey assholes alone."

The six went on their separate ways and Martin hurried downstairs toward the warehouse. Kitrick had promised him the last half of his tequila for some smokes. Trading was 'legal' on a small scale for items costing fewer than 500 points. Half a bottle of tequila would run slightly over 500, but Martin didn't care. As he made it down the stairs someone grabbed him by the shoulder. He raised his fist to knock them out when he saw it was Gareth.

"Don't fucking sneak up on me!" Martin exclaimed. "And don't follow me either."

"Where are you going?" Gareth asked.

"Oh, just heading down to none of your fucking business, Gareth." He turned and started off again when Gareth caught up and blocked his path.

"Nope, you don't get to do this. Cut the crap."

"Man, if you don't—"

"I'm taking a lesson from someone who didn't let me cut myself off. You know my brother Alex."

"Then get Alex to try and give me a hug. Let me by."

"Did you ask for placement at an outpost?" Martin was silent. "You did."

"Daddy said no. Now fuck off."

"Look, the last time you wanted to leave I threatened you into staying. When Kaylee left I wanted to punish her, and I did as much as I could when we got to Sipsey. This time, I want to know why. With you and with Kaylee, I never thought to ask why you wanted to leave."

He breathed out unamused laughter. "Why? Why? You motherfuckers are a ball and chain around my neck. You make me weak. The more I matter to someone the more at risk I am. You said it yourself that if I'd been threatened after Terminus by Negan, you'd have let me die. No skin off your nose, no one would've cared or missed me. Hell, Theresa would've popped champagne. But, but if you think about it, he might not have killed me 'cause I didn't matter, wouldn't have affected you. Now you get it?"

"You can't choose not to matter to someone."

"Oh, no, no, there's always a choice, remember?"

"Not this time." He stepped forward and Martin inched back. "Martin, I'm in hell. Utter and complete hell. I can't say if I loved Cynthia like she loved me, I don't know if I'm capable, but I can't stop replaying it my head. What would have happened if I'd have tackled Naz ten seconds earlier. That I should've told her to get behind me. The way she got closer when Naz showed up because she expected me to protect her. That she thought she'd be okay as long as I was there. All I could think about last night was how much I wished she were lying next to me." His eyes glistened. "But I'm not going to run from that. That's not what we do."
"Well, if you hadn't let her get close to you Naz wouldn't have used her. You made her vulnerable. You set her up for that." Pain flickered across Gareth's features, but he continued, "I am not letting you—any of you—do that to me. You understand?"

He blinked the hurt from his face. "How are you going to do that? Negan won't let you leave. You're stuck with us."

"I liked you so much better at Terminus. You got it then, survival above all else. You were better."

"Is that what you want? Terminus?"

"Yes!" He hadn't intended to shout, so he lowered his voice. "Yes. I want no one to care if I lived or died. I don't want you to be my friends. I want to hate Theresa again, I wanna think Alex is a pussy, I want to think you're just a good lay, I wanna snicker about going behind Greg's back and fucking Gina, I wanna tell Albert to get over his goddamned angst fest, I wanna try to use Cynthia to scratch an itch in my pants."

"Forgot Kaylee."

"That's 'cause I didn't even notice her."

"What was it you said, 'nothing sadder than dying and there being no one left to miss you?""

"Don't turn my words around on me. Hell, you know what else I want?" He dug his hand in his pocket and pulled out Susan's necklace. "I wanna crush this thing and forget about that stupid dead bitch."

"Do it then. Come on, I'll wait."

He clutched its chain until his knuckles turned white. "This wasn't the plan. I left everyone. My mom and dad at that camp, and before that I offed my sister because she was a threat. And that was when I knew what kind of man I was." He loosened his grip on the chain. "Once upon a time, I wouldn't have hesitated to break this thing."

Gareth pulled the necklace from Martin's hand and slid it back into his pocket. "You should keep it."

He was quiet for a moment, glancing down. "Cynthia wasn't your fault."

"Yes, she was."

"As much as you think everything is on you, it's not. You're not the puppet master and there will always be things you can't control. And listen, I'd never seen that chick so happy as I did the past three months. With you, with living there. That's more than any of us will get in a lifetime."

"Still not enough."

"More than enough." He sucked his teeth and was quiet a moment. "Hey, uh, I do gotta go. Promised Kitrick that I'd trade him some smokes for tequila."

"No one with a bottle of Jack?"

"Sadly."

"Can I join you?"
"Yeah, sure, why not."

* * *

The tequila had gone straight through him so Martin parted ways with Gareth and made his way to the tiny restroom on the warehouse floor. Pushing open the door, a girl stood scrubbing down the sink. Her shoulders stiffened and she froze.

"I totally appreciate your cleaning and whatnot," Martin started, "but you need to get out 'cause while I'm sober enough to have the decency to not just piss in a potted plant, I'm too drunk to have the decency to not whip it out right now. So..."

She whirled around and he figured he must have been much drunker than he thought because she looked familiar. His eyes scanned her form and without thinking, he grabbed her wrist. Several gold bracelets covered a clear scar.

"Beth?"

She said nothing, looking up at him with wide eyes. Lined eyes. Pink lips, an ironed, holeless dress, and soft, styled hair.

The hell?

"Let me go," Beth said through clenched teeth.

"Not until you tell me why you're here. Why? You're here, why?" He blinked roughly several times and tried to negate his fuzzy head.

She pulled her arm free. "You're drunk, shockingly. Good, no one will believe you."

"Yeah, they will. So tell me why you're here or I'll... I'm gonna..."

"I don't want to have to do this, but I'll say you were hittin' on me. That you were gonna flash me. Like hell they'd believe you wouldn't."

"Who's they? Why you look so good? Like model good."

"See? Hittin' on me." She turned around when he pushed the door shut and held it in place, his arm above her head.

"Damnit, lollipop, I asked you a question."

"I don't want to, but I will tell him."

"Tell who? Negan?" She was quiet. "Why would he care if—oh." Her appearance, her insistence he would be punished if he was flirting with her... "Are you a wife or somethin'?" Beth still said nothing and Martin cackled. "Oh, shit, oh forget what I said earlier, I fucking love my life. Oh, god... oh, this is fantastic."

"I'm not Beth here. I'm Annette."

"Okay, 'Annette,' why you in here cleaning some nasty sink?"

"I had time to myself and I hate not doing anything to help folks around here. Least I could do."

"So why's it matter if I tell someone? He not know about 'Beth'?"
"No, he doesn't. But you know, just for this, shutting us in here together and hounding me? He'll be pissed. So don't say anything about 'Beth' and I'll forget this happened."

He sighed and opened the door. "Alright, fine." He stepped into the hallway and raised his hands. "No hounding you, just one adult talking to another. But don't you think Negan wants to know who you really are?"

She folded her arms and followed him. "I told him I had a past I didn't wanna talk about. He respects that. And I don't want... I just don't want you to bring any of it up again. Please."

"Hm, so you know we were here?"

"Figured when I first heard Negan talking about this 'feisty people-eating chick named Theresa.'"

"You never found your people, did you?"

She gave a shake of her head. "They're gone."

"Tyreese?"

"He's one of the reasons I'm doing this. Negan keeps him cared for. No points."

"Funny, don't remember seeing my armless arch nemesis around here."

"He ain't here. He's at an outpost."

"Oh, please. That's bullshit. You wanted pink lipstick and pretty dresses. You were all lonely and nice old Neegs offered you a life of luxury and all you had to do was shimmy down your panties."

"Boo!" Theresa's voice echoed and they flinched. She appeared from the stairs around the corner, a smile on her grief-stricken features.

Martin quirked a brow. "Two sources saying they seen you now. And Theresa will assure Negan I was not making a pass at you."

Theresa fluffed her hair and sauntered over. "Gareth was feeling sick because his tummy can't handle tequila apparently, asked me to come make sure Martin didn't piss in a potted plant and on my way I heard the most familiar voice."

Beth hugged herself tighter. "Theresa—"

"Annette, huh? Why'd you do it? Really? You were all full of hope and spunk last time."

"Things change. You do what you gotta do."

"Not the self-righteous Beth I know."

"It's Annette."

"Also can't believe you've run into us three times but never your own group except for Tyreese. Your luck sucks."

"You work with what you get."

"I have to know exactly how this happened."
"No."

"Gareth seriously can't handle tequila?" Martin asked Theresa. "That's embarrassing."

She rolled her eyes, the first hint of playfulness since Sipsey. He suspected Gareth shared the last hits of tequila with her. "Nope. Glad he can't though because lady luck just wants us together, doesn't she, Annette?"

"What do I gotta do to keep you quiet?" Beth asked. "Just pretend we never met."

"Why would we do that? Because we had a few moments of understanding? Because we were going to work together to get away from the Samaritans? No, no, it's we first, always. Always."

She gulped. "I heard about her. Cynthia."

"Fuck you. Don't you dare say her name."

"Still don't see what's so bad about him knowing," Martin said.

"I'm not her anymore," Beth said. "Sometimes you have to become someone else to survive."

"I'm not keeping secrets from him," Theresa said. "Not now."

*Just gotta hope he never finds out we blackmailed Amber and Mark, and why... whoops.*

"Besides," she continued, "imagine the lesbianic fantasies he can have about us now knowing our history. He'll be gleeful just for that privilege."
Alex and Theresa waited in the small resting area for Negan. It was the place the leader most often met with his higher-ups. Though Theresa was slated to meet with the leader privately, Alex was going to stay with her as long as possible. He sat on the sofa and she stood in front him. His arms wrapped around her waist and his head rested on her chest.

"You're gonna have to let me go," she said, stroking his hair.

He shut his eyes and savored the warmth from her body. "No."

She tilted her head and half-smiled. "I know, I wish you could stay. I hate meeting with him alone."

"You know I had a dream last night where we were living in his quarters."

She inched back and glanced around. "Shhh."

"No one's here, don't worry."

The elevator made its telltale squeak of movement and Alex squeezed Theresa tighter.

"Alex..." She guided his arms down and he planted them on her hips. Her mouth opened to protest, but she instead let out a sharp breath and let her arms fall to her sides.

The elevator doors slid open and Negan sauntered out alongside Beth.

Oh.

"You—you beat us to the punch," Theresa said.

"Yeah, Annette here—" Negan paused, "sorry, Beth, fessed up before you could blow the whistle and be the good little Saviors that you are. Alex, you can let go of her ass. I know she's your wife, shit."

Alex reluctantly removed his hands and Theresa said, "I didn't think she'd tell you."

"Sorry," Beth said with a dash of attitude. "You're not the hero this time."

Negan smiled and his eyes darted between the two women. "Whoa, the cattiness here is delicious. Holy fuck." He closed his eyes. "Oh, yeah. I'm seeing it. You two. Mmmm... and what's this? Naughty Beth stealing all of Theresa's panties? You need to punish her for that, peach."

Theresa quirked her brow. "Still can't believe you actually married such a drip."

Even Alex cracked a smile at that. The jabs were for Negan's amusement, but he would be lying if he said he had no resentment toward Beth.

"Oh? You jealous?"

"Jealous of that dress. It'd look so much better on me. I know I might not have a generous chest either, but I certainly have enough to actually fill out those cups that are sitting empty and baggy on her."
Alex suppressed a laugh. Theresa told him she had been somewhat of a mean girl in high school and he could picture it.

Negan raised his finger. "Hey now, flat chicks can be hot as fuck too. What's life without variety?"

"Maybe."

"Fucking apologize to her."

Theresa scowled. "Sorry, Beth."

Beth frowned. "I did think you were better than this, Theresa."

"Oh, for fuck's—"

"Hey," Alex interrupted. "We shouldn't get off-topic."

She shot him a look, but said, "Yeah, okay."

Negan was still grinning. "I do appreciate your candor, peach, but what I don't appreciate is my new best friend, Martin, being a colossal male reproductive organ to my wife. Told me it's the second time he's tried to piss in front of her. Shutting her in the bathroom and hounding her like that? So not okay."

"Wasn't specific to her," Alex said with a shrug. "The guy's just very proud of his urine."

"Did you know you weren't supposed to be here?"

"Double date," Theresa said. "I think it's fair."

Negan rubbed his temple. "Yeah, I guess. I'm just worried he'll remain adhered to your side when you become one of my lieutenants."

"What?"

"Oh, fuck. Did I say that out loud? My, my, my…"

No, no, no, no. That would be dangerous. And with her possible pregnancy?


"I have not forgotten about that. Be-fucking-lieve me. And this is a maybe."

"You just wanna get her away from me," Alex blurted out.

"Untwist your fucking panties, no I don't. Go on ahead and superglue yourself to her now and really lock in that clinginess of yours."

Despite the sting of the insult, it was a good idea. Along with securing her in bubblewrap.

Theresa ran a hand through her hair. "Okay, well I suppose I still don't get a say about Martin? Or Gina?"

"Nope," Negan replied. "Not even a little."

Beth gazed up at her husband. "You don't need to punish him. It's fine. I'm fine."
"The fuck are you defending Martin for? He grabbed you by the wrist."

"You know I don't like him, but you also know I hate seeing people punished. And I think if he knew I was one of your girls, he wouldn't have been such an ass. Look, I'm okay and I'm not hurt." She grazed his chest and Alex's stomach rolled. The poor girl was only nineteen.

He grazed her cheek in return. "Oh, okay. Just this once."

* * *

"Hey, Alex," Martin said, knocking on the frame of his open door.

"What's up, man?" Alex asked as he made his bed. A bout of nausea plagued his gut over the mission to come later that day.

He sucked his lip. "Oh, I just…" He tapped his nails on the doorframe.

He stopped at the end of the bed. "You just…?"

"I never—when you let me in Terminus's gates—never said, you know, 'that was cool.'"

He blinked, trying to process the sentiment. "You mean 'thank you'?

"Something like that."

He moved around and fluffed the pillows. "Why you saying this now? Tess bully you into it?"

"No, just felt like it needed to be said, that's all. But she did say she was gonna twist my nutsack into a Twizzler if I didn't apologize to Gina for stalking off yesterday."

"Heh. Yeah, that sounds about right."

Martin stepped inside. "You're looking after him, right? Gareth?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's acting all stoic and together, but that don't mean nothing. You know he has screws that come loose every so often, and you're the only one who can keep him together."

Alex pursed his lips. "I know, and I am. But he ain't running away this time. I think he knows that he can't."

"He fucking better not after he gave me that whole guilt-tripping lecture about how I was stuck with you."

"Well, it's good he did. We can't all be trying to run in different directions 'cause of this. You're not going anywhere, right?"

"Right."

"Good. 'Cause you're one of those screws that keeps us together whether you like it or not."

He sighed. "You ready to go?"

"Gotta be."
"People are going to die," Theresa said, adjusting the lace of her boots in the moving RV. "And I'm ready. Have to be."

"Better be," Negan chimed in as he drove the vehicle. He had Theresa drag Gareth and Alex along for whatever reason. Likely some game Alex had no interest in playing.

Dwight and two other Saviors—a male and female—sat at the table playing their own game of cards. The crossbow leaning against the wall by Dwight's feet gave Alex the oddest sense of deja vu, but he couldn't place why.

Gareth sat down on the sofa beside Theresa and Alex. "Not like it's anything new."

Alex placed a hand on his brother's wrist. "Just another day, man."

Negan banged his palm on the wheel. "Holy shit, you are all bumming me the fuck out. Dwight, where's the party music?"

"In the sedan," Dwight replied without looking away from his hand of cards.

"What? None of you fuckers thought to get it? Lucille needs to get pumped."

"Sorry."

The note of sarcasm in Dwight's reply was comforting.

"Oh hey, speaking of Lucille," Negan started, "Alex, you're all artistic and shit, you should do some candids of her eats."

*Oh, god.* The abysmal photographing of Negan's victims.

Alex bit his cheek to dissuade the dissent rising inside. "Sounds good."

As if he could express his distaste in it after everything he had done. It would be the epitome of hypocrisy. A memory bathed in red flashed through his mind: butchering the Occupiers after escaping the traincars. Skinning the torso…

Nausea lurched up his throat and he pressed his hand over his mouth.

*Shit.*

The ill feeling had lingered too long to be simple anxiety. A few Sipseans had stomach bugs in the days before he and his group left. His head became light-headed and he gulped, hoping to force the sick down.

A few minutes passed of steady malaise before Theresa said, "You look pale. You feeling okay?"

Alex bit his lip. "I'll be fine," he murmured. "Just a little nauseous."

"Oh."

Gareth handed him a thermos of water and whispered, "Don't tell me you're the pregnant one."

Alex gave a tiny smile and took a drink, but it made him gag.

"Oh no, no, no, no," Negan said. "You take that shit somewhere else. If someone pukes, I puke, and I had a huge breakfast that I'm having a great time digesting."
Alex scrambled to the RV's restroom and was sick in the toilet. A low whine escaped his burning throat, he laid his head on the seat, and cold shudders and aches claimed his body. Of all the times to be ill, it had to be when he was needed. He staggered to his feet and washed his face with soap and water. The mirror reflected his ashen face, grey circles around his eyes, and...

When did I start looking so much older?

He slunk back to the floor right as the RV hit a bump that jostled the vehicle. It almost made him heave again. Negan's laughter echoed down the hall as the RV slowed and stopped.

"Alright, out, out!" Negan ordered. "All their exits are blocked about now. The blonde lesbian said they wanted to meet us out here. Smart, you know. I don't wanna lay waste to those delicious fucking crops out there that I really want to digest."

An assortment of footsteps thudded through the vehicle and the RV door groaned open. Alex stayed motionless as two familiar pairs of footsteps entered the restroom.

"It's time," Gareth said.

"Yeah, I know," Alex mumbled as he got up.

Theresa rushed over and grabbed a rag. "No way, you're way too sick." She dabbed the cloth on his damp forehead.

"Hey!" Negan yelled from outside the room. "Stop playing doctor and get the fuck out here."

"He can't do this," Theresa said.

"Yes, I can," Alex insisted. "Just give me—"

"No."

"It's my decision."

Negan stopped in the doorway, Lucille over his shoulder. "Alex, get the fuck out here. Peach, Adonis, come on."

Theresa whirled around. "He is sick! You want him to get killed?"

"He's fine. He'll start feeling better once the adrenaline kicks in." Theresa imitated gagging. His face faltered. "Hey, now…" She made more hacking sounds and Negan yelled at her to stop.

Alex took a step forward, feeling some strength return. "Tess, don't fake puke for me. I'm doing this."

She ignored him and continued to feign vomiting until Negan conceded. "Okay! Fine! Just fucking stop it, dammit. That is the one and only time you have ever not looked hot. Good job."

"Negan, I'm going," Alex said.

"No!" she protested.

"Theresa," Gareth started, "if he wants to go—"
"I'll tie him down."

Alex moved passed her. "I'm starting to feel better, okay?"

"Then fucking go," Negan said. "Jesus fuck." Theresa huffed and stormed out of the RV. "Good, I need that rage of hers. Come on, shutterbug."

* * *

There was only one road to and from Sipsey and the Saviors' convoy had it blocked. Melanie and the other Sipseans had joined them along with a good fifteen other Saviors. The defected Sipseans had informed them their enemies wanted to 'have it out' on the road.

They had waited a good thirty minutes so far and Alex's sickness waned into a low rumbling of nausea. He rehydrated himself with water and felt better with each sip. That was until both Dwight and Martin lit cigarettes. The smell rarely bothered him, but this time it was too much so he ducked behind the RV. Theresa stood leaning against it with arms crossed.

"I am so mad at you for this," she told him.

He let out a short sigh. "I know."

"I mean, why are you playing martyr? It's stupid and dangerous and…"

He didn't want to argue, but the words came out anyway. "I'm always worrying about you. Every time you went off on your own I got no say in it and I didn't try to."

She paused. "That was different, I wasn't sick. I was capable."

"And I'm capable now. I ain't sitting in the RV while this goes down. If you were in my shoes, you'd be doing the same." She unfolded her arms but stayed quiet. "And I want my sketchbook back."

She offered him a warm glance. "I know you do."

"That's why I'm fighting. I told you this wasn't it. I need that book back, I need to show it to our kid. All this has to be worth something other than getting back at 'em for what they did. It has to be more than that." He slid in front of her. "The Occupiers, it was about more than revenge, it was about living. All this awfulness has to end up somewhere good or it's just awfulness for the sake of it and I ain't having that."

She fiddled with her hands. "I want your sketchbook back too. I swore to myself we'd get it back. I still beat myself up for losing it at Terminus."

He reached for her hand when Albert circled around the RV with his fists balled.

"Do you still have that scar?" Albert asked. "From Cynthia?"

Alex nodded. "Yeah."

"Can I see it? I just—I know it's an odd thing to ask, but—"

"No, no, it's no problem." He pulled down his hoodie and revealed the fading pink mark.

His face relaxed like he just took a hit of a drug he was addicted to. "You're lucky you have that."
"I know. Hope I never lose it."

Albert frowned and started to speak when Dwight shouted, "Movement!"

Alex, Albert, and Theresa pulled out their weapons and joined the rest of the armed crowd. A nudge of queasiness again struck Alex's gut.

_Easy does it._

Two SUVs rolled up the hill—less than expected. A few mutters of confusion echoed throughout The Saviors. Out climbed four people from the front and four from the back. Alex figured something had to be up. Eight Sipseans versus thirty Saviors was a death sentence for the former.

Laura appeared to be leading her group as Brandon was nowhere in sight.

Negan pointed Lucille at the eight. "So Brandon pussied out, huh?"

"Thank you for not opening fire," Laura said. "Guess Mel and the others told you we had cooled down a tiny bit."

"Oh, I'm sure there's going to be opened fire at some point, but not yet because I am curious as shit. Why the low numbers?" He looked her across. "Damn, have I mentioned I like you? All tall and beefy. Want to be wife number seven?"

"Thanks, but no thanks. Hector?" She looked over her shoulder. "That still on?"

Hector stepped to her side and held up a walkie-talkie. "Yep."

Laura placed a hand on her hip. "Cynthia is alive."

Alex gritted his teeth.

_Of all the things to pull…_

"Oh, fuck you, Laura," Theresa spat. "That's a low blow."

"Yeah, that's not funny!" Albert cried.

"We're not lying," Laura said. "And the reason why there are so few of us is because the rest are defending our home. Like hell we'd bring everyone out here like _they_—" She gestured to the defected Sipseans. "—said we would. And Cynthia? She's on the other line."

"They're lying," Melanie said. "We buried her. I was there."

Gareth's face twitched. "Yeah, and I was there when she died."

"Naz had a tiny scrap of metal in the chamber, not a bullet. It didn't touch her brain. There was blood on the ground because she fell flat on her head. She's in bad shape, but she's alive."

Gareth's jaw clenched and Alex worried. Such a cruel joke was puncturing his armor, and that was exactly what their adversaries wanted.

"You mean to tell me," Negan started, "that little miss Cynthia was pricked in the head by some shitty metal, fell and hit her head, and stayed knocked out until you miraculously revived her? You dumb motherfuckers expect us to believe that? Come on, let's see who's on the other line. Some great impressionist?" Hector laid the walkie-talkie on the concrete and kicked it over. Negan
picked it up and chuckled before turning it on. "Is this 'hot and dirty chat with the tri-county area's hottest singles'?

"Negan?" asked a familiar feminine drawl from the other end. Alex's heart stopped. It couldn't be. It had to be someone talented in voice impersonation.

Albert streaked over beside Negan. "Cynthia!? It's Albert."

Negan rolled his eyes.

Static erupted from the speaker. "Albert! Hi! I'm okay. You just gotta do what they say. They'll kill me if you don't."

"Albert," Gareth began with clenched teeth, "that's not her."

Albert's chin quivered. "It sounds exactly like her."

The girl on the other line sniffled. "Gareth, it's me. I swear."

"Who is it really?" Theresa asked Laura. "Taylor? Mandy?"

Negan sighed. "Well, I think I know what we need to do: the whole 'ask her something only she would know' shit. Peach? You want to do the honors?"

Theresa took the walkie-talkie. "Okay, 'Cynthia,' why does Alex have a scar on his shoulder? What's your last name? How many weeks before the Occupation did you arrive at Terminus? What kind of sunglasses did you pick out on that supply run when we ran into Riley?"

The woman laughed a little. "Alex has a scar 'cause I threw a vase at him. My last name's Howell. I got there like two weeks before, I think. And I picked out heart-shaped sunglasses."

Her eyes widened. "Thar's... no..."

Alex glanced behind him, Martin stood impassive and Kaylee's eyes were planted on the ground. Did they believe it or not?

"She could've told you any of those things in the past three months," Gareth said.

"The sunglasses," Theresa countered. "Why would she have ever told them that?"

"Lana is with her," Laura announced. "And the second she hears things go south she's going to kill her for real and this time it'll stick. Revolver point-blank through her brain. That is unless you leave and don't hurt us, then we'll clue you in on where she is. This is a peace offering. We don't want war. I'm not stupid enough to think we can take you down. Brandon is, but I'm not."

Negan feigned contemplation. "Yeah... nah. No deal. I'm gonna mow you all down and take Sipsey."

"No!" Albert exclaimed. "No, no, no, please. Negan, please."

"It's not her," Gareth argued, face going red.

"How does lying down benefit me again?" Negan asked. "I want the bunker, I'm going to get the fucking bunker redhead or not. See, Laura, baby, you seem to think Theresa has more authority than she does. I am the one in charge, you understand? And it's a shame, Cynthia is—or was—a sweet girl, but she's not worth the bunker."
The opposing Sipseans' faces dropped.

Theresa stepped in front of him and gazed up. "Negan, I am begging you. Please."

"Just because you ask you think I'm going back down? Nope, sorry." He took the walkie back from her and switched it on. "Yeah, no deal, you can go ahead and—"

"I'll marry you!" Theresa interrupted and Negan's brows shot up. "I'll marry you."

Bile rose in Alex's throat. "Tess! No! No, no, don't—"

Negan raised his hand at Alex. "Ah, ah, ah, hush. Did I hear that right? You'll marry me?"

Her jaw clenched. "Yes. If you save her, I'll marry you."

Alex's blood ran cold.

"The whole nine yards?" Negan questioned.

"The whole nine yards."

"You'll break up with Alex?"

She hesitated, tears glistening in her eyes. "Yes."

"Move in with me and, oooh, little Beth-Annette?"

"Yes."

"Walk around in some sexy lingerie for me?"

"Yes."

The world was ending all over again. The dead were rising and his life was turning inside out. A violent shudder rocked his body.

"You're going to let me tap your sweet ass and lick up the delicious cream from between your thighs?"

"Yes."

He wanted to die.

Negan burst out laughing as if it were the most ridiculous thing ever. "Seriously? I ain't marrying you."

A flicker of life returned to Alex's system.

Theresa blanched. "What?"

"Fuck no. Shit, a few months ago I'd have said yes, yes, yes! But you're on my payroll, I like you where you are. Can't piss that off because I really wanna squeeze those little jelly donuts you got." He made a honking motion at her chest.

Alex started to breathe again, hoping to fight off hyperventilation when he remembered.

Oh no... Cynthia.
His heart broke for Cynthia's second death. Gareth had it written all over his face as much as he was trying to force it away. He was losing her twice. Just like Naz lost Paul twice.

Negan clicked on the walkie. "I'm so sorry, you guys. Believe me, I am."

A shot rang from the speaker and it went dead.
The tension from the hunters held heavy in the air as the walkie-talkie went dead. Negan would be earning glares from them for weeks over his decision, but sacrifices had to be made.

Albert sniveled and fired his gun at Laura, hitting the side of her skull and expelling an amount of brain. The Sipseans scrambled to pull out their weapons and missed all targets in their haste. Several fell victim to The Saviors' superior arsenal.

A Sipsean bullet shattered part of the RV's windshield and Negan charged forward with Lucille. "Now I'm mad! I just had that fucking thing replaced!" Lucille knocked one of the male Sipsean's guns from his hand before striking him across the head.

He chuckled as Lucille practically vibrated in his hands. His lovely vampire bat grew sated as she smashed in the man's head. Beside him, Theresa used her gifted dagger and slashed through an attacking female. Blood stained her hands as she yanked the blade from the woman's limp body. Strands of messed hair hung across her face and her chest heaved in deep breaths. Negan damned her for wearing a shirt without cleavage.

*Still sexy as fuck.*

At the end of the battle, only Hector remained alive. The balding man stood shaking violently against the hood of his vehicle. Negan stared him down and brushed Lucille's dripping end across his cheek. Hector shut his eyes and whimpered.

"Whose bitch are you?" Negan asked. Hector sputtered out a vowel. "I think I asked a question; whose little fucking bitch are you?"

"Y—yours," Hector choked out.

"Louder. Scream it from the top of your lungs. Who owns you? Say his name."

"Negan."

"Louder!"
"You!" he shrieked "Negan owns me! I'm his bitch!"

He burst out laughing. "Yeah, there we go! Now, was that so hard?"

"Where's Cynthia?" Albert asked after a moment's quiet.

Negan rolled his eyes. "Did I say you could speak, son? Sipsey is our number one priority right now. Even slightly above Paula and company's missing status and especially over your girl." He booped Hector on the nose. "And baldy, you and all those dead guys of yours are our leverage. It's over. You lost." Albert started crying again and placed his hand over his mouth. "Listen damnit, you can go look for Cynthia after we go to Sipsey, okay? Just cool it for now. Oh, Alex?"

"Yes?" Alex's seething voice came behind him.

"Click, click, take a pic, mister butthurt." He pointed Lucille at her latest victim's body.

Alex moved in a flash to the RV and returned with the Polaroid camera. He stopped by the man's body, raised the shutter to his eye, and clicked the camera.

Negan grinned. "Good boy."

* * *

After duct-taping the holes in the RV's windshield, they loaded up the fallen Sipsean's bodies and headed to the bunker. A near-catatonic Hector perched at the table between Dwight and two other Saviors. Gareth sat lost in thought having appeared to settle from his mini-meltdown. Negan knew he was one to talk, but the man always gave him the creeps. Boyish good looks combined with cannibalistic intent were never a combination one could trust.

Theresa and Alex were beside one another, devoid of adorable touches, sickeningly sweet eye contact, and words of loving encouragement. Alex didn't even have his hand halfway up her vagina to show Negan yet again she was his wife.

Hm...

The Savior leader wasn't a desperate high school girl trying to drive a wedge between them, but Theresa proposing to him in front of Alex struck a chord of triumph even though the offer was out of concern for Cynthia.

Negan beamed as they approached Sipsey's gates. "Oh, Hector, almost home. Are you excited? I'm excited. Who else?"

Dwight stayed silent due to the crossbow bolt up his rear at all times while the other two men readily agreed. And Gareth applauded to Negan's surprise.

"Hey! There we go! He's got the right idea. Guys, be a little more creative in your enthusiasm other than 'oh yeah, boss, yay!' Jesus fuck. Boring ass shit."

A group of Sipseans—likely most of their remaining population—stood both inside and outside the front gate. None moved as The Saviors' convoy stopped. Negan chuckled, took Lucille, and filed Hector outside. The faces of the opposing crowd tensed as he marched across the pavement before his people.

"Well, well, looks like you're ready to take it up the ass, huh? Didn't fall for your cute as shit ruse. I mean, do I seem stupid to you?" They didn't reply and Negan half-smiled. "Oh, Dwight? Show
the good people what happened when they tried to fuck with us."

Dwight nodded a reply and moved to the pickup truck where the seven bodies lay in a row. Two had turned since their deaths had not been caused by extensive head trauma. Rope gagged the undead pair's mouths and tied their hands.

Negan made a face of mock disgust as the corpses were taken out. "Ew, look at Laura's brains all sticking out like that. Nasty as fuck. That was courtesy Albert, by the way. Boy had some great initiative. Lots of spunk. Took her down the bitch with who had the audacity to toy with his delicate heart strings."

"But what happened to them?" cried an elder Sipsey resident.

"What do you think, idiot?" Dwight quipped as he and two other Saviors drug the roamers up while restraining their hungry forms.

"Where is he?" Theresa asked, stepping forward and clutching her still bloodied blade. "Where's Brandon?"

"What she said," Negan echoed. "Bring him out or Hector's brain gets to meet my girl." He tapped Lucille against Hector's ear. The group parted and Brandon ducked out. Theresa's eyes smoldered and Negan licked his lips. "Come the fuck forward and accept your fate like a man."

Brandon scowled and moved to stand before Negan. "I'm not afraid of you."

That was a lie many a man had told him face-to-face. Not one of them did so without the fear of god painted on their faces and Brandon was no exception. Though he had to give the man credit, he was at least trying to keep himself contained.

"Liar. I mean, you piece of shit. It was your idea to humiliate these two women, yes?"

He gulped. "Yes."

"All because you knew the shit they've been through. Do you know what I do to men like you? Huh?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what they have done to men like you?"

He glanced at Theresa and Kaylee. "I can imagine."

"You're not going to have to imagine," Theresa purred, holding up her knife.

Negan commended his choice to wear an exceptionally tight pair of underwear since Theresa's bloodlust was already stirring excitement below the belt.

"Dwight?" Negan called over his shoulder. "Gimme one of them former friends of his." His lieutenant brought one of the creatures forward. The undead looked to have been around thirty and had brown curly hair. "What was this guy's name, Brandon?"

"It's—it was Bill," Brandon replied.

"Bill, Bill... William. Poor Willy. See, the thing is, there's no 'fool me once, shame on you' in my world. You try and fool me once, shame on you. Super shame."
"You know you can't fight this," Theresa said, sliding up a step.

"Lady's right, you know."

"I said," Brandon started through clenched teeth, "I'm not afraid."

Theresa quirked her brow. "Bill is hungry." She sprung forward and unzipped Brandon's pants.

Panic filled his eyes. "What—what are you—"

"She said," Negan started, "Bill over there is hungry for your micro dick."

Brandon's stoic exterior crumbled and he flinched. "No, I didn't get off on it, for fuck's sake!"

"Oh, well, nevermind!" Theresa countered. "That makes it so much better."

Negan motioned for Dwight to come forth and hold Brandon in place. Brandon was considerably more fit than Dwight the slim jim, but man if Negan didn't feel like messing with Dwight today. He knew he had purposely left the party music CDs in the sedan. Fucker.

"Alright, peach. You start. Remember that eye contact during the good stuff."

Theresa locked her vision on Brandon and dug her knife into his groin. He screamed and struggled against Dwight's hold.

"Oh, damn! That's gotta hurt!" Negan laughed, bouncing on his feet.

Laments from the Sipsey crowd sounded as blood ran down Theresa's knife and across her hand.

Again, he thanked his decision to wear snug underwear because his own blood was heading south watching Theresa. Her glare, her crimson-stained hands, her pants hugging her backside just right…

The woman drove him mad with desire. Their back and forth song and dance having grown almost artful. He imagined him and her in his bedroom after a violent shakedown like this one. Theresa sweaty and panting lying tangled in a mess of silk sheets with a soft glow on her face. Sated from both the sexual tango and vengeance on who caused her harm. It crossed his mind to agree to marry her, get a taste, then say it wasn't working out and put her back on the job. But that would be wrong.

If only I wasn't such a good guy…

Negan snuck a glance at Alex who stood resigned and didn't seem the least bit turned on by Theresa's actions. What the hell was wrong with him?

As soon as he got back to The Sanctuary, Negan was going to dive headfirst into one of his wives. Beth maybe? Or perhaps Nikki. The woman could do a great impression of Theresa's voice which he had much enjoyed.

Theresa dug her knife further into Brandon's groin and her eyes glistened with tears. "You know, I think Bill should take a bite straight from the source. Spare me the sight of your micro dick."

Negan chuckled as she shoved Bill's roamer to the gnarly wound and the creature chomped. Brandon's wails of pain pierced the air.

Negan faked a shudder at the undead's chewing. "Ew, oh damn. That's even grosser than Laura's
brain sticking out. Shit, peach, you're disgusting."

Theresa took a deep breath before impaling the roamer in the head. "I'm bored with this now."

It was time for Lucille's grand finale.

"I'm ready to put you out of your misery," Negan said, lifting Lucille above his head.

And *smack.*

*Crunch.*

*Squish.*

After Lucille's feast, a satisfied Negan sauntered to the terrified Sipseans. He waved the bat's gored end before their faces. "This is what happens when you fuck with me, try to trick me. I thought going a bit overboard initially would make you fucking get it, but apparently not. Do you understand now? Do you fucking understand whose dick is perpetually up your ass at all times? Your ass which belongs to me, by the way." The people nodded. "Ugh, Hector was all quiet at first too. Come on, *say* it."

* * *

Lucilleing someone made Negan two things – hungry and horny. The latter couldn't be helped at the time—no wives around—but the former could. The Sipseans were slick with their slashed-in-half supplies and made it pretty well. And with their numbers even lower, they had fewer people to feed. Good for them. Negan had benefited them in the end.

"Motherfucker this is good," Negan declared, resting his feet on the table in the dining hall and slurping his potato soup. "Who cooked this shit?"

"It was my recipe," Melanie said from the table beside his. Kaylee sat resting her head against her girlfriend's shoulder.

"You might need to come to The Sanctuary and be my private chef. This has the perfect amount of rosemary and garlic. Annette always puts in too much and I never put in enough. Yeah, I fucking like to cook occasionally, secret's out. You though have the gift."

"Glad to know, sir."

"Hey, where'd Alex go with my Polaroids? Hope he's not off being a little bitch."

"He gave them to Simon," Kaylee said.

"Then where'd Simon go?"

"Don't know."

"Hm, well I—oh, would you look at that!" The orange and white cat, Heathcliff, trotted into the dining hall. Negan stood and made his way over, the feline stopping and raising his tail. "I was worried you might've gotten hurt in all the hullabaloo." He lifted the cat and petted him as he purred against his chest. "Yeah, you remember me. Cats are the fucking best, you know? We have one who hunts mice down in the warehouse. Need a few more though. How's the other one here and that dog?"

"Just fine," Dwight said. "Saw 'em curled up on a pile of laundry."
"Aw," Negan replied, and spotted Martin alone at a table on the far end of the room. He smirked and headed over. "Give this guy a good long head scratch."

Martin pressed his lips together. "I'm kinda allergic."

"Oh, I know. I overheard you bitching about it last time I was here." He handed him the cat.

He reluctantly accepted and grimaced as Heathcliff settled in his lap.

"There we go. Don't let him go unless he gets down on his own. Breathe in all that dander. Heh, now we're even for Beth."

"You said she didn't want you to—"

"Kick your ass. Telling a guy allergic to pussy to pet the pussy is not a violent reprimand. Shit."

Theresa came shuffling inside wearing a change of blood-free clothes and hurried into the kitchen. He thought it odd since the pot of soup was laid out there in the dining hall. Negan fetched a still uncleaned Lucille and followed her. The faucet ran as she stood by the sink and cleaned beneath her nails with a scrub brush.

"Trying to get the get blood out?" Negan asked.

She continued washing without looking back. "I just hate having crap under my nails."

"So… I guess washing Lucille for me would be out of the question?"

She turned off the water. "I'd rather not just because I'd like to eat."

"Ah, vengeance make you hungry and horny too?"

"Just hungry."

"Aw, shame. But you know those blood stains, where they really fucking count, never coming out, peach."

"I'm not trying to wash them out."

"I wouldn't want you to. You look good in red. And what with Paula being missing and all… you might—might—be a semi-suitable replacement.

She gripped the sink edge and said, "I hope so, sir," before turning and stalking past him.

"You know how I'm pathological about cleanliness, I'll clean Lucille," Gareth said from beside the cookstoves.

Negan winced. "The fuck long have you been there? Weird ass fucker just standing around alone in here. God damn."

He started forward, tracing his fingers across the stove pilots. "I needed to be alone to stew in my deep dark thoughts, obviously."

"Oh? Is the pain too much to bear? Must you brood and have turmoil over your love?"

"Mourning for my lost Lenore."
"You go and dig up the place Melanie said she was buried then?"

"Yes." He pursed his lips.

"Uh, and?"

"There was nothing."

"So what, either they dug up her pretty little corpse or she climbed out of her own grave?" He scoffed at the notion.

"Only three of them helped bury her, and only the ones who gave us the ultimatium said she lived. But we know who the trustworthy ones are."

"Hm. No begging to find the chick who either has her body or dumped it somewhere?"

"I'll look for Lana or whoever, but I'm not going mope over Cynthia. It's not what we do, is it?"

"No, no it's fucking not. And I had hoped former cannibal cult leader to get that. Good, good. I hate seeing you mopey. It's pathetic. Probably best she bit it, you know." He searched for a hurt reaction, but Gareth gave none. "Yeah. You get it."

That's it. Twist for me.

"May I clean Lucille, sir?"

"Sure, why the fuck not. See how well you can do with eight fingers." He held out his hand and ushered Gareth to the sink.

He accepted Lucille and reached for the scrub brush. "This be too harsh for her?"

"Gotta get your hands dirty, remember what I was telling your sister-in-law. She doesn't have too much brain dried on there anyway. Brandon having a runny head and all. Just do it already, kid."

Gareth held back a scowl—Negan knew he hated to be called that. As if he weren't a thirty-something year-old child with delusions of real world maturity. Who actually thought he played for the major leagues when in reality he was unsure how to even clean a baseball bat.

Gareth turned on the water and let it run over Lucille. Dried burgundy melted and ran down the drain.

"No, no, not like that." Negan moved close enough behind him that their clothes grazed. Taking his hands, he guided them over Lucille and Gareth scratched off a chunk of dried skin. "Just like that."

"This is very homoerotic," he said, his voice uneven.

"You fucking wish." He loosened his grip and Gareth released a held breath. But Negan then squeezed the other's hands and his muscles went rigid. The pads of his fingers slipped across the barbed-wire under Negan's command. Gareth squirmed a tad as the sharp points pierced his fingers and spilled fresh blood over the wood.

Though he spoke no words of protest.

"That's a good boy," Negan said. "That pain you feel? Only thing you can truly count on."

Gareth nodded. "I know." When Negan released his grip, Gareth continued to wash the bat as he
had before, carving various more cuts into his skin.

"See, pretty dead girlfriend or not, you bleed for me first. You're warm fucking clay in my hands that I can mold in whatever shape I damn well please. You jealous?" Before Gareth could reply, Negan added, "Course you are."

Chapter End Notes

FYI, I decided to go canon compliant with one thing and that's Negan letting people touch Lucille. I made the alteration in a previous chapter already. I like other people getting to hold her. :D
"All of us died when the world ended," Gareth recalled Cynthia's words as he sat against the door inside his Sanctuary room. "And we all came back. Walkers came back all the same, but we all came back different." She had spoken such whimsy in the wee hours of the morning at Sipsey. He clung to them, recalling the loveliness of her drawl as he dragged his battered hands through the shags of the oval rug. If she were there right now, she might say something like "Negan's wrong. Pain ain't all you can count on."

But what did she know? She was dead—or so they thought. An empty grave either meant her body was taken by someone or she had climbed out of it. The former made his stomach twist into knots and latter was plain ridiculous. Gareth did his best to dismiss the possibilities as Negan had ordered the hunters back to The Sanctuary while others searched for Lana and the phantom Cynthia. Besides, it wasn't a big deal. Losing his mother, father, and all of Terminus wasn't a big deal. It was a mere roadblock, not something to cry over and no reason to plan illogical motives of revenge.

Negan was in charge and he made the decisions. Gareth was broken to his will. The sting from Lucille's incisions on his hand reminded him each time he moved his fingers.

He clenched his fist against the rug and the sting turned to a throb. It was Negan's world, not his, not even the dead's, it belonged to Negan.

Alex's heavy gait from the hallway cut off his thoughts. Gareth stood, unsure if he was going to talk to Alex or go for a drink of water. When Alex's door shut, he settled on the latter and pulled open his own door. The muffled voices from the adjacent room piqued his curiosity. Eavesdropping was wrong, especially in such a tense moment, but his legs moved him beside the door as to avoid casting a shadow beneath. His ears attuned to Theresa's voice:

"...for you to at least mention it," she said.

"I know why you did it," Alex said.

"I would never have gone through with it. I'd find a loophole, we'd run, we'd—"

"No, there's no runnin' from it. No matter if it was Cynthia or not the deal was made. If he'd said yes, you'd be—"

"No."

"Still just can't believe that's where your head went so fast—proposing."

She huffed. "Cynthia, Alex. It was Cynthia. Or it could have been. I had to do something."

"You know she'd never want that."

"I don't care."
"No, you don't care. You think you have this responsibility to throw yourself to the wolves like some great martyr. You don't."

"Because if you could sell your soul to save Cynthia, you wouldn't have. That's bullshit. What is this really about? You think I like this? Like being moved around like a chess piece and having my ass ogled?"

"You loved your position at Sipsey, I know you did. Something he gave."

"I had to. I couldn't have mopped around and done a bad job just because I didn't want the damn job. We adapt, remember?" She paused. "Do you think I have some deep-seated desire to be his wife or something?"

"No!" Gareth flinched at Alex's rise in voice. "I don't. I just..."

It sounded like she stomped her foot. "Then why are you so pissed?"

"Seriously? Why? You were gonna leave me, marry him, and let him... let him fuck you. I don't care why, I don't care how noble it was, the point is you were going to do it. And if you don't see why that might upset me then you need pay attention."

"We've made sacrifices far more degrading."

"Yeah, but they never tore us apart, they kept us together. If she'd been alive, she'd be in hell over losing you to him. It would've broken us. Not even dying is enough to kill us, but that would've."

"I never thought you'd be so selfish."

"I never thought you'd start acting like Gareth did at Terminus."

_Ouch._ That stung.

"We talked about this before, sometimes we have to!"

_The things they must have said about me in private..._

"Not if it means—not if it means that."

She let out unamused laughter. "I'm not doing this right now. I'm going to check on Albert."

"Always to the other guys," Alex mumbled.

Gareth's eyes widened and awaited the fallout.

"Oh my... oh my god! What did you say?"

"I—I didn't mean—"

"Yes! Yes, you did! What do I have to do to convince you that yes, I want you, only you?" Her voice shook. He was quiet. "Nevermind, I'll go see Kaylee instead if that's okay with you. She is into girls though so who knows what—"

"Tess, I'm sorry. I told you I had a hard time believing anyone actually—"

"Really loved you. That you weren't a crutch. That I wasn't just with you because you were nice to me when I was vulnerable. Well you need to get over that." The doorknob wiggled and Gareth
lurched back, struggling to return to his room. Theresa burst out and slammed the door as his hand reached his doorknob. Her shoulders dropped before giving him a dirty look and stomping down the hall.

* * *

Walker stench wafted through the guard tower with every breeze and the morning humidity only worsened its intensity. A relative peace came with watch duty, but Alex's aura of discontent was deafening.

"I'm gonna kill him," Alex said, leaning up against the tower.

Gareth didn't need to guess of whom he was speaking. "There's a long line of people waiting on the same thing." He tapped the rifle leaning against the tower beside him. "But Alex, you can't let him control every single thought. He owns our asses, not our souls. Just because Theresa—"

"It's not just 'cause of Tess. It's 'shutterbug' and 'honey bunny' and making me a fucking lumberjack and treating me like a joke. I swear to god, I will kill him."

He hated seeing Alex like this. The one who always saw the bright side of things, the one who offered the strength Gareth wish he had.

He sighed. "First, I suggest saying things like that at a lower octave, and second, I think someone else will beat you to the punch."

Alex slunk to his brother's side. "So you think he's gonna get it? That his days are numbered?"

"Not anytime soon if that's what you mean. I wouldn't start counting on it."

"You also said you didn't think nothing bad was gonna happen to us at Sipsey."

He gulped. "Don't make this about my credibility."

"I wasn't trying to. I'm sorry."

"Then what do you want me to say?"

He glanced to the walkers below. "For you to be the leader again."

"I'd like that too. But where we are, right now, there's no fighting it."

"But you think that it's... that there's some hope? Someday?"

"Yes."

"That's all I needed to hear, man. That you hadn't given up."

"You thought I did?"

"I didn't know what to think."

"You lost faith in me."

"W—what? No, never. I just—"

"It's okay, I haven't been able to be someone you can have faith in. Negan saw to that. He's in a
league far past a dozen bandits with a collective IQ of eighty who stuck us in a train car."

"Yeah."

He gazed across the scratches on his hand. "You what else? You need to stop talking about 'The Saviors' as a separate entity. We are Saviors. 'We are all Negan,' remember?" Alex pursed his lips and muttered under his breath. "Look, we've always had to sacrifice something to survive in all this. In this case, it's our pride, our autonomy. Before, I think it was our humanity."

"I never lost my humanity. Those assholes took my dignity at Terminus, but they never took me. They tried, they thought they did, but they didn't. And I can tell you I had a hell of a lot more dignity starving to death out there after Terminus than I do as 'honey bunny.'"

"Pride and dignity doesn't keep you alive."

"Don't mean I can't miss it."

"Of course not, but it's not like the we've actually had our dignity the past three months. Just its illusion. And besides, after we were banned from Sipsey, knowing we could go to Negan, wasn't it reassuring? Having that power behind us and knowing what he'd do? Especially to Brandon?"

"Yeah. It felt great. And that's another reason why I'm gonna kill him."

* * *

Gareth had never been to the brig, nor had we wanted to, but Dwight insisted he follow him to Hector's cell. The Sipsean was held in the dark and musty prison as both punishment and insurance. His barred door revealed his hunched over, dirty, and half-naked form. Beside him was the polaroid Alex took of Brandon's bashed-in head. A flicker of empathy pulsed through Gareth's heart as he recalled his own imprisonment in the train cars. Hector was part of the group who rescued them on the road, and he had seen him each day for months, exchanging pleasantries and organizing their stock together. He shook it away—empathizing would get him no where.

Dwight slid open the cell and they both entered the small space, Gareth catching sight of another gory polaroid by Hector's foot. Likely the one of man killed by Negan at the meeting point.

"What is it you expect me to do here?" Gareth asked Dwight.

Dwight pulled a small exacto-blade from his pocket and handed it to Gareth. "Negan says you'll figure it out." He urged Hector to turn his back. Bloody carvings marred his back that resembled writing. When he recognized Alex's blocky font and Kaylee's near ineligible cursive, he realized his people had carved their initials. His mind filled in their names as he read off the list:

*T. M. L. E.* for Theresa Marie Lincoln-Ellwood

*A. T. E.* for Alex Terrance Ellwood

*K. N. P.* for Kaylee Nicole Phan

*A. M. M.* for Albert Martin Messner

*M. C. O.* for Martin Charlie O'Connell

Gareth blinked.

When did they do this? Whose idea was it? Why didn't they tell him?
Yet when he spoke, he only mustered, "Where's Gina's?"

"No one from Sipsey fucked with her," Dwight replied. "Boss said it wouldn't make sense."

What had been her last name? Lane?

Gareth turned the blade's hilt in his palm, glints of dim light jolting across its razor tip. It looked like it belonged in his grip. Cuts crisscrossed his hand, his two missing digits a testament to the pain others inflicted on him. And the blade was about to do the same to another. Negan spoke of pain being a sure thing and Gareth knew he didn't just mean receiving it.

Dwight knew it too. It was literally all over his face and in whichever gnarly deed Negan had him doing that day.

Gareth knelt down before Hector and traced his fingers across the incisions, making him hiss. "Would it be too clichéd if I said this hurts me more than it hurts you?" His joke went unanswered. "Yeah, guess you're right. Those look pretty smarts. But you know, we've both been cut and bleeding lately. You should see how Negan had me clean Lucille."

"Go to hell," Hector croaked.

"Been there, done that." He let out a small sigh as Dwight's impatience thickened the air. Gareth began carving the letter 'G' below Martin's initials and Hector hissed again. "They even give you any antiseptic?"

"Only after he goes home," Dwight answered for him.

This was Dwight's domain, Gareth realized—his home. Ugly sights and actions all for some greater good. The phrase 'to make an omelette you have to crack a few eggs' came to mind. In Terminus's case, they had no eggs left to crack, nor the chickens to lay them, so they improvised. Negan had a whole pen of chickens and yet chose to play with the bountiful omelette he'd made himself. Gareth thought him spoiled while he created a red letter 'C' for his middle name, Christopher. The Savior leader could use his time torturing someone who in all fairness didn't deserve it. At Terminus, Hector would have been dinner with no flashy shenanigans like Negan was so keen.

As he pressed the tip in for the letter 'E', Hector said, "She was alive. Cynthia. You saw the grave, it was shallow, and we dug her out because Brandon was gonna... but then we saw her breathing and saw an opportunity. And I—I mean, who knows what that gunshot could have been. It might have been her firing it."

Gareth's throat tightened and his blood turned to flame at the thought of a trembling Cynthia being hauled from her tomb. Perhaps Hector did deserve some razor work. Beneath G.C.E. for his own name, he pressed the blade in deeper than before and dragged it slowly through the skin. Hector whined as his flesh tore. Gareth withdrew the exacto and watched the blood pour from the letters C.E.H. for Cynthia Ellen Howell.

"Can't believe you didn't hear," Martin said, puffing his cigarette by the wooden shed Alex 'the fucking lumberjack' had helped build. "What they found of Paula ain't pretty."

Gareth stretched his arms. "Well, Lucille will be happy with whomever she gets to eat." His nose tingled as he got a nose full of smoke. If only Martin would quit the habit. He had cut back considerably at Sipsey but reigned it after they were evicted. Not that he could blame him.
"Yeah, but bad news for Neegsy 'cause Theresa's puking with Alex's stomach thing so she can't go. Yeah, they were fighting again this morning. Hate it when mommy and daddy fight. Hurts me on the inside."

"Just don't go reenacting their arguments with your non-filtereds."

"Nah, smokes make terrible toys. Just ask them kids on floor C who were trying to build something with 'em."

"Oh yeah, I'll make sure to do that." He rolled his eyes before his tone dropped. "When did you go to Hector's cell?"

"This morning."

"Albert said he went this afternoon. I just hope we don't get pushed into lying by omission situations again."

"Guess it kinda sucked. But Hector's always been kind of a serious pussy. I barely scratched him and he started making noises."

"Susan always liked him." As soon as he said it, he knew it was uncalled for, but Martin didn't reply and kept inhaling his nicotine.

Two boisterous male voices floated from around the nearby steel building's corner.

"...once Neegs gets tired of her," one said.

"I can't get off anymore without thinking of fucking Sherry's sweet ass," said the other.

They went on into more obscene detail of their desire for Negan's first wife. Martin laughed under his breath.

Gareth saw an opportunity and whispered, "Don't you think we should break that up?"

Martin's face crinkled. "Why?"

"Get us some gold stars as the kind of guys who set straight people who disrespect our glorious leader. There is a hierarchy out here. Might as well take advantage of it."

"Yeah, true. Plus, I recognize those dudes and they have some very punchable faces. Think they're brothers."

Gareth gave him two pats on the shoulder before venturing out and putting on his salesman face. Martin followed.

"What seems to be the topic of conversation?" Gareth asked.

The two men—sharing similar close-together inbred features—turned and eyeballed them. "What's it to you?" asked the slightly shorter one.

Martin shrugged. "Oh, just that you'd be in a world of hurt if Negan heard you saying shit like that about his wife."

The taller one scoffed. "What, you gonna tattle? He hates it when people run telling just in hopes of some reward."
"Not looking for a reward," Gareth said, flexing his right hand. "I just think this new world order works much better when we pay the kind of respect to our superiors that they ask for. Which includes keeping certain extremely disgusting thoughts to ourselves."

"You honestly care about Sherry's honor?"

No, not particularly. The woman had sold them out after all.

"Of course I do."

"Fucking liar."

Martin took a few steps forward and the taller one shrank back. "I think y'all need to learn respect the good old-fashioned way." He pressed the end of his lit cigarette against the other man's cheek. He flinched and shoved Martin. "Hey! That ain't nice." He socked him in the nose with enough force that the receiver stumbled back and slumped to the ground.

The other of the pair bolted, but Gareth caught him and pressed him against the steel wall with a thud. "That's shameful. Your bro gets attacked and you run? If that were my brother, I'd stay and fight like hell. Besides, it's not like if you weren't a pathetic coward you couldn't take us. I'm like a buck fifty and my friend there will probably get winded after a few punches what with his lack of proper lung capacity."

"Hey," Martin protested, holding his foot on the floored man's neck. "It ain't that bad."

Gareth ignored him and continued, "You still thinking about Sherry's orifices?"

"Fuck you," he spat.

"Wrong answer." He took a fist to his gut and knocked the wind from him.

"What about you?" Martin asked his catch before narrowing his eyes. "Wait, is your nose broken? You must be made of toothpicks and tacky glue. That wasn't even my best shot." He offered a swift kick to his stomach and the man cried out.

The two were easy victims, Gareth knew. But one had to start at the bottom and the weakest were the easiest prey.

"I'm grateful for what Negan's given me, given us," Gareth said. "You're not and that makes me very mad." His fist met his stomach a few more times and Martin again kicked his victim. "All you can rely on is pain. So you remember this—" He smacked his fist against his cheek, then steadied him so he could look him in the eye. "—for the next time you stray and have your very ungrateful sickening little thoughts."

Gareth was a Savior, and to stay alive he had to be the best Savior he could be. No matter how many bones he had to crack and lies he had to tell. It was just like at Terminus.
I'm guilty of a plot hole/major oversight (though I know this story can't be free of others :p): Melanie said they buried Cynthia and yet I made no mention of them searching for a grave at Sipsey let alone digging it up to see if she's in the thing. Seems important, yeah? So I added in descriptions of it in chap 73 when Negan and Gareth are in the kitchen, and in 74 at the very beginning and again at the end scene where Gareth's carving his initials. I'm telling you this so you don't see sudden references to the grave and wonder 'wtf when did that happen.'

I hope the added bits in 73 and 74 make sense, but if not, you can let me know and I'll work on it some more.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Theresa slipped on her red lace teddy and fluffed her hair. Her head tilted as she analyzed her outfit in the full-length mirror.

Of course he'll like it, she thought. He'd think I was hot in a big parka and corduroys.

Her husband entered the room behind her and raked his eyes across her form. "Looks good on you," he said, and snaked an arm around her waist.

"Negan, I'm starting to think you'd even like me naked." She admired their reflection. A looming monarch with his primped and coiffed trophy wife. Cliché, but they were attractive nonetheless.

"What the fuck ever makes you think that, peach?" He leaned down and nipped at her ear, eliciting a small smile.

"Well, because it's how I like you," she thought. "And how I want you, which is right now."

He kissed back with fervor and groped her most intimate places. "Same to you, my little predator."

* * *

What a sickening dream, Theresa thought, dressing in her green camo jacket and pulling her hair into pigtails. She gazed at her reflection in the vanity and tried willing the glower from her features. Crow's-feet were in her near future if she couldn't force a smile. Her husband entered the room behind her just as she got her face to neutral.

"I'm tired of this not talking thing," Alex said.

The glower began to reform but she pushed it back. "There's nothing to talk about. Not right now. I have work to do and so do you. You said you didn't want to fight, so we're not." She turned and started past him.

"Tess, we gotta at some point. I know dealing with all this shit is so hard right now and adding us to the list makes it worse, but I'd rather be fighting than not talking. Not talking to you is killing
me. Let's fight some more, come on. I just wanna be talking to you."

She stopped in the doorway and bit her cheek. Not talking was hurting her too. Alex was the person she went to first when upset, and without him the pain was excruciating. But facing his insecurities and her proposal to Negan was something she wanted to set aside for then, afraid of where its exploration might lead.

"I'll see you later, okay?" she said without looking back.

* * *

Negan was slated to return that day. Likely with Lucille sporting the brain matter of some unlucky sap. Theresa thanked her good graces that she faked a fever the day before so she could avoid being forced along. Leaving behind her group, especially Alex, when they needed their team together was out of the question. She had lay in bed having dampened her face with water to imitate sweat. Kaylee pretended the thermometer she held read 101.7 and declared her unable to travel. Her ruse was convincing enough that even Martin believed it at first. She was exhausted of having to feign vomiting for the second time for manipulative reasons.

Voices called signaling Negan's arrival and Theresa and Gareth started toward the gate. Gareth's posture was straight and his gaze focused as if the events of the past week never happened. Her heart broke for him as much as she admired his strength. She couldn't be that strong, sneaking places to cry over whatever was bothering her the most at the time. Alex, Cynthia, her violation, losing Sipsey, their new permanent station at The Sanctuary...

The crowd of Saviors gathered around the gate and tried to sneak a peek of Negan's RV and its following vehicles. Theresa searched the congregation for more of her people but saw none. Gina had her worried. Ever since her visit to her quarters the night of their first fight, she had made herself scarce.

The RV rolled through the gates trailed by several other cars. Each Savior knelt as they awaited their leader's exit. Negan's cackle pierced the air and snapped Theresa back to her dream. His thick beard rubbing against her mouth and his rough hands on her body. She pressed her lips tightly together as she dared look up at his victorious stance while he held Lucille over his shoulder.

"Great fucking news, everyone!" Negan announced. "We got a new subsidiary called Alexandria. Just rolls off the tongue along with half their shit into our hands, huh? Assholes didn't want to give it up that's for damn sure. Lucille got to eat twice and we got ourselves a neighbor for Hector." He gestured the crowd rise and they did. A few offered cheers. "Now, in one week we'll collect our due. Had a shit ton of wins lately. I'm proud. I am fucking proud of all this shit, all of you, and especially Lucille." He raised the bat and Theresa swore she saw a dark hair fall from it.

He went into more detail about Alexandria, but Gina and Martin's appearance on the crowd's edge stole her attention. As Negan strolled down the parted path, he stopped on a stout man named Joey.

"It's almost like Negan's never starved," Gareth murmured to Theresa. He was right. Mocking someone with extra fat reserves was asinine.

After a few more distasteful prods, Negan walked past them with a glance before stopping and taking a few steps back. "The fuck? I didn't even recognize you," he said to Gareth. "You shaved, and close. You look like a prepubescent boy."

"Thank you, sir," Gareth said with a nod.
He rubbed his jaw. "Been thinking about shaving this thing. Beth loves it though." He winked and Theresa couldn't fight the small grimace creeping onto her face. She again recalled her dream. "Love those pigtails by the way. Fucking adorable as shit." He sauntered away, shouting, "Unload the prisoner!"

Theresa was unenthusiased about the new detainee so she and Gareth ducked out and circled over to Gina and Martin. "Hey," she said and the two spun around.

"Fuck," Martin said, placing a hand over his heart. "You scared the shit outta me. Thought a biter had gotten in here with as ugly as you look."

"Because that joke never gets old," she quipped as Negan yelled something about the brig-bound person.

Gina peered over the crowd. "I think we can slip out. Come on." She led the way to a space between two parked vans. "I wanted to talk to y'all 'cause I made a decision. About the leech."

"The leech?" Gareth asked.

She patted her pregnant belly. "This thing that's leeching off me, what I've been silently calling it. You don't gotta take it for me, Theresa. You and Alex should have your own."

"What changed your mind?" Theresa asked.

She let out a small sigh. "Yesterday... I was out fishing on the lake a few miles north. Kitrick came with, but I told him to get fucked 'cause he was talking my ear off. So I took my boat and sat there by myself for an hour with no bites. But god do I love being on the water, best feeling in the world." She folded her arms. "This is embarrassing actually 'cause I started talking to the damn leech like he or she was there with me. Saying how much I wanted to share this with 'em someday. It's like all I ever do is run and cheat and screw people over. No more."

Theresa's heart warmed.

Martin mocked sniffing. "It was so touching, I cried."

Gina elbowed him in the stomach. "Shut the fuck up you redneck asshole." Martin let out an indignant whine.

Theresa cracked a smile. "What can we do to help?"

"You can hit him some more. But I really don't need anything myself. You know kids get the essentials for free."

"But you," Gareth began, "you can't be working for points and taking care of a newborn. We do have some standing here, we can help you. It's what we do."

She shook her head. "Nah, you don't gotta——"

"Yes, we do," Gareth said, and briefly linked his three-fingered hand with her own.

* * *

Certain places at The Sanctuary were almost beautiful at night. On one of the lower roofs, the light from inside illuminated a few dozen trees while leaving the walker fence in shadows. Theresa admired the sight and breathed in the cold night air. Then hanging her head, she headed down to
the underground warehouse to assist in sorting Albert, Kaylee, Candy, and a man named Nick. The former Samaritan stronghold had a new arrival of goods. She wondered how The Samaritans were doing. The only tidbit of info since their departure was from the now late Bud saying they had 'toned down their nauseous cheeriness.'

Nick was one of the men Gareth and Martin cornered to exert authority. He wore a bruised and fractured nose via Martin and was quiet and skittish around the three hunters.

_We do have 'some standing here' indeed_, Theresa thought with a smirk.

Kaylee spoke of her new medical position in the infirmary and Melanie's in the kitchen. Albert said little, but seemed stable. But without Cynthia it was as if there were a light missing in every room. It was never bright enough. Thoughts of Cynthia's missing body invaded Theresa's mind, and she took a deep breath before gulping down the ache of grief in her throat.

Candy and Nick left since they had other things to attend. Once the three hunters finished, Theresa dreaded going back to her and Alex's room. She felt another fight was imminent despite her attempts to avoid it.

"Hang on," Kaylee started, "this box goes in the bedding supplies room." She lifted the large cardboard box and crossed the hall. Albert pushed open the door for her.

A soft thud sounded from the room and Theresa and Albert followed Kaylee inside.

Kaylee stood by a large wardrobe not yet purchased with points. "I think the cat's in here again." She pulled open the twin doors and revealed Beth scrunched in fetal position. Her face was beet red and tears carried dark streaks of makeup down her cheeks.

"Beth!" Albert cried.

It dawned on Theresa only she Martin, and Alex had seen Beth since her appearance became known. The concern on Albert's face made Theresa grind her teeth.

"Just leave me alone," Beth whined, and tried to pull the doors shut when Theresa held them in place.

"What happened?" Kaylee asked.

"Nothin', just leave me alone."

"Did Negan hurt you?"

"No, n—no. I wish."

Theresa squinted. "Look, my curiosity's piqued, and I assume you don't want anyone to know you're down here. So tell us what you're blubbering about and I won't tell the first person I see you're here."

Beth's face flashed with anger before her chin quivered. "It's... the people he... Lucille..."

"Spit it out."

"He was telling me about it and I—I hate it when he does, but I listen 'cause I gotta be able to, but he was talking about these people... he... it was... it was..."

"Was...?"
"Glenn! Okay! He killed Glenn."

"Who?" Theresa asked, unfamiliar with the name.

Just when she recalled it, Beth leapt out of the wardrobe at Theresa. "You know who!"

"Don't speak to me like that!" Theresa countered and Kaylee jumped between them. "I fucking remember now, okay?"

Kaylee held her hands out. "Just tell us, Beth."

Kaylee's soft tone made Theresa grit her teeth again.

Beth was silent for a few long moments, wiping her tears and further smearing her makeup. "It was my people who killed Paula and who killed Bud. Once he said the leader's name was Rick, I knew. First guy he said he killed was a ginger, there wasn't no one with red hair in our group that I knew, so okay. Then he said one of them threw a punch at him so he took it out on someone else. Said he was Asian." She sunk to the ground, her words barely understandable through her grief. "Maggie was there when he did it."

**Oh.** Theresa froze, unsure of how to feel. Was she happy? Indifferent? Sad? The redhead was likely Abraham, and she couldn't care less. But **Glenn?**

She recalled abducting him and Maggie to be their next course after Terminus. The conversation they had, their escape, and Beth's own stories. A young couple meeting and falling in love at the end of the world.

Beth continued, "I knew. I knew who I was marrying, what I was getting myself into, and what he did. I knew. I made my bed. I'm not a fool. I just never thought... never thought it would get to someone I love. I was doing this for Tyreese at the outpost. I can't—I can't go back to him, to Negan. I can't. When he told me I just said 'oh tell me the rest of the story in a little bit, babe. I need some air.' Like it was nothing 'cause I've gotten real good at pretending. So Simon took me out and I snuck off, been hiding here ever since."

"Who's the prisoner?" Theresa asked.

She blinked. "The—oh god. I forgot about... didn't even think... they always take a prisoner! Oh my god!" She started hyperventilating.

"Oh, um is there a paper bag somewhere...?" Kaylee muttered as she hurried around the room.

Albert's crumpled face at Beth's hysterics tugged on Theresa's sympathies and she gave him a nod. He rushed down and wrapped an arm around Beth. Her head lay on his shoulder as she struggled for oxygen.

A trickle of warmth touched Theresa's face and when she brought her hand up she realized a tear had fallen. If this death had happened after Terminus, she wouldn't have cared, felt glad even, but there was something about Glenn and Maggie that hit too close to home.

Theresa backed away from the scene before sprinting down the hall while Kaylee and Albert called after her. Her pace through The Sanctuary had her bumping into various people and earning her a few curses. Once she made it to her destination, she flung open the door to Alex tidying up his side of the room. That was the rule; she refused to clean up after him. She wondered if Glenn and Maggie had a similar agreement as she practically knocked Alex down with an embrace.
Alex stayed still for moment before placing light hands on her waist.

"We have to figure this out," Theresa said with a sob, her face nuzzled in his neck. "We have to."

"Yeah. Of course we will." His arms slid around and held her close. "You okay? What happened?"

Tears flooded from her eyes and dampened his shirt. "It's... it's... the people Negan rounded up. It's Rick's group." She pulled away and gazed at him in relief. He was alive. They were alive.

His eyebrows shot up. "Oh."

"You know it's not like I care, turn about's fair play but it's... one of the ones he killed was Glenn. With Maggie there. They were so much like us, you know? That's why you were so uncomfortable when I wanted to torment them."

"Yeah." He nodded and wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb. "Does Beth know?"

"She's the one who told us. Albert, Kaylee, and I found her hiding in a wardrobe in the warehouse. She wasn't happy to say the least. Alex, it could've been us. Or you."

He gave a knowing nod. "If we hadn't kowtowed to Negan. Unlike Rick and them apparently."

She took his hands in hers. "I want to understand how my proposal hurt you so much. Tell me, it's okay. I want to know now."

He pursed his lips. "Let's sit down." They perched on the bed facing each other. "Remember what I was saying about how you felt when it was the other way around?"

"When Gabby came onto you and you didn't tell me." She previously shut him down the second he tried the analogy.

"If that'd gone on, if she'd been sincere in having the hots for me, then used me, flirted with me constantly. But if dealing with that was the only way we could get some standing. And if someone could be saved if I agreed to be her boy toy. How'd you feel?"

"Oh, god." She buried her head in her hands. "That'd be so..."

"Even if it was to save Cynthia? Even if the reason made sense? How'd you feel?"

She lifted her head. "Betrayed. Like I was exchangeable. Upset you went there so fast."

"Exactly."

"I'm sorry. All I was thinking about was Cynthia. But even if the shoe was on the other foot, I would never doubt that you loved me."

"Yeah, guess that's my thing. Don't know why I have trouble believing it sometimes."

"It hurt me so much to think you've ever thought I might not really, truly love you. And I do, I love you so much."

"I know, princess. I'm sorry."

"When you're backed against a corner you'll do anything and say anything. No matter what the cost as long as it means saving your own skin or someone else's. What we did at Terminus was because we were backed into a corner too. So what, what is it I have to do to prove to you I'm in this a
hundred percent?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. But I will say that when you opened the door and looked at me like that, like you were so relieved—."

"Indicated fondness?"

He smiled. "Yeah."

She took a deep breath and shut her eyes before saying, "If you still need time to get through this, then it's okay. We don't have to try to act like everything's fine and normal if you don't feel like you can."

"Was kinda gonna say the same thing to you."

"Well, then we're agreed. I know we can't just jump back to how it was, but I want to jump right back into working to get there. So how about this: one step at a time?"

He traced her forearm. "Sounds great."

"There's some more things I'd like to talk about but... it's getting late and I am so tired."

"Step number one then, going to bed."

"Good idea. That's easy." She stood up and started pulling down the covers when she spotted his sketchbook on the nightstand.

"Oh, yeah," he began, standing beside her and taking the book, "I thought The Sanctuary's night sky was worth jotting down. Minus a few walkers." He flipped it open and showed her his illustration.

A flush of heat filled her chest. Alex always found the glints of beauty among the decay and taught her to do the same. She traced the drawing with her fingertips and smiled. "I love it."

Chapter End Notes

Just wait until you see what's in store for next chap. :D Unless you've figured it out already.
Alex watched his sleeping wife lying peacefully under the bed covers. His hand stroked her hair while he took in the beauty he found angelic. It was about the little things. Her gorgeousness, the sunset, a comfortable bed, and a good meal. Those small tidbits that made life worth living. He made himself remember that when his thoughts drifted to Negan. And his head had been spinning that night so he elected for a walk. Perhaps to the roof.

Slipping away from Theresa and out the door, he strolled down the dim corridor. Albert turned the corner and stopped dead.

Alex raised his brows. "Oh hey, man."

Albert gaped. "Uh, hey."

"Where you been? It's like three in the morning."

"Could ask you the same."

"Couldn't sleep. Just out for a walk. You?"

"Same here." He passed Alex and gave him a nose full of floral perfume.

A smile crept onto his face. "Who is she?"

Albert stopped again. "What?"

He laughed. "You dog, you smell like her perfume."

"It—it was no one. Just a girl." He reached for his doorknob.

"Aw, come on, I gotta get my mind off everything. I mean, clearly you had the same idea."

He turned and shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

"You need me to demonstrate on a broomstick how to put a condom on?"

He blushed. "What? No, we're not... we haven't..."

"I'm just giving you a hard time."

"Heh, yeah. Thanks. It feels normal." He got a glint in his eye. "I will say... she looks almost exactly like Theresa."

It was just a joke, and a well deserved one, but his blood pressure still rose. "Oh, ha-ha. Very funny."

"Just giving you a hard time."

"Feels nice."

"Goodnight, Alex."

"Night, man."
"Just hope it wasn't Candy," Gareth said as he and Alex navigated the busy mess hall.

"Heh, yeah, she don't smell like roses," Alex said.

"Leave him alone about it. He's coping."

Alex wanted to ask him how he was coping. It had been days since he last mentioned Cynthia, but he knew Gareth would shun his concern.

'I'm okay, don't worry about me," he would say.

"There's the girl," Gareth said, pointing to Theresa tacking up assignments on a kitchen board. "How are you guys?"

"Better. Can't say there ain't no tension but..." He shrugged. "What do you expect?"

"You just have to accept people have your back. There are no 'even thoughs."

He narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"Think about it, brother."

What was he talking about 'no even thoughs?'

"Stop crowding me!" Theresa shouted before she finished updating the board. The crowd rushed forward and she elbowed herself away with a string of coarse language.

When Alex tapped on her shoulder, she whirled around with her pen raised like a weapon.

Her shoulders relaxed, but she still held high the pen. "Oh."

Alex couldn't help smiling. "You can lower your deadly weapon now. I come in peace."

"Right." She tucked it behind her ear.

"Guess not stabbing me with a pen means you really love me?"

Even though...?

She exhaled a deep breath. "Absolutely. Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Hey," Gareth began, "if you want to talk about how many presents you want to get me for my late birthday, be my guest." He pushed his way through to the bulletin.

"Why's he so chipper?" Theresa asked.

"He's gotta be," Alex said, and motioned to a nearby metal table. They moved over and took a seat across from one another.

Theresa glared at the people reading the announcements. "They're rats. They're little, tiny, beady-eyed rats all vying for a handout of cheese and pushing each other over and running on their damn wheel like... like..."

"Rats?"
"Yes. Like rats." She shut her eyes. "I'm sorry. That's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

Was she... pregnant? No, she would never tell him in public. She would want to do it in private. Each time he had fantasized about her breaking the news, it had been while alone.

"What is it?"

"I'm decidedly not pregnant."

"Oh."

"And I don't know why, but I am extra on edge this time."

Having been together so long, he knew how to handle this. "A few hundred points can buy some chocolate and my backrubs are always free."

"God, that would be incredible, but those points—"

"Are worth it to make my girl feel better." He stood up and circled around before remembering he needed permission. Brandon's humiliation still made her squeamish toward contact in certain areas.

"Go ahead, it's okay." He started massaging her back and she relaxed into his touch. "Thank you."

The warmth from beneath her shirt radiated through his hands and across his body, satisfying his ache for her.

"So um, about the 'decidedly not pregnant' thing?"

"Nothing's changed. If it happens it happens. If not, it doesn't."

Alex did not want to raise a child in a world where Negan reigned supreme. But he wasn't about to let him control every facet of his life. Especially his and Theresa's relationship.

"A day is a month nowadays," she added, and let out a pleased sigh.

"Huh?"

"Just something I heard a long time ago that's stuck with me. What I mean is it's not always going to be like this." He nodded and slid his hands down to her lower back. She shuddered. "Oh, right there."

"You uh, heard anything about the prisoner? Saw you talking to Dave."

"Just that he doesn't talk much, and I didn't get a name. It's not like I'm not horribly curious, but it's like what Gareth says, it's not important right now."

"Curiosity is killing me."

"Me too, but I'm thinking it's someone we didn't know. I mean, Negan hasn't said we go down there and carve letters in him."

Alex bit his cheek, he had hated doing that to Hector. "Unless Beth didn't tell him."

"Hm. Well, then she's a sucky wife, isn't she?"

"Why don't she just go back? Say those are her people and take Tyreese and go. Negan's all about
She was quiet a moment. "Alex, she hopped into bed with the devil. Imagine going back to your sister and saying you were married to the man who killed her husband. The shame would be overwhelming. Damn me, I actually feel sorry for her."

"We all gotta change to stay alive. Everyone's done it."

"Yeah, true."

If they truly loved her, they would never reject her even though she had sided with an enemy. Even though she became someone they wouldn't recognize. Someone who sacrificed their goodness to stay alive. Even though...

Theresa loved Alex even though he was just the guy who happened to be available during her vulnerability. After all, Negan had the stereotypical 'real man' written all over him that no woman could resist. A trait easily preferable to Alex's offering of back rubs and his silly drawings of sunsets and colorful characters.

Gareth loved him even though he was weaker, smaller, less intelligent, less assertive, and less accomplished. Mary had loved him even though he was an accident. Michael loved him despite the fact that he wasn't really his son and should never have been born. Both his parents loved him even though he ruined their marriage.

Yet they had assured him he had not. Mary even saying she would never take back her infidelity because she wouldn't want to have lived without knowing Alex. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling he was a charity case. And Negan hit that sore spot in a way no one ever had. Not even Gareth at his worst.

* * *

Negan had been away for the past day doing something Alex didn't care enough about to remember. There had been grumbling among those he dragged along since they had only just arrived back.

When gunfire erupted from outdoors, Alex wished somehow Negan had finally gotten his. Alas, Alex watched from the catwalk as the man reentered his domain alive as ever. He hurried down in attempt to duck past him since he was in the path of his bathroom scrub duty. Then he saw his error. It would have made more sense to stay put and await Negan's exit. The leader always flustered his thinking.

"Alex!" Negan called, and Alex halted, his back turned. "Oh, this is fucking perfect! I believe this is someone you know?"

Cynthia? Blooms of hope rose in his chest only to be extinguished when he turned around. Negan stood beside Rick's son, Carl. He had not anticipated this.

Oh, fuck.

The kid wore an eyepatch beneath his oversized sheriff's hat. His one visible eye narrowed as if unable to place Alex in his memory.

Negan stepped forward and nearby people expressed their heartfelt gratitude that he was unharmed.
"Yeah, yeah," Negan started, waving them off, "I got it, and I appreciate it, but can you see I'm trying have a fucking conversation?" The people backed away and apologized profusely. "Rude as shit, am I right?" He extended a hand and gestured Alex follow him and Carl. They complied.

Alex kept his gaze forward, wanting to avoid contact with Carl. He counted his own footsteps instead.

*One, two, three, four...*

"If you're wondering about that gunfire, honey bun, this kid's a killer," Negan said. "Been hitching rides or some shit. When I got to that shitty outpost, he got in one of the trucks. Smart." Alex assumed Carl's youth was saving him from a cruel death. "My wife," he continued with a smirk, "who the kid knows as Beth, told me everything. Including how she blubbered to you. I know who Rick the prick is to her, who Glenn *was*. Had to get going before I could fuck with you about it though."

Alex still didn't speak.

"Terminus," Carl finally said with a blink of recognition.

"Yeppers," Negan confirmed. "Don't worry, he doesn't bite anymore. None of that nasty shit. He's got me now, just like you. Old enemies coming together for the new world order. I think it's fucking beautiful. An old adversary will make you feel at home here, kid."

Carl ignored him centered in on Alex. "You were supposed to be dead."

"We're all supposed to be dead," Alex replied.

"Yeah," Negan started, "heard you tried to burn them alive in some church. Well, see they told me they were miraculously saved by a cute little doctor who escaped the meat-packing plant. Another one ended up here too. Damn small world, huh?"

"Are you—are you *all* here?" Carl asked.

Alex allowed himself to look down at him, and he seemed to be trying to place his reaction. In the scheme of things, Terminus was nothing compared to the wrath of the Saviors. Did Carl think so too?

"Almost," Alex answered.

"Tall hot one bit it recently," Negan said as they made it to the catwalk.

Alex figured he and Carl were feeling many of the same things. A wish for Negan to drop dead likely number one.

Candy crept up the metal stairs and peaked around the corner. "Sir?"

Negan grinned. "Oooh, my sweet hard Candy. What's up?"

"May I speak with you? Privately?"

He rolled his eyes. "Ugh." He met her and they and began talking. His face dropped on a dime. Glancing over, he barked, "Alex, watch the kid for a second." He stormed off alongside Candy.

Alex bit his lip, hating the awkward silence. "Go on, then. Tell me. Tell me I'm a sick cannibal monster who should've died bloody, and Terminus deserved to burn and my mom to die. Tell me
that you and yours and gonna kill me and mine along with Negan."

Carl placed his hands on the railing and watched the residents bustling below. "You should've died." He paused. "But it doesn't matter. All that matters is him. And my dad will kill him."

Alex stepped beside him. "No way, I called dibs."

"What he do to you? Was it the girl he said died?"

"Wasn't 'cause of him. Totally unrelated. What he's done, it's a bunch of things. Nothing like what he did to y'all, but that's only 'cause we did everything he told us to." He squeezed the railing, his hands a mere inches from Carl's. "I'm sorry about Glenn."

"No, you're not."

Alex grit his teeth. "Yes, I am. Believe whatever else you want about me, but believe me when I say I'm sorry about that."

He was quiet for a few seconds. "Maggie is pregnant. Daryl is the prisoner."

His eyes grew. "What? Maggie's—"

"Story just keeps getting better doesn't it?"

His heart ached for Maggie. "That motherfucker's gonna get it one day," he said of Negan.

Carl nodded. "You know I lost my mom too. She said I was going to beat this world. She was wrong. There is no beating it."

Alex searched for a reply, but none came. He was right. There was no beating it, only joining it.

A loud whistle sounded through factory followed by Negan's booming voice, "Come one! Come all!"

"Come on, man," Alex said. "I know we'll be expected."

"What's going on?" Carl asked as he followed Alex.

"Oh, somethin' fun I'm sure." He led the way down to the floor as people gathered. It was the same area where Gina's fingers were cut. "Negan loves his public punishment. That's what this is gonna be."

The crowd parted for him and Carl which Alex thought odd. A few stared at him as he waded through. His heart sped up. Why were they looking at him? When they reached the forefront of the crowd, Alex's stomach dropped. Albert was tied to a chair. Beth was on the sidelines along with four other well-dressed women—wives, he assumed—while Sherry held her close.

It all clicked.

Albert smelling like perfume, his reluctance to speak of the girl he was with, and Negan's time away. Beth cheated on Negan with Albert and now he was going to pay.

A low croak escaped Alex's lips as he set sights on Negan heating the iron inside a woodstove. Carl said Beth's name as a mixture of happiness and horror flashed across his features. Alex scanned the crowd for his people, but his eyes were unable to focus, only seeing blurry faces.
No. This was not happening. Albert was not about to have his face burned. He was not going to have a permanent scar like Mira, Jackie, Mac, and Dwight.

But this was Negan's world, so yes he was.

There was nothing Alex could do but watch. Only be there for him. Albert found Alex among the sea of faces and with a shameful gaze, mouthed what looked like 'please, go.' Alex shook his head. He would never leave him.

"Alright!" Negan piped up, making Alex flinch. "It saddens me to say we have a big no-no here. One of the conditions of being my wife is you must be loyal to me. And my sweet Annette has been unfaithful. To fucking Albert here of all people. Dave caught them in the throes of passion earlier today. Tsk tsk. I'd hoped this would never happen, but..." He pulled the red-hot glowing iron from the stove and walked over to Beth. "I'm sorry, doll. I really am. I've clearly been unable to give you what you need so you had to look elsewhere. I'll make it up to you."

Beth kept looking down as Sherry held her heaving shoulders. Negan slid to Albert who shook on his seat. Yet in an act of bravery, he lifted his head to give Negan access. He screamed as the iron scalded his face. Steam rose from his melting skin. Alex's knees went weak and his veins filled with white rage.

Negan then removed the iron, bits of skin still sizzling on it, and declared, "You'll carry this mark forever, but all is forgiven. Just don't um, don't fucking do it again."

Albert was rocking violently in his chair as he still cried out in pain.

This had to end. Forcing them into servitude, treating Theresa like a trophy, threatening to kill Martin, chopping off Gina's fingers, and now this? Alex spotted a revolver in a nearby woman's holster and reached for it. Negan had to die. As his fingers brushed against its handle, a shove forced him back. He didn't know or care who it was and stayed focused on the gun even as its owner edged away.

"Let me go!" Alex yelled, struggling against the other. "Let me go!"

"Cool it!" Martin's voice pierced his ears. It was him who got in the way of his goal. A new set of hands gripped him beneath his arms and held him in place.

"Let me go!" He kept fighting but soon lost his resolve and went limp. "Let me go..."

"Whoa!" Negan said. "Alex, I know that was hard to watch but he's going to be fine. It's alright, I'll let that outburst of yours slide. I know you have major angst issues."

"No more!" Beth declared, and stomped over to Negan. "No more, Negan. I'm done."

He placed the iron against a beam. "Excuse me?"

"I'm done being your wife. I'll live down here, I'll work for points. Tyreese can go back with Carl. I'm not doing this anymore. Albert didn't deserve this. You want to know why I strayed? Because he's a better man than you, a better person. And so am I." She drew back her hand and slapped him across the face. He twitched his struck cheek and studied her as if waiting for her to apologize, but she stood her ground. "If that's your decision then I can't stop you."

"No," Carl said, stepping forth from the crowd. "She's coming back with me."
Beth pursed her lips and shook her head. "No, I can't, Carl... look at what—"

"I don't care. You're our family no matter what. We need you no matter what."

There were no 'even thoughs' for them. Beth had become a stranger and a villain in the eyes of many yet they would accept her back. Alex and his people would still love Albert after his breaking of the rules. No question about it. Alex realized perhaps there were no 'even thoughs' for him either.
Gareth was a Savior. He lived by their rules and their rules alone. But when he peered through the infirmary door and saw an agonized Albert lying on a cot, gauze covering half his face, he had to force down his own pain. Albert had broken a rule. This was the life they had agreed to. The punishment they must endure if they disobeyed.

Still, a member of his family was hurting and no reasoning could dispel the rage in Gareth's system. Gina's lost fingers were one thing. Both she and Gareth got by without them. An official mark of shame was different. Albert would carry a deformed face for the rest of his life. His youthful glow ruined before even reaching twenty.

Gareth opened the door and rushed to Albert's side. Kaylee and Steph argued a few feet away, but Albert took no notice of anyone, only whimpering in pain. Pain was all they could count on. Gareth understood that. So how many times did Negan have to remind him?

"Albert," Gareth said, leaning over and trying to catch his gaze, but he jerked away. "I'm not mad at you. You have to know that."

Kaylee removed her rubber gloves with a pop. "Steph, just get out."

Steph barked out a laugh. "Excuse me? This is my job."

She clenched her teeth. "Please."

"Listen, you little bitch—"

"Get, out, get out, get out!" Kaylee's shriek ripped through the air. Gareth's eardrums vibrated. Never had he heard her voice reach that decibel.

"Wow, bite my head off."

The other doctor turned and left.

Kaylee laid her gloves on a nearby desk before looking to her patient. "I'm so sorry. I can't make the pain stop. They only let us have Tylenol Three to give you and that's... I know it's not enough."

Albert gave a semblance of a nod. "It's... fine."

It didn't matter what they gave Negan. The minute they stepped out of line they were mincemeat. It didn't matter Gareth and Martin had exerted authority in his name. It didn't matter that Gareth worked his hardest to be The Bestest Little Savior in the World. Because at the end of the day they were mere pawns.

The door burst open and in came Alex, Theresa, and Gina. Gareth silently questioned Martin's whereabouts. Theresa and Alex stood by the door as they had already seen Albert's injury. Gina, however, had not, and she bolted to the bed.

"Oh, baby..." Gina cooed, her three-fingered right hand hovering above his gauze.

"This has got to stop," Theresa said with a blank face.

Alex folded his arms. "Even Beth said 'no more'."
Against his instincts, Gareth replied, "Beth has a clean way out. We don't."

"Then we make a messy one," Alex countered.

For the good of his people he wanted to. He always had, but keeping them there was their only means to stay relatively safe.

"There is no way out," Gareth added. "This doesn't create one. I'm sorry I can't tell you what you want to hear."

Theresa came forth and looked him in the eye. "Make one out of thin air then. Or I will."

"Oh? Then what's your suggestion? What's your brilliant plan for getting out of here and evading an army of Saviors eager to hunt us down? You want to go to Alexandria and have Sunday dinner with Rick and Carol?"

"No, what I was is to never have to breathe the same air as these people again. Make it happen. Blow this place apart or so help me god, I will."

"Still not hearing your plan."

"Set fire to the fence of walkers. They're flammable."

He rolled his eyes. "Fire? Really? Destroying a major section of their property and painting an even bigger target on our backs? Oh and nevermind all of this with Albert probably has us on Negan's radar for a possible break. Next." Theresa was quiet, pursing her lips. "See? You have nothing. We have nothing."

"You once found something out of nothing."

"I know you're afraid, man," Alex interjected. "You're afraid of what might happen if you get things even a little bit wrong."

Gareth rubbed his temple. "I am not afraid."

"Yeah, you are. You told me something about myself earlier that I didn't know, so I'm gonna tell you something about you you didn't know. He's terrified you. You can't see straight you're so scared. Of him, of yourself, and of what might happen if you stop being perfect for one minute."

Imperfection was why Cynthia was dead. Sipsey had made him soft and flawed. He should have jumped Naz the second she showed up. Instead, he waited for her to pull the gun.

Again, he pushed his instincts away. "You know what that makes us if we make a run for it now? Cattle."

"Gare's right," Gina said, gripping Albert's hand. "Y'all haven't been here as long as I have. Haven't been around like I have. He gave it to you all nice and comfy at Sipsey. You don't know how horrible he can make your life without him even being there. You do not want to be running from him."

"You want to give up too, huh?" Theresa accused.

"I wanna stay alive. My kid too."

"You said you were going to stand with us from now on."
"That's enough, Theresa," Gareth warned.

Gina lifted an eyebrow. "Oh really, queen bee? 'Cause you'd be so eager to bounce if you had a kid in your belly."

"You didn't even want your kid a week ago."

"Tess!" Alex exclaimed. "Seriously?"

Gareth moved in front of her. "Theresa, don't make this worse than it already is."

She was quiet a moment as Gina glared at her. "I'm sorry, Gina. That was out of line."

"Look," Gina started, "if you go, I'll go with you. When I said no more cowering like a bitch, I meant it. But I'm telling you, it's a mistake."

"No," Kaylee said. "He's scared you too. We can't take this anymore. This is the last straw for me."

"Get us out, or I will," Theresa said.

Gareth shook his head. "You're running on your emotions and that spells mistakes. That was one thing you were supposed to have learned as a leader. Slipped your mind?"

"It's given me incentive you arrogant bastard. You taught me. You taught me about the benefits outweighing the risks and vice versa. You're scared? Well so am I! I'm so scared I'm willing to take a risk!"

"Fine, you win. I'll come up with a perfect scheme just to prevent you from acting out of impulse. There's a benefit outweighing a risk."

"I knew it! I knew you always thought I was incompetent."

"You're only incompetent when you let yourself be."

The door opened and finally Martin arrived.

"Been missing you, sweetheart," Gareth bit.

"Aw sorry, honey," Martin replied, and raised his middle finger. "I had the audacity to do damage control after Alex lost it back there. Yeah, and I can already tell what you've all been saying. Gare, you're convinced we need to play it safe. It's 'too dangerous' and we have to stay here or else it's suicide. Theresa, you're pissed and outraged and demanding he grow a set or you'll do something yourself." He slid to her side. "And I'm totally on board. Team Maresa, you know."

Theresa offered him a half smile.

"I'm getting deja vu to when you two busted open the vault and got kidnapped."

"Made shit actually happen, didn't it?"

"We walk right out the front door," Alex said.

Gareth blinked. "What?"

He shrugged. "No one would think we'd just get up and leave. You're always looking for a complex answer through a maze. This ain't algebra, it's two-plus-two."
Martin smacked his hands together. "See? That's it. He's got it."

Theresa's pointed to her husband. "Yes. *That* is a good idea."

Gareth thought. They could organize an away trip of a few of them and several Saviors. After killing the Saviors in their party, the remainder of their group at The Sanctuary would venture out in search. It would only be a few miles away. Nothing that needed approval from Negan or the lieutenants.

It was so stupid and simple it just might work.

"Listen to your brother," Gina said to Gareth. "At Terminus, it was all about you and what *you* wanted to do because *you* were so damn brilliant. I think some of us got some good ideas too."

Gareth narrowed his eyes. "You said you were against this."

"Oh, I am, but I think Alex is onto something."

* * *

"If I weren't such a control freak, I'd just ask you to lay out the whole thing," Gareth said to Albert as they sat on his bed. Albert had been discharged from the infirmary after several days. He spent as much time as possible in his room.

"Alex's idea is a good one," Albert said.

Gareth felt Albert's state of mind was stable enough to finally ask the question he had been dying to. Beth. "Why her? Why now?"

"You really have to ask? She's... Beth. I felt so ashamed when we first had her with us. What you wanted to do to her when all I wanted to do was be with her. But she was just supposed to be a tool to—"

"Fulfill my pathetic, aimless idea of some vengeance?"

He smiled a little. "She has a gentle soul. Like Cynthia." His voice dipped. "God, I wish Cynthia were here."

"So do I."

"Why don't you talk about her?"

"I miss her too much. And I did wrong by her. Not just Naz, but before."

He squinted. "How did you do wrong by her?"

"I knew going into it I would eventually break up with her. I knew exactly where we would end up."

"Oh."

"She never knew that though I don't think."

"I guess not. She talked about you all the time. Complained about you a lot too, but she was happy to have the privilege."
A hollow ache claimed his chest. "Least there was that."

"If we go, we'll never know if that was her. If that—"

"It wasn't her. She talked about everything to people at Sipsey. Her last name, her favorite sunglasses, etcetera, etcetera."

Cynthia had her own pair of heart-shaped sunglasses at bunker. Gareth had taken them back to the factory unbeknownst to anyone else. He secured them in his jacket's inner pocket.

A knock came at the door followed by a voice, "It's Alex."

"Come in," Albert shouted.

Alex came in and shut the door behind him. He held a sealed styrofoam cup. "Hey, man. I uh, brought you this. They said it's got chicken broth, 'course I don't know if that's true. It's also got egg noodles and carrots, and..." He shut his eyes and set the cup on the dresser. "You don't have the flu, half your face was burned with an iron. And I bring soup like an idiot."

Albert sat up and shook his head. "No, no, no. Thank you. Anything to avoid having to go out and get stared and laughed at. Thank you, Alex."

His shoulders relaxed. "Oh. You're welcome."

"So, uh, sex-ed then chicken soup, huh? You'll make a great dad."

Alex showed no reaction to his joke. "Yeah-huh."

Gareth stood up, starting to ask when Alex gave Albert sex-ed when he realized something else was on his brother's mind. "Hey, you all there?"

"No. Hell no."

"You have to be."

"I just keep thinking about how I fucked up again. That chick's gun I tried to grab. I mean, Martin had to do damage control for me."

He sighed. "Get over it."

"What?"

"Get over it. Get over feeling sorry for yourself. Albert's doing it, and a damn good job at that."

"He's right," Albert said, pulling himself off the bed and to his soup.

Alex scoffed. "Just like that? Get over it?"

"Yep," Gareth confirmed. "Suck it up, stop it, knock it off."

He watched Albert as he popped up plastic lid. "Oh, damnit, I forgot to bring a spoon."

Albert sipped from the cup. "World's not going to end again because I don't have a spoon."

"Focus," Gareth said to Alex. "Our plan is in the works. Albert's just better enough to travel, but not too much so that they'd think we were waiting for him to fully heal."
Alex cleared his throat. "Okay. And the rest of it?"

"Tomorrow, you, Albert, Gina, and Martin are going to go fishing on the lake with two or three other Saviors. I've already talked to a few higher-ups about it. You're going to catch a ton of fish, hopefully, because we'll need the dinner. Then you'll cap your Savior companions. That'll take approximately three hours. Meanwhile here, we'll wonder why-oh-why you're not back yet. Theresa is going to be upset worrying about you, near tears because she's so overwhelmed." He recalled how well her ruse worked when luring Geoff in Atlanta. "The rest of us will, likely with more Saviors, will go out looking for you. They get deaded too and we're home free. It's simple, it's plain, it's not what anyone will expect. Just like you said."

"I got weed. Could have a bunch of us get stoned."

"What?"

"Well, it's partially for you, Albert, 'cause of your pain. A dude traded me some from the grow box they have a few floors up. So what if we get extra stupid and get stoned? What kind of dumbasses try to escape while high?"

"Why, baby brother, can you fight for your life while buzzed?"

"Gina won't be smoking it 'cause she's knocked-up."

"I always knew you were brilliant under there."

Alex's tense features brightened into a warm smile. "So um, how many hours after you take off will that leave us to get some distance?"

"One to two. Gotten pretty familiar with their protocol."

"So Appalachia?"

"'Appalachia,'" Gareth echoed in a mock southern drawl. "Their territory stops at the mountains. They'll expect us to head there, but it'll be ten times easier disappearing in that terrain than anywhere else. And hey, make sure to bring your sketchbook."

"Ain't no way I'm ever leaving that behind again."

* * *

Gareth had watched Alex, Albert, Gina, and Martin drive away in a pick-up truck. Three others named Dave, Abby, and Dan joined them, each all sitting in the truck bed.

Rest in peace, Gareth thought.

After a few hours, he sought Melanie and found her in settled on a second-floor bench with a book. The woman was concerning. Having lived in Sipsey so long softened her survival skills and comprehension of camouflage. Her gold, red, and blue-striped shirt wouldn't suffice.

"Melanie?" he greeted.

She looked up from her book and straightened. "Oh. Hey."

"May I?" He gestured to the seat.

"Of course."
He sat beside her and lowered his voice. "Your shirt looks like something an eight-year-old boy would wear. Sort of screams 'look at me.'"

She nodded. "Right. Camouflage. I need to blend in."

"Exactly. So you should change before we go." Her hand moved to the butterfly clips holding back her short golden blonde hair. "Those are fine."

*Hideous, but acceptable.*

He folded his hands. "And Melanie, just so we're clear, when I agreed to bring you along it was because of Kaylee. You're going to need to be a hundred-and-ten-percent committed to whatever we have to do out there."

"I am."

"I mean, really, *really* commit. No wishy-washy, no hesitation. Really think about it. Because if you don't have the steel stomach to deal with it, then you need to stay right here so you don't bog us down and get one of us hurt or killed. That hurt or killed one of us who could be Kaylee. I'm letting you come because I did her wrong and I owe it to her, but don't think I won't face her wrath again to keep us strong. I won't hesitate to break the weak link if I have to."

The color drained from her face. "I—I am committed. And I'd never think twice about keeping Kaylee safe."

"Good. As long as we understand each other we won't have any problems." He patted her knee and she flinched. "So... whatcha readin'?"

"Oh, uh... it's a book, it's uh... about rabbits."

He succeeded in flustering her. Good. It gave her a taste of things to come.

He peered at the book cover. "Ah, Velveteen Rabbit. Good choice." He checked the wristwatch Alex loaned him—4:40 PM. Just under half an hour until Theresa would urge to send a search party.

He had considered sending Theresa fishing and having Alex home instead. Theresa and Martin complemented each other as he thought them the 'rottweilers' of their group. But her current volatility made him decide to keep her close.

"You rip that off from Sipsey?" Gareth asked.

"Yeah, it was my favorite book as a kid. Always comforts me when I need it."

"Cute," he replied as footsteps approached. Candy.

"Gareth?" Candy asked.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Negan wants to see you."

His stomach dropped. "Why?"

"You don't ask why, you ask 'how do I get there ASAP?' Come on, gorgeous, he don't got all day."
Gareth rose and Melanie said, "Hey, Gareth? Good talk." She gave a thumbs up. He returned it, thinking her an odd girl.

Candy escorted him across the busy mess hall and up several flights of stairs. She looked him over once they got to an executive floor. "I swear, boy, you get prettier every time I see you," she said, and Gareth held back a grimace. "If that whole eating people thing didn't weird me out, I'd smack your ass right about now.'

"Oh, I'm beside myself in disappointment."

"You're also a grade-A dick. Just like my first husband."

He wasn't going to miss Candy.

They reached the door leading to the small dining area for 'wealthier' residents like lieutenants and advisors. Fear clenched at Gareth's center when Negan's boisterous laugh sounded through the door. Does he know? Why was he asked up here?

Candy held the door open for Gareth and shut it behind him. The room was small, but well-decorated and stocked with bookshelves. Negan stood at the forefront beside Dwight, Carl, and another man dressed in white with his back turned and holding a serving platter. Another squeeze of fear struck him when Negan flashed him a grin. Alex was right—he was terrified of the man. The man who so nonchalantly scarred Albert for life. Who would do worse to them if he knew their escape plans.

When he caught sight of the unknown man's face he recognized him as Daryl. Negan's motive clicked instantly: Dwight, Carl, Daryl, and Gareth in one room with him? He wanted to play with his toys.

And since Gareth was a good Savior, he knew how act the part. "Heya, archer," he said, and Daryl's head jerked up with recognition "Still no haircut, huh?"

"Dwight would never do it," Negan said, taking a strawberry from the serving platter and tugging on Dwight's hair. "He won't even cut his own hair. Hey, Daryl, stop being fucking rude and offer our guest something to eat."

"Ironic, he feeds me now. Didn't let me before."

"Ew. None of that talk while I'm eating. Shit."

*How long is this going to last?* He wasn't enjoying such sadism. The natural order of the world looked to have punished Daryl enough. Though he might have felt differently if the broken prisoner were Carol.

Daryl offered the plate, avoiding eye contact. Gareth took a strawberry and Negan smirked at his cut hands. The look he gave next made him swear he gained telepathy for a second.

"*Remember that pain.*"

Phantom slices of pain crisscrossed his hands as he recalled Lucille's barbs. Nauseous dread made him nearly forget how to bring the fruit to his lips. But he persevered and let its sweetness pool across tongue. It would be a long time before he tasted something like it again. Hunger was imminent.

*What are we doing trying to run?*
Gareth ignored his feelings and leaned down to analyze Carl's eyepatch. "Happened to your eye, kid?"

"Fuck you," Carl spat.

"Jeez, you kiss your dad with that mouth?"

Carl started forward and Negan held him back. "Hey, Gareth. Be fucking nicer. He's just a kid. Manners."

"Sorry. Alex was good cop, I guess. I always have to be the bad guy."

Negan finished his strawberry and tossed it in the trashcan by his feet. "Yeah, Carl told me he and Alex talked about their feelings. Heartwarming."

"He has that power to get you to spill your deepest, darkest secrets."

Dwight sneered. "It's fucking annoying."

Negan bit his lip. "That Alex, huh? He's like the sweet, gooey center of your group. Like that Glenn was of Rick's group. Heh, he was definitely gooey. Just ask Lucille."

Gareth could read between the lines—that was a threat against Alex. He crushed the strawberry leaves between his fingers.

"Or maybe the gooey center was Beth?" Negan continued. "Nah, more like the cream center. Slick, wet cream. That garnered a murderous look from Daryl. Gareth promptly lost his appetite. "Gonna miss that cream. Just wonder how it's gonna be with her going back saying she fucked big old bad Neegsy and one of the Termites who were going to eat them. No, wait, did eat one of them. Whew."

"She's our family," Daryl murmured.

"Sure about that? Yeah, she dumped my ass, but any family of yours ever scream for me in pure, pleasure, saying 'oh, Neg—"


"Then eat the god damn fucking melon. It's right there." He gestured to the honeydew on the serving platter. "Hey, how come she chose the name Annette?"

A few moments passed before Daryl answered, "Was her momma's name."

What came to Gareth's mind was cruel, but it would amuse Negan. "If momma Annette could see her Southern Belle now. Not as pure as the driven snow anymore."

A knock at the door interrupted any reaction. Negan groaned. "Who the fuck is it?"

Theresa peaked through, and Gareth checked his watch: 5:01 PM.

"Peach!" Negan beamed, extending his hand. "What a pleasant surprise. How'd you get up here?"

Theresa stepped inside, offering a glassy glance to Carl and Daryl. "I told Candy there was an emergency and I had to tell Gareth. There's been a—"

"Don't lie, you wanted to see some old friends."
"No. The fishing party was supposed to be by at about three and they're not." Her lip trembled. "They're out of walkie range and we were about to go looking."

"Well thanks for letting us know, and gracing us with your lovely presence." He gave a bow. "Now Gareth won't worry."

"I actually came to get him."

"He's kinda busy."

_No, no, no, no..._

If any of them failed to show up, they agreed to abort the plan. No harm done since the Saviors weren't slated to be killed until after he, Theresa, and Melanie arrived. But this would be their only shot for a long time. Another 'trip' so soon would be suspicious.

Theresa folded her arms. "Well, it's just, I know he doesn't want to stay here while our people are out there. And I really want him to come. Please, Negan?"

Negan placed a hand in his chest. "You're breaking my heart. But I'm sorry, peach, he's busy." He looked at Gareth. "Isn't that right?"

Gareth wanted to sink to the floor. "It's alright, Theresa. I know you can handle it without me. Go."

"Okay," she said, giving a solemn nod before slipping back out the door.

"That one," Negan started with a mouth full of honeydew, "has the hottest, sexiest damn temper. Holy _sh*t_, do not piss her off. I have to tell you the story of when she fed a dude's dick to a roamer."

_She'd do the same to you if she could, Neegsy._

Time droned on and the hope bled from Gareth's veins. Although he figured if Negan knew their plan, he would have announced his knowledge when Theresa walked in. Though it was hard to find solace. Finally, Negan excused him, and Gareth slogged down to the main floor. His watch read 5:29 PM. The search party would be long gone.

Peering out the window to the parking lot, a spark of joy ignited upon seeing Theresa, Kaylee, and Melanie. Theresa, Kitrick, and Dave the brig guard, helped each other change a Jeep's tire.

Gareth rushed to the exit and flew outside. "What happened?" he asked, feigning concern.

Theresa scowled and cranked down the car jack. "Some asshole cut the tires on this and every car out here we're allowed to take. I bet it was Mandy. She is insane."


The corner of Gareth's mouth quirked. "You need any help?"

Kitrick shook his head. "No. Theresa knew how to change one, and she's not even one of the lesbians." He threw a glance to Kaylee and Melanie.

Gareth might miss Kitrick. His idiocy was amusing.

Once they finished, they hopped in the car and set off through the gate. Gareth, Theresa, Melanie, and Kaylee squeezed together in the back seat as it offered easy access to Kitrick and Dave up front. The Sanctuary faded from view and Gareth gripped the knife in his holster.
Just a few more minutes...

Gareth's pulse raced as he nodded to his people. Kaylee and Theresa used their guns to hit the two Saviors in the back of the head, knocking them out. The Jeep swerved as they slumped forward and Theresa took the wheel from the unconscious Kitrick. Gareth stabbed him in the neck and Melanie knifed Dave before they hauled their bodies from the moving vehicle. Their status as walkers would trouble the search party and grant them more time.

"Holy shit!" Theresa exclaimed, breathing a sigh of relief as she settled in the driver's seat.

Gareth hopped in the front passenger's and relaxed into its cushioning. "Whose idea was slashing the tires?"


Not useless after all, huh?

"Thank you. I mean that."

She didn't reply, but Kaylee told her, "No, no, no, don't look back. It's best not to."

Gareth's skin tingled with anticipation as they made it down the dirt road to the lake's clearing. His watch read 6:04 PM. Dusk light reflected over the water that washed over three bodies. He swallowed a small gasp, but released it when he recognized them as the three Saviors. A rickety engine roared and Martin rolled the pickup truck from beneath an array of trees. Alex sat beside him in the passenger's seat and the rest scattered in the back and truck bed.

Theresa and Martin stopped their vehicles side-to-side, both asking questions and talking over the other in the process.

"Everyone okay?" Gareth shouted over them.

"Yeah," Martin answered. "Our buds over there caught onto us pretty quick to my surprise. Not before we got some fish caught though. So what the fuck took y'all so long?"


"Okay, everyone," Gareth began, "we need to put as much distance between us and The Sanctuary as we can before it gets too dark. Drive, drive, drive."

Chapter End Notes

While this is certainly *NOT NOT NOT* the last we'll see of Negan (don't worry!), the big ol' official Saviors arc is coming to a close. Why? Because while it's been my favorite of this story, I've grown weary of large amounts of peripheral characters and large communities. It hasn't been just the hunters since they found Sipsey. I miss them trying to make it on their own, having autonomy, and I miss writing wilderness survival.
"I see you..." Negan's voice pierced Theresa's ear as she began waking. "I'm coming for you, peach." She woke with a start. His voice felt real enough that her eardrum still vibrated. A mere trick of the half-asleep mind, she reminded herself.

The rest of her group sat under the bright night sky in the back of the pickup truck. Pulling her knees to her chest for warmth, she noticed no one else was sleeping. Nor did they speak.

"So we really did this," Theresa said, her voice ragged from sleep. "We're really back out here."

"You having second thoughts?" Gareth asked without a hint of weariness.

"No. Just thought we'd passed this is all."

Kaylee lolled her head against the edge of the truck. "Every time we find a light at the end of the tunnel, we find there's another tunnel on the other side of that light."

"There is no great finality," Gareth said. "No point where we finally make it and live happily ever after. Thought you knew that already." Kaylee stayed quiet and after a moment, he added, "Theresa, I want to thank you."

Theresa squinted. He must be joking. "Why?"

"You always challenge me. You keep me on my toes. You've never been afraid to share with me your plethora of opinions."

"You and your backhanded compliments."

He smiled with an edge of self-deprecation. "I mean it. Thank you. You helped get me out of my labyrinth mindset. And because of that, I'm asking if you want to lead our group with me."

This was some sort of prank.

"What?"

"You were in a position of power, and even though it was one beneath Negan, it was still a position of power. Once you get to that place, there's no giving it up or turning it off. I can already see what will happen if we don't share this. You'll be unfulfilled and frustrated."

"You said I could be incompetent."

"So can I."

How would it even work? Would they have brainstorming sessions together? Argue until they came to some agreement? Nevertheless, the offer was intriguing. Being the huffy voice of dissent
grew old. A real role of authority was too good to pass up.

"Okay," Theresa said. "I'm in." The rest gave a few quiet cheers. Alex slumped against the truck and laid his hands on his lap. She figured he was relieved her and Gareth's quarrel was over. It was hard on him when they were at odds. She then did a double-take: where was Gareth's public gratitude to Alex? "Gareth," she began, "you should also thank Alex."

Gareth raised his brows. "Yeah?"

"It was his idea to go the simple route. I was in the maze mindset too until he said simplest was best."

He gave a nod. "You're right. Thank you, Alex. Couldn't have done this without you."

Alex returned the nod and even through the dark, Theresa knew he was blushing.

* * *

"You know he'd never, ever say it out loud, but he just wants his big brother to be proud of him," Theresa told Gareth as he organized supplies from the Jeep.

Gareth shut the door and shielded his eyes from the bright sun. "I know. Always have."

She scanned the area to ensure no one would overhear. "Look, I know you accepted his idea because you thought it was a good one, but I have to thank you this time. After everything Negan's dug up for him, and for us, he needed that more than you can believe. I'm his wife, and I can convince him I love him and he can believe me, but there's some things even I can't give him. And that's you."

"You know I'm nothing if not strategic. Even when I don't know it. And you're welcome." He patted her shoulder and she pulled him into an embrace. He went rigid. "That's..."

"You're my family, you arrogant bastard."

He breathed a laugh. "Never been much of a hugger, you know."

She let him go and tugged at the ends of his long sleeves. "Just so long as we're clear."

"Crystal."

"I'm so going to enjoy getting some more sway over you."

"Figured you would."

"Hey!" Martin called. "We got the motherload over here."

Theresa peered around the truck to Martin kneeling by a freshly dug hole in the grass—earthworms. They had tasted great when starving, but now she might have to hold her nose.

"First meal beside the fish to document," Gareth remarked, pulling a pen and small notepad from his pocket.

She frowned and trudged over to Martin before settling in the grass. Numerous worms wriggled in the soft dirt.

"How many you think I can fit in my mouth?" Martin asked, dropping three of the moving things in
his mouth.

She resented his smacking. "You're disgusting."

"Yeah, duh. Answer my question."

"Not too many. We need to ration them." She flicked the dirt off one before placing it on her
tongue. The familiar slimy and sandy taste made her grimace.

Martin burst out laughing. "Your face. Oh god, your face."

She choked the worm down and hurled fistfuls of dirt at him. He laughed even harder and she
seethed, throwing several more dirtballs that included a few worms.

"Yay, more for me." He took a worm from his shirtsleeve and ate it, dirt and all.

Despite disliking the mockery, her mood lightened. Martin had a knack for finding humor at the
oddest times. A trait she had previously hated most about him. Now she didn't know what she
would do without it.

"Guys," Gareth's warning tone began, "we need to separate those and dole them out. Gina should
get a bit more."

She cleared her throat and wiped her hands on her jeans. "Right."

Martin shook the sand from his clothes as Gareth joined them. "We were just about to, boss.
Damn."

"Bosses," Theresa reminded.

"Right."

They divided the worms and Theresa elected to bite hers in half before swallowing them whole.
She gave a handful to Gina and Albert then found Alex in the Jeep's backseat. He ate them without
hesitation and she rolled her eyes. The guy had to force down broccoli and green beans but had no
qualms about worms.

Leaning over the seat, she reached for her bag on the floor to fetch a water thermos. Alex's gaze
was planted far lower than her eyes.

A grin spread across her face. "All this time and you still make an effort to look down my shirt."

His gaze flitted up. "Huh? Oh, was just in my field of vision."

Her heart swelled with love. Even through the pain of their recent hardships, she felt so lucky this
adorable goofball was hers. She moved forward and claimed his mouth in a soft kiss.

Once they parted, he asked, "What was that for?"

"Just love you is all. Even though there's still worm guts on your bottom lip."

He licked his lip clean and smiled. "Love you too." He was silent a moment, his face then growing
somber.

"What?"
"Aren't you terrified?"

"Of course I am. I know we all are, we just have to not let it influence us."

"I know that, but every little sound I hear I think it's one of them. Negan's won't give us a pass this time. This is it."

"Wouldn't give us a pass. He's not going to find us."

"Found Dwight and Sherry, didn't he?"

"Dwight and Sherry didn't know what they were doing. And think about it, we've never heard about anyone who successfully got away, but if there were, wouldn't Negan want to keep that info to himself? Make everyone think that no one's ever really escaped?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Guess you're right."

She cupped his face and pressed a kiss to his forehead, then cheek, and finally his mouth. "It'll be okay."

He gave something like a nod. "Okay."

"We need to help get everyone ready. Get on the road."

"Yeah, I was just fixing to start."

She gave him a look. "Right."

Gina's groan of pain sucked the warmth from her body.

They bolted for the sound's source and found Gina leaning against an elm at the forest's edge.

"What's wrong?" Kaylee asked as the rest of the group gathered.

Gina cradled her stomach and held up her hand. "It's fine. This happens sometimes. I think it passed —" Her face scrunched.

Theresa's heart pounded against her ribcage.

Kaylee placed a hand around Gina's wrist. "Why didn't you tell us about this?"

"Well, I'm still pregnant, so it ain't like I'm losing the leech. It's probably those false contraction things."

"Gina," Gareth started, "you have to tell us if something's wrong."

"Don't like folks worrying about me."

"It's not just about you anymore," Theresa said. "I know that sounds bitchy, but it's true."

"She's right, man," Alex added.

Gina huffed. "I'm not a porcelain doll."

"No, but your baby is," Kaylee said. "How long has this been happening? How often? Where does it hurt? What kind of pain? Has there been any blood? Is it random or triggered by something?"
"Yo, slow down. Uh, about a month. Once or twice a week. Right here." She tapped on the space below her belly. "Feels achy, sorta like period cramps. Never been any blood, and it's random."

"Okay. Sounds like Braxton-Hicks. Just unusual it's happening so soon."

Her eyes widened. "What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure." She scratched her head. "Maybe it's stress? I'm not an OB/GYN, just taught myself some basics a while back. You had an exam, right?"

She pursed her lips. "No..."

"Gina!"

"Look, Steph's a cunt, the male docs at The Sanctuary are creepy as hell. And I didn't quite feel like going 'hey, Kay, guess what, I'm pregnant. Will you stick your arm up my pussy?'"

Martin snickered.

Kaylee bared her teeth. "Gina..."

"Kaylee," Gareth started, "give her an exam. This isn't going to do. We need to find someplace to settle to keep her safe. And if I—we—" He glanced at Theresa. "—tell you to take it easy, you take it easy."

"Making a break for it is not going to be the reason you lose your kid," Theresa added.

Gina pouted. "Fine."

"Theresa? Help me out?" Kaylee asked.

Theresa stiffened. "With the exam?"

"No, with baking cookies."

She suppressed a smile. Kaylee was such a quiet, well-mannered thing until it came to her patients. She was a born healer. No wonder she left them once. 'First, do no harm,' was ingrained in her beliefs.

"Why not get your girlfriend to help?" Gina asked. "Theresa's all fidgety about it."

Theresa's brows shot up. "Fidgety?"

"Oh, uh..." Melanie stuttered, "I don't know you that well, Gina. I think it'd be awkward."

"You know, I can't see that well out of this eye," Albert said, pointing to his burned side. "So..."

Kaylee glared. "No."

Martin stepped forward. "Yeah, but it ain't nothing I hadn't seen before, G-string." He winked.

Gina scoffed. "I hung up the G-strings at week seven. All granny panties these days." She started for the Jeep. "Alright gals, let's get this porno intro on the road."

Theresa followed Kaylee and Gina to the Jeep and tossed a worried glance back to Alex. He shrugged.
The three women reached the vehicle and Gina climbed in back. Theresa stood awaiting instruction as Kaylee pulled an almost-empty hand sanitizer bottle from the middle compartment.

"So, what are we even going to do?" Theresa asked.

"Pelvic, then I'll feel her stomach," Kaylee answered. "Again, I'm not an OB..." Her voice dipped.

"How hard can it be?" Gina asked, lying back and fiddling with her pants fly.

Theresa tensed and hurried in, getting on her knees beside the seat. That way she could help Kaylee without the visuals. She was no prude, they had shared communal showers at Terminus and Sipsey, but this was many times more intimate.

"First rule, no lesbian jokes or I'll pinch your cervix," Kaylee warned. Gina made a zip lip motion. "Theresa, you help hold up her leg and hand me more Purell if I need it."

* Hold up her leg!? *

Kaylee began the exam and Theresa's bashfulness shattered once she realized she could find something wrong. Her lips parted and her breath stopped as she watched Kaylee's hands pressed against Gina's bare stomach. They had to keep the child inside alive.

The child who would have no idea what kind of people her mother and her friends were. No notion of crumbled civilization, the dead walking, or the survivors who committed all manners of ugly deeds. No Terminus, no Saviors, no fear, no grief, only innocence. Theresa's memory flashed to her cousin's daughter calling her 'Auntreesa,' and wondered if Gina's son or daughter would do the same. For the first time, she felt a pang of envy Gina was the one expecting instead. Her hand instinctively rested on the locket in her hip pocket.

"Everything seems normal," Kaylee said once she finished, lying back against the seat. Theresa let go of Gina's leg

Gina sat up. "You sure?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Again, not an OB, but I think you're just having early false labor."

Theresa knitted her hand with Gina's. "We'll make sure you'll be taken care of."

* * *

Theresa sat in the back of the moving truck and enjoyed the chilly air. The Jeep had run out of gas and she and Gareth decided to ditch it. They would only get roughly half as far if they split the fuel between two vehicles. After pushing the Jeep into the forest, they set off down the overgrown road.

Martin pulled a cigarette from his pocket. He had lessened his smoking in the time since The Sanctuary, but Theresa still frowned.

When Martin lit up, she opened her mouth to protest due to Gina's pregnancy when Gina bounced away, exclaiming, "I'm pregnant, you dick!"

Martin gave a shake of his head. "Oh, right." He scooted to the edge of the truck and exhaled the smoke into the whipping wind. "But a word of advice for the future, it would've been more constructive to say: 'Martin, dear, I respect your choices, but I am expecting, and would appreciate you not smoking near me lest it harm my child.'"
Gina stuck out her tongue.

Theresa ignored the two and peered inside the truck through the window. Kaylee and Melanie sat in the back while Gareth drove and spoke to Alex beside him. She filled with contentedness seeing them so comfortable with one another. Just like Michael and Mary always wanted. Turning back around, she inched to Albert at the far left side of the truck bed. "How you doing?" she asked.

Albert shrugged. "As good as I can be. Alex's weed helps the pain a little, makes it bearable. And Kaylee's been keeping an eye on me. She gets so intense when she has a patient."

"I know. It's when her claws come out." Albert rubbed a piece of red fabric around his hand. One of Cynthia's hair ties. "She's still with you, you know. She's with all of us."

"I try to think so."

"I feel her around me all the time. The only right thing Negan's ever said was what he did to you that night. You don't want to be just another body. A breathing one or a non-breathing one." She traced the hair-tie and recalled Cynthia wearing it while sitting in front of a watercolor set Alex inspired her to use. The bright colors spilling across the page as the brush touched the paper. The girl had brought so much light into a dark world.

Tears formed behind her eyes and she removed her hand from the fastener.

"Um, you know," Albert started after a while, "that's one of the reasons for Beth. She made me feel like I was alive."

"I get that. You both lost something precious. You know I particularly... dislike Beth, but I can't blame either of you. Bet you wish Beth was here right now." He didn't reply. "I won't be mad if you say yes."

"Yes."

"You know I'm proud of you."

"For what?"

"Being able to still be standing after all this." She brushed her thumb across his cheek—he was finally growing in significant facial hair. "I still remember that broken kid with the hollowest eyes wanting to jump into the grave with his family. You've lost more than any of us. I don't know how you still remember how to breathe."

He watched the scenery rush by. "One breath at a time." An unamused laugh escaped him. "Nah, I'm just a stupid teenager with hormones."

"Yeah well, the world gets turned inside out, but some things remain the same."

"Actually surprising how much hasn't changed."

"That a good thing or bad thing, you think?"

"Depends. Pain's stayed the same. Grief."

She recalled Gareth's description of Negan's words to him: 'Only thing you can count on is pain.' In many ways he was right, but Negan would not be the cause of any more of their pain. No more.

The vehicle reached a steep uphill slope overcome with growth. Gareth parked the truck and
climbed out alongside the rest.

"Wanna machete that to bits?" Martin asked, waggling his eyebrows.

"First, we need to scout the terrain," Gareth said. "Theresa, what do you think?"

"Makes sense," she replied.

"How you want to do this? Half stay to keep watch on things this end, half go scout?"

"So you're coming up with the ideas and asking me if I agree?"

He sighed. "No."

"Then I'll go scout." She scanned her people. "Martin, Gina, Alex, you're with me."

"Really?" Gina asked. "But I'm made of glass."

"And broken glass can be used as a weapon. Come on."

They packed their weapons and headed to a section by the off the road sparse enough to fit through. Theresa shoved through bundles of brush when Alex let out a low whine of pain.

"What is it?" she asked, whirling around.

Alex stood rubbing his eye. "Oh um, just a branch hit my face and pine poked my eye."

Theresa gave him an affectionate smile before continuing on.

Adorable goofball, indeed.

"Happened to your contacts?" Martin asked.

"They went adios at The Sanctuary," Alex replied, winking his irritated eye. "Solution to put 'em in was too expensive."

"I am not missing that points system," Gina said. "Much prefer the 'see it, take it' kinda thing. Not 'see it, buy it'."

"You always been a klepto?" Martin asked, hacking a branch in half with his machete.

"Did I steal shit at Terminus? Uh, no."

"That we knew about."

They cleared an especially thick area and came to the edge of a cliff. Rolling tree-covered hills claimed the landscape.

Theresa gaped. "It's... it's beautiful."

"Wish I had that Polaroid camera," Alex said. "'Shutterbug' here could take some pretty pictures for once."

"Maybe you can draw something inspired by it later."

"It is a damn nice view," Martin said.
"Now," Gina began, rubbing her chin, "from what I remember from vigorously studying the map at the factory, this area we're in is called 'bum-fuck nowhere.'"

The three others laughed and Theresa cocked her head. "Yeah well, that's the idea. So, you still think we made a mistake?"

"Mistake's made. Can't do nothing about it now. But every mile we gain is mile more we're still breathing."

"Every day above ground's a day won," Alex quoted Mary. "Plus, no walkers yet."

"A guy at Sipsey said he found a horde up in the mountains a while back," Martin said. "Some folks were actually smart enough to move as far away from what's left of civilization. Didn't work for 'em if they were cold bodies, clearly."

"That's both good and bad for us," Gina said.

Theresa gulped. A return to hunters was imminent.

Her ears picked up rustling sounds from the left. She raised a finger to her lips and they skulked toward the noise.

Martin narrowed his eyes at a tree above. "Think I saw a squirrel. Toss you up there to look, boss lady?" He laid his machete against the trunk.

She shrugged. "Sure."

Martin knelt and gripped around her hip before lifting her up. She held herself steady by wrapping one arm around a branch. "Don't see any squirrels." A skeletal hand lurched forth from above and she flinched back. Tumbling down with Martin, she landed on her posterior, crying out, "Ow."

The walker snarled as it reached downward and then fell from the branches.

Gina sprung over with Martin's machete and halved the creature's head. "Ugh, I hate it when they just jump out at you. Like give a few warning sounds, shit. Damn things are impolite."

Theresa scrunched her face from the pain of the impact.

"You okay?" Alex asked, crouching beside her.

"Yeah," she replied. "Be better if Martin hadn't ducked out of the way at the last second."

Martin rubbed his neck as he rose to his feet. "Your elbow was gonna land on my nads, so…"

She growled and sat up before taking in the walker lying on its stomach. The undead appeared to be one of the early turns due to its slimness. Yet its skin lacked decomposition. No bones poking through its flesh and no curdled blood on the mouth.

Theresa stared at it unblinking as her people spoke words she failed to absorb. Did it die of starvation? Based on the height it was probably male, but with no fat reserves who could tell? This person had died up there. Perhaps fallen asleep and their heart stopped. The weak muscle having been cannibalized by their own body for energy. It had happened at Terminus. One didn't have to be skin and bones for hunger to take their life. A lowered immune system and no nutrition to aid fighting an infection had killed a Terminant by way of pneumonia. The man fell asleep and never woke.
That could be them. There were only on the edge of the mountains and yet conditions were so brutal not even this one person was able to survive.

A gasp of air burst from her lungs. She vaguely registered Alex's hand shaking her shoulder, but her body inched closer to the dead thing. Had this former person ever eaten another? Or had their pride won against life?

"Hey, Tess?"

"Theresa?" Martin echoed.

Gina leaned over. "The hell you doin', girl?"

That was it, wasn't it? Negan would cause them no more pain. There would be no climactic end. No crunching strike of Lucille, no reverberating bang of a gunshot, no garbled mess of a walker bite. Just slow, humiliating, quiet death. Saviors would come across their starved bodies one day and shake their heads thinking what idiots they were to run.

Her throat closed up and she struggled to breathe. "Oh no..."

"It's real skinny," Alex said, and wrapped his arms around her. "Hey, if you think that's gonna be us, it ain't."

Gina hurried over and drug the walker from view. "Away you go, bones."

But the image of the undead's starved body remained vivid.

*They must have been so hungry when they died...*

Alex held her tighter. "It's okay, princess. Just breathe. Focus on that oxygen."

"Get up," Martin said.

"Step off, man," Alex bit. "Give her a minute."

"No, she's our leader and therefore doesn't get the luxury of little breakdowns. Get up."

"Martin, I will fucking punch your ass."

He got on one knee and gripped her wrists. "Upsy daisy."

Alex smacked his hands away. "Last warning. I mean it."

"Hey," Gina said, returning from disposing the walker. "Guys, cool it."

Martin stood. "Look, if Gareth were here? He'd say get over it. What if a horde came through right now? She'd be too blubbery to move."

She blinked. A horde. Threats. Her people. Gina's baby. They were going to starve to death if she didn't do something.

"Get fucked, man!" Alex yelled. "I swear to god, if you don't step off—"

"No," Theresa murmured through a shaky breath. "He's right. I—I have to get over it." She pushed herself up while Alex held her steady.
"He ain't right."

"Actually, he is," Gina said with a hand to her hip. "There's no room for that. Not out here."

Theresa managed to straighten her posture. She flexed her hands. "I can't let that happen. That walker. Not if I'm afraid of it."

"Making sense would be a good next step." Martin said. Alex moved forth and kicked Martin's shin. He bounced on one foot. "Damnit, Alex! She agrees with me!"

Gina's giggling and the men's raised voices further sharpened her senses.

Theresa pressed a hand to her husband's chest. "Alex, he wasn't out of line. Just tough-loving me."

"But he—" Alex sighed. "Sorry."

"You only have a temper when it comes to people messing with me. Which is appreciated as a wife, but as a leader—can't have that." He pursed his lips and nodded, but kept a wary eye on Martin.

"Atta girl," Gina said, moving to Theresa's side. "Though that might've been a really hot boy fight."

Shuffling feet thundered through the woods and Gareth appeared holding his rifle. "You okay? We heard—"

"Yeah, we're okay," Theresa interrupted. "We're alive."
Whet my Appetite

Alex tossed his dagger at a pine tree. His aim grew better after an hour of practice, striking his imagined bull's eye in the center more often that not. Theresa's breakdown over the emaciated walker replayed in his mind. Martin had been right to use tough love. Alex could never bring himself to be so harsh on her even if it was what she needed.

A sliver of fear had him again worrying he couldn't give Theresa what she needed which was not 'honey bunny.' He shook away the anxiety. It wasn't true. She had begged him to believe her and he knew she would never lie to him.

"You suck," Martin said, strolling up behind. Alex ignored him and retrieved his knife from the tree before stepping back. The blade flew and hit the bull's eye. He smirked. "Silent treatment, huh?"

"Whether someone else talked never made a difference if you did."

"Look, I'm not sorry I was so hard on Theresa."

"I don't care about that."

"What, you're gonna act like some sort of insecure chick and I have to figure out why you're mad at me?"

Alex yanked the knife from the wood. "Dude, I was not even thinking about you. You overestimate your importance."

"Fucking hell. Okay, okay, I submit."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "No, man. I'm sorry. Bad day."

"Why you out here anyway?"

"Gotta get ready." He took a place farther from his target this time.

"For?"

He threw the knife so hard a muscle pulled in his bicep. "Ow," he muttered before replying, "Whatever's out there."

"That's never a bad idea. But it's almost dark, so you oughta—"

"I know."

"Okie-doke." He shrugged and headed back to the Jeep.

Alex once more retrieved the knife when the folded sketchbook in his coat pocket poked his side. He hadn't drawn since they'd run. Even with the beautiful sight of the Appalachian hills, he had no inspiration. The sky was too dark to do any that night anyway, and he grew weary of making holes in the pine. Circling back to their rest area, he spotted Melanie sitting alone on a log.

"Why you all by yourself?" he asked.

"Kaylee wanted space," she replied, fidgeting with her hands.
"Oh? Oh no." He sheathed his blade and sat beside her.

He waited for her to elaborate but she instead said, "I know you don't want me here."

"Well, that's—"

"Gareth said so. Kaylee's the only reason I'm here. Because he owes her."

Alex couldn't argue its truth. "Is what it is. But that don't mean we hate you or anything, or that you're a stranger. We lived under the same roof for more than three months."

"That same roof I've been under for years."

"Guess this is pretty scary, huh?"

She pressed her palms against her thighs. "I don't remember how to start a fire with rocks. I don't remember how to make shelter. I don't know how to track animals. I don't know anything."

He touched his fingertips to her hand. "Hey man, it'll be alright. We all catch on quick. 'Sides, it couldn't have been easy gettin' to Sipsey."

"No, but I was only out here for the first six months of the outbreak. I haven't been out here like you. The first six months of this thing? They were nothing compared to how it is now. Everything is stripped bare, everyone has camps, all the lone survivors get picked off. And all I know how to do is season rice."

"Well, good cooking skills always comes in handy."

Her face fell. "I know about Terminus."

He removed his hand from hers. "Figured you might."

"I also know you're good to each other."

"We're not good people."

"Maybe not, but you're good to each other."

"You sure about that?"

"Families fight. You do think of them as your family, right?"

"Of course. And whenever I'm having trouble, I just think of them."

"You have to do that a lot?"

"Every day. So just think about Kaylee and how you feel about her. I think about those little things too. Like how pretty it is out here. You saw those nice hills from that cliff, right?" She nodded. "Think about that too."

She cocked her head. "You draw, right?"

"Yeah."

"I used to."

His eyes lit up. "Really?"
"Just drawings of things. I think you do more creative stuff."

"Oh well, I dabble in a lot." He pulled out his sketchbook. "Actually brought this thing with me."

"Oh, can I see?"

"Sure. Might not be able to see much in the dark though." He was reminded of showing Noah his artwork. Noah who he never inquired Carl about. In all honesty, if he were dead, he didn't want to know.

He was so tired of death.

* * *

"This place is awesome," Martin proclaimed, following his people into a small bar in the back room of a large convenience store. They had cleared the overgrown road and found a few shabby houses and shops.

The room sported a lounge area, small bar, and pool table. Alex smiled a tad at the memory of Cynthia winning a game against Negan at the outpost.

"Damn, ginger snap, I see why they keep you around," Negan said at the end of their game. Cynthia had smirked.

Martin scrambled behind the bar and searched beneath the counter. "Please, please, please… yes!" He pulled out two bottles of tequila. "I am so getting shit-faced drunk."

"No," Theresa scolded, stalking over and taking each bottle from his hands. "No shit-faced drunkenness."

"Didn't say right now."

"Not even later."

"We might need that for sanitation," Gareth said, checking under the couch cushions. "Or maybe —"

"Don't say it," Martin said, shutting his eyes.

"What?" Melanie asked.

"Boil out as much alcohol as we can and have a few sips for the calories," Gareth replied. "Not really that beneficial, though. Still got me buzzed."

"Don't matter," Martin said, pouting while Theresa placed the bottles by her supply bag. "Any removal of precious alcohol is something I will not take part in."

"I for one am all for getting shit-faced," Albert commented as he relaxed on a loveseat.

Martin pointed. "See?"

"Nah, If I can't have any, no one should," Gina said, taking a seat on the edge of the pool table. "It's only fair."

Alex started to add a quip to the exchange when he spotted the menu above the bar:
Nachos...$3.39
Chicken Fingers...$3.39
Hot Wings...$5.49
Hamburger...$5.99
Cheeseburger...$6.29

His stomach growled.

*I'm so hungry.*

The scavenge had been a proper distraction from his appetite, but the menu brought its presence roaring back.

Martin and Gina were shaking the pool table and making some lewd joke about its durability. Alex was grateful for their high spirits, yet they couldn't lift his own.

"Mel? Kay?" Gina asked. "Y'all wanna test drive this together?" She winked.

The two girls forced a smile and shook their heads.

*What's up with them?* Alex wondered. They were at odds over something, having not spoken to each other all day.

Their full search revealed nothing edible. The entire place had been ransacked save for the tequila.

Alex wandered to the front window and undid the curtain. Dust bloomed out illuminated by the streams of light. He traced his fingernail back and forth on the dirty window, leaving tiny streaks behind. They had had it made. They had a safe place—an underground bunker. Who could ask for better? It was solid and safe. Then it was gone. Then they were owned. Then Cynthia was gone. Then they ran.

He thought back to the menu board. Each item the epitome of fatty, stick-to-your-ribs goodness. Crispy chicken fingers leaving a film of grease on the pads of one's fingers, the crunch of the fried skin, and the tender, flavorful meat inside.

"Brooding, huh?" Gareth's voice came followed by his methodical footsteps.

"I'm not brooding."

"Sounds like something someone actively brooding would say."

"Hey," Theresa said, coming over from an empty aisle. "We're not done looking here. There's still a few houses down the road."

Alex turned to the warm gaze of his wife. "Cause that's where the buffet is held up."

"Stranger things have happened," Gareth said with a yawn.

* * *

All previous homes they searched were devoid of any useful supplies. Yet the last home on the block differed. Its 'home is where the heart is' welcome mat was stained with fresh dirt. Alex licked
his lips. This sign of foot traffic meant it could be occupied.

Gareth pulled open the screen door before Theresa pushed open the unlatched one. The tiny foyer's linoleum boasted a beach-full of the same dirt.

Gareth leaned in and whispered, "Fifty percent chance I'm about to make an idiot out of myself because these people are actually long gone." He straightened and cleared his throat. "We know you're here!"

Silence.

Theresa pointed to the right and Gareth the left. Alex followed Gareth, Martin, and Kaylee into the living room, and the others trailed Theresa into the kitchen. Clothes, dishes, and other trash lay strewn around the living room. A meager sheet covered the windows.

"Quite the little setup you have here," Gareth called. "Love the roaches by the way. Nice homey touch."

Alex's mouth went dry as Theresa shouted similar taunts on the other side of the house. Were they hunting? Were people going to be on their dinner plate? So soon?

Gareth stepped into the adjoining restroom. "Look, the longer you hide, the more embarrassing it's going to be for you when you're found." He yanked back the shower curtain. "See, aren't you embarrassed?"

The disheveled middle-aged man raised his hands. "Please man, don't—"

"No one's killing you, not yet at least. I'm just so glad I wasn't cleverly shouting at no one. Boy, would my face have been red."

Alex and Martin moved over and hauled him out of the shower. More voices on the other side of the house indicated another catch. Searching the man, they found nothing but a lighter before bringing him to the living room. Theresa appeared with her group and a nervous brunette of around twenty.

Theresa arched a brow. "Two for two."

"Just—just take whatever!" the man exclaimed. "Take whatever you want and leave me and my girl alone."

"Just you two?" Gareth asked.

"Just us. I swear."

"See, I can't believe that. Not without knowing your names. Got to start building that trust."

"Uh, J—Jack."

Theresa looked at the brunette. "And yours?"

"Rachael," she answered.

"Okay, Jack and Rachael, any more of you?"

"No. Only us."
Theresa help up a finger as if having an epiphany. "You're the ones who cleaned out the area, aren't you? Nice stash in the kitchen."

"Stash in the kitchen, huh?" Gareth said, eyeing Jack up and down.

"Take it," Jack said. "You haven't killed us yet. That has to count for something, right?"

Alex blinked. What were they waiting for?

Gareth shrugged. "Since it's—"

"You have to help me!" Rachael blurted out. "You have to help me. He—he's horrible. He keeps me here like a prisoner, he makes me do everything for him, he rapes me! I found him about two months ago, he offered me shelter, him and this other guy."

Theresa raised a hand. "Wait, wait, slow—"

"The other guy was nice. Too nice. Jack thought we were hooking up, but we weren't. I wasn't even your fucking girlfriend, Jack! Tamrin was just being nice, and you killed him, you motherfucker! Just so you… just so you… Only reason I stayed is because I'm just one person. I can't make it on my own. And he knows that."

"Don't mind her," Jack said. "She likes making up stories. Pathological liar. Gets boring out here so she concocts all sorts of crazy shit. Hell, she killed Tamrin."

Alex's intuition made him believe Rachael. Though they had to ask questions.

*Protocol.* Just like at Terminus.

"Please tell me you believe me," Rachael pleaded with Theresa.

Theresa faltered. "I… we have to be careful. People will make up anything to get sympathy."

"I—I can show you proof." She rolled up her sleeves to display dark blue and black bruises on her elbows. "My um, knees too. If you want to see."

Theresa's lips parted as she traced a finger across the marks. Alex knew she believed Rachael too.

"Girl likes it rough." Jack shrugged. "That's all."

A gunshot and Jack was dead in an instant. The bullet piercing his skull and splattering the yellow wall with gore. Alex's ears rang.

Kaylee lowered her gun. "There. No muss, no fuss."

Gareth eyed the body. "That was… unexpected. Not uncalled for, Kaylee, just unexpected."

Rachael gasped and went still. "I—I… you…"

Kaylee stepped over. "I had to."

"I… thank you!" She burst out sobbing and wrapped her arms around Kaylee. "You killed him! You actually killed him! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Alex felt sick.
That guy was scum. Good riddance. But the girl? She was so happy to be saved. As if they were good people doing a simple good deed. Sure, they crushed the dreams of people at Terminus, but that was their choice to refuse. They weren't going to give Rachael a choice, were they?

Gareth strolled over and stared down the emotional girl. "Now you owe us a trade for our help. That stash in the kitchen?"

Rachael kept a strong hold of Kaylee and kept crying.

"I'll get it," Theresa announced, taking off into the kitchen.

"I'll help," Alex said, and followed his wife.

The tight squeeze of a kitchen was indeed stocked. Ramen noodle packets, crackers, chips, and cans—all what was missing from the stores. Such a haul could last them at least three days.

Theresa pushed her hair back and gripped a box of noodles, then froze. "What are we doing? With her?"

Alex set a few bags of chips in her box. "We're keeping her alive."

"For?"

"What do you think?"

"This isn't Terminus. We're not the same people we were at Terminus."

"No we're not."

She set the box back on the counter. "Then why are we going to keep her alive? Hm? Think she'll want to dine on her rapist?"

The way she stressed the last word made him tense. "Heard of it happening before."

She looked over her shoulder. "All at once or easy does it?"

"Should ask Gare about that."

"No, I'm asking you."

He was unsure how to respond. Their opinions often differed on such things. "You… really want to know I think?"

"Yes."

"Easy does it. She needs time to adjust."

"So you think we should give her a choice?"

"Yeah, I do. It's impractical, one more mouth to feed and we don't know her but if she said yes, and we killed her anyway? What does that make us? Really?"

"Saviors," she seethed.

* * *

Tricking Rachael was easy. Theresa and Kaylee suggested she 'get the rest she desperately needed'
while they disposed of Jack. And lo, Martin and Gareth found a deer during her slumber. Best to eat its meat now to preserve the rest of the stash.

Rachael didn't question a thing. Though she was curious about the identities of her rescuers. Gareth divulged her the bare minimum information, omitting everyone's names. She eventually quieted and dug into her meat. They sat in a circle on the living room floor with full plates. Alex watched them eat, all appearing unfazed except for Melanie. A timid look on her face as she took in each piece, barely chewing before swallowing.

*Think about Kaylee, Mel.*

Alex stabbed a slice with his fork and got a waft of its familiar scent. His stomach growled, begging for its nourishment.

Theresa leaned in a tad. "Alex."

He hadn't yet eaten any. Whenever he tried his hand froze in place. Then the immense pressure of Gareth's stare enabled his hand to bring the meat to his mouth. Prickles of flavor overwhelmed his tastebuds. Theresa and Gareth turned their attention back to their own plates. A few chews in, Alex found himself unable to swallow. He reached for a shirt beside him and spit the meat into it, pretending to be using it as a napkin.

*Why did I do that?*

He shook it off, taking another slice, certain he'd swallow this time. But again he feigned using the shirt as a napkin and spit out the meat. Use of the shirt after each bite would be suspicious, so took a few mouthfuls, pressed it flat on his tongue, and feigned a swallow before spitting it out. Several flecks of flesh and grease inevitably made its way down, but his stomach remained unfilled as his plate emptied.

What had he just done? Not even twenty-four hours earlier he told Melanie to think of the best to get through the worst. Yet he failed to take his own advice. The same advice that made a cannibalistic Terminus bearable.

Merely a hiccup, he told himself. A one time mistake from stress. Next time, he would eat it. But he had to hide the evidence. The others would lecture him relentlessly if they found out.

"I'm a little tired again," Rachael said. "I wasn't able to sleep in the house. It's kind of um…" She rubbed the back of her neck.

"You could sleep outside," Kaylee said. "Kinda chilly, though."

"I'll take a blanket."

Theresa and Kaylee helped her find a quilt and escorted into the back yard. With the others' attention diverted, Alex saw an opening and nudged back the shirt. No. That wouldn't do. It still stuck out too far. Someone could kick it by mistake and reveal its contents.

"Hey, help me get these," Gareth said of the dishes.

Alex stood up and again pushed at the garment. Biting his cheek, he assisted the others in putting away the dishes. Gareth then stood brushing back the sand in the foyer with his foot.

Alex choked back a laugh. "You're honestly tidying up? We're fixing to be outta here."
We are about to leave, right?

Gareth let out a long sigh. "Yeah. Just nice to have something productive to do."

"You have fun with that." He had an idea—tidying the living room would give him a chance to dispose of the shirt. "Yeah, actually, let's do that. Way too messy in there, even by my standards."

"Impressive," Gareth said, stepping into the living room and picking things up. The others reluctantly assisted.

Relief washed over Alex as he grabbed the garment, flicked off an investigative roach, and hurled it in a trash can. Gina was behaving like a child told to clean her room, slogging around and tossing about random things. Alex pulled up an old tablecloth when he heard her kick something over.

"What the hell is this?" she questioned.

Oh god, oh god…

He turned around to Gina holding up the unfurled shirt, his chewed meat having fallen to the carpet.

Gareth, Gina, Albert, and Martin looked to Melanie.

"What?" Melanie asked. "I didn't do it."

"Just admit it," Gareth said with a tired tone. "Not doing you any favors to deny it."

"I didn't spit it out."

"Mel—"

"I didn't. Someone else did. You saw me eat it."

Alex shrunk back toward the wall. Was he going to let someone else take the blame?

"Could've been Kaylee," Albert suggested.

Gareth squinted. "Go fetch her for me?"

"Yeah," Albert said before heading out back.

Martin sneered. "I can't believe we're honestly dealing with this crap at this point in time."

Alex twitched.

Asshole.

Albert returned with both Kaylee and Theresa by his side.

"What's going on?" Kaylee asked, focusing on the overturned can.

"This nastiness," Gina answered, gesturing to the meat.

"What? What is that?"

"Don't play dumb, woman," Martin said.
"Nice try," Gareth added. "But you spit it out."

Kaylee folded her arms. "Uh, no I didn't."

"Kaylee," Theresa started, "you need those calories. I hate this too, but you should know—"

"I didn't do it," Kaylee insisted. "I was the one who killed the bastard knowing exactly what we'd do to him, remember?"

They argued back and forth, hot guilt eating away at Alex until he finally admitted, "It was me."

They turned their attention. "I spit it out."

Theresa's eyes went wide. "Alex…"

"I'm sorry," he replied through clenched teeth. "I said I was sorry."

"You can't waste it like that." "Gareth," Theresa warned. "He knows he screwed up. Lay off."

Gareth raised his hands. "You're right. But next time, I'm going to watch you."

Theresa frowned and slid by Alex. "We'll have to."

"It'll get easier," Albert said.

Alex was being lectured like a child. He wasn't a child. He made a choice. There was always supposed to be one, wasn't there?

"I need some fresh air," Alex said and hurried out the front door.

His mind stuck on Gareth's classic look of disappointment. He knew his pride had been temporary. It was inevitable he would screw up again. And damnit, his stomach was still rumbling. How hard was it to chew and swallow?

The door opened and Theresa appeared. "Hey, where's your head at?" she asked. Alex kept quiet. "Okay… no talking then. Look, I know how this is for you, but like you always say, we do this so we can have this." She took his hands. "Good stuff like this. So we can live." She gripped his upper arm. "This is healthy fat and muscle tissue? Meat is good for that."

"I'm not a child. I know protein builds muscle."

Her shoulders fell. "I'm not trying to treat you like a child."

"No, but you are. All y'all are. What were we talking about earlier? There being a choice? If not then we're just Saviors."

"This is different. You already made the choice. You can't go back."

"Why? Why the hell not? They did this to us. Negan did this. Made us run. Made us have to do this shit again. I'm sorry, I'm selfish. I want that pride. I don't care, I don't care that dude was a piece of
shit rapist. I don't want to do this."

"You want to completely stop?"

"I… maybe. I don't know, maybe I'm just saying things so I can hear 'em out loud. But if Cynthia was here, she'd have done the same thing as me. Probably be saying the same too."

"It will fracture the group if you refuse."

"It's not my job to keep us together."

"It's all our jobs. Please, please, Alex. You've done it before, you can do it again."

"We shouldn't have to be doing this. This is Negan's fault."

"You wanted to leave too. You gave us the idea to get out."

"Well, damned if we do and damned if we don't."

Her gaze intensified. "Do you judge us?"

"For what?"

"We all ate it."

"You mean do I think bad about y'all 'cause you don't have this problem?" She nodded. "No. God, no. I wish I could be like you. That I didn't have this handicap."

The door flew open and Melanie barged out. "You're a hypocrite," she told him.

"Hey!" Theresa barked. "Did we ask for your opinion?"

Melanie ignored her. "You told me to think of all the things I get in return. And that's all I thought about when I was eating. What you told me. And you were lying."

Theresa bared her teeth. "Excuse the hell out of—"

"Tess, it's fine. Alex cut her off. "She's right, man."

"She's not right."

"Yes, she is, and you know it. Just like I knew Martin was right about you when you saw that walker. I know I'm a hypocrite. I'm sorry, Melanie." Melanie sobered and gave a nod. "Look, I'm really not in the mood for a group therapy session, so I'm gonna…" He pointed his thumb toward the door.

I am a child, he thought as he found his way to the bedroom. Shutting myself in the damn bedroom brooding.

No one bothered him while he parked himself on the carpet against the wall. Voices moved throughout the house, his name occasionally cropping up. The room jived with the events that took place. Its sickness seeped into his pores and left a familiar slimy feel on his skin. He had thought knowing who it was they were eating would calm his apprehensions, but it wasn't about who, it was about what.

Rising to his feet, he ambled through the door and halted in the living room's archway. Gareth sat
alone with his hands folded in his lap as if waiting for him. The now infamous shirt was stuffed into the filled trash can.

"I heard what you said to Theresa," Gareth said. "It's not Negan's fault."

He took a few steps inside. "What? Of course it is."

"Negan's not holding Lucille to our head to do this."

"If he hadn't ever showed up, we'd still have Sipsey. We'd never need to do this again."

"Did you really, honestly think we'd never have to again?"

He bowed his head. "I believed. 'Cause I'm an idiot." He moved over and perched beside his brother. "'Who really thought, 'yeah sure, Negan has Sipsey, but we're independent enough. We're safe. Things can only get better.' I believed we could make it there. You and Cynthia would stay together and be happy. Albert would find some girl it didn't literally hurt him to be with. Me and Tess would have a baby. And we'd get older and leave all that awful stuff in the past. Stupid, stupid dream."

"Optimistic, not stupid."

"Don't patronize me."

"I'm not patronizing you. Survival is based our decisions. Lot of people think it's solely about physical and mental strength. Quick wits and quick reflexes. But none of those things get you anywhere if you make the wrong decisions."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying, don't make the wrong decisions. You're not one of a kind. You don't get a pass to refuse because it upsets you."

That stung. "Mm-hm."

"I've always felt like I was taking something from you, making the decision to keep eating people. Because that's so un-you. And I'm sorry you have to give that part of yourself up, but—"

"It's the right decision." He pursed his lips and folded his hands.

"So you really think Cynthia would have done the same as you?"

"I know she would. Never told you this, but at the school after Terminus, she cornered me and said we should bring up maybe stopping."

"Doesn't surprise me. What'd you tell her?"

"Zip it. 'Cause it would fracture the group."

"Well, just so you know, I'd be telling her the exact same thing if she were here right now and had done what you did. Like I said, it's not unique to you."

"Yeah."

"You can always smoke a joint before dinner tonight."
"I don't need to be medicated. And that's all Albert has for pain."

"He said he'd share it with you if you wanted. I think you're going to at some point. Whether you like it not."

Alex half-smiled. "Guess if you insist." He was quiet a while, before standing, marching over to the trash, and digging out the shirt.

"You don't have to eat that…"

"Of course I do. It's a waste not to. Like you said." He unfurled the garment and shoved a mushy, cold piece into his mouth before swallowing it whole.

Gareth stood and snatched the shirt from him. "We're not that desperate."

"I'm making a decision. My decision. My choice."

"Don't make yourself suffer for making the wrong choice before. Just make the right one next time."
Martin stood in the convenience store archway munching on a pack of soft but state sweet tarts. Rachael sat on the floor and leaned against an empty shelf. Her hand traced its edge back and forth. Some sort of madness mantra, he figured.

She caught his gaze and inched back. "What are you doing?"

"Just spying on you," he replied, popping another candy in his mouth.

"People usually don't do that in the open."

"I don't believe in playing games when trust's on the line." He held out the candy. "Want one?"

She shook her head. "No, thanks… um, I don't even know your name."

"Joe Schmoe."

"You're funny. Look, I know you don't trust me, but like I said, I have absolutely no reason to trick you. What do I have to gain?"

"Always something to gain. And it's nothing personal against you. Stranger danger and all. Don't matter what nasty shit you've been through, no one's trustworthy."

"Not even you?"

"Especially not even me."

Gina entered from the storage room, her face lighting up at the sight of the candy. "Oh, yum." She plucked it from Martin's hands.

"Hey, what the fuck?"

"I need all the nourishment I can get." She patted her belly before digging into the box.

Rachael did a double-take. "You're pregnant."

"Yeah, duh." She ate several pieces. "What, you think I was just fat?"

"Is one of you the—"

"Nah. Dad died a while back."

"I'm sorry."

"Shit happens. You get over it."

She rose to her feet. "Do you know where Gareth or Tess is?"

Martin raised a finger. "Oh, no, no, only her guy gets to call her Tess. It's Theresa to everyone else."
"Her guy? The one in the hoodie?"

"That'd be him."

"Why won't you just tell me your names?"

"We're not hiding it from you, just listen and you'll figure it out. Like you did that Theresa and hoodie guy were betrothed."

"They're in the back room," Gina answered her question. "Why you need 'em?"

"They're the leaders. I want to talk to them."

"Why?"

"I know of someplace we could go."

"Oh? Do tell."

"I want to talk to them."

"Alright, fair enough."

"Thanks." She stalked past Gina and into the back room.

Martin glared at Gina as she finished his candy.

"Almost lied and said it was your kid for the hilarity. But our genes are scary together even in theory."

"Rude."

"I mean, kids in my family usually take after our dads so having a tiny you? I have a feeling your childhood was a flurry of adults begging, 'Martin, sit down,' 'put that back,' 'that's not a toy,' 'go timeout,' 'please be quiet,' 'please, for the love of god stop it.'"

"Heh, pretty much. So, for curiosity's sake, who was baby daddy?"

"A Savior."

"He had a name?"

She crumpled the candy box and tossed it behind her. "Charlie."

"That's my middle name. You've been trying to replace the best you ever had?"

"No, dick. I didn't know that was your middle—" Her head jerked up. "I smell pot smoke."

Martin's eyes darted around. "From where?"

"Outside I think." She placed her hand over her mouth. "If I don't bounce I'm gonna puke. That's one the smells that makes me sick." She hurried toward the restrooms.

Martin made his way out the front door to Albert and Alex sharing a joint. "No fair. You didn't invite me?"

"Guess not," Alex said, and took a hit.
"Alex, man, dude, I think it'd be best for the group if we set everything aside and have a joint together. Whatever tension is here needs to be cut, yeah?"

"You be saying this if some sorta drug wasn't in the picture?"

"I'm hurt. Seriously hurt by that callous and untrue accusation." He held his hand out. "Gimme."

He handed it to Albert instead. "You gotta step it up a notch. I want groveling. Something to lift my spirits."

Alex had spit out Jack's meat and wanted an apology from him for being the one who didn't coddle him? Martin had nothing to apologize for. Regardless, making peace was more important, and the guy was so damn sensitive. At least he got over his meltdown and ate Jack's meat for dinner.

"Try it with ketchup," Martin had said. Alex found the joke profoundly unfunny.

"Alex," Martin began, "accept my most sincere apology. I'm just jealous of your superior masculinity."

"That's more like it."

Albert laughed a little and handed Martin the drug. "So, you think Rachael is trustworthy?"

"No," Martin said before taking a large inhale. He shut his eyes. "Mm…"

"Hey, just a few tokes, man," Alex warned. "We can't get too blitzed. And I think Rachael might actually be. At least for now."

Martin squinted. "Why?"

"Just a vibe I get."

"I think she'll be Sunday dinner."

"I'm not sure about her," Albert said. "But I want her to be truthful." His fingers tugged at his face bandage.

Martin had seen Kaylee change the bandage earlier that morning. Extensive scabbing covered the melted skin and his eye drooped from where the iron grazed it. Likely he would never regrow the missing hair from the edge of his eyebrow and by his ear. Albert took in stride the brutal blows and refused to be a victim. Martin was proud.

The door swung open followed by Gareth, Theresa, and Rachael filing out.

Gareth cast a skeptical eye at the joint before saying, "Rachael has an announcement for us. Where's everyone else?"

"Gina's trying not to puke and the girls are still asleep," Martin replied, taking one last drag off the joint.

"Go ahead anyway, Rachael."

Rachael folded her arms. "I know you're running from someone. I know the look. And I know of a place to hold up for a little bit. Jack and I were there for a week until we ran out of supplies. It's a small coal miner's town called Andale. We were going to go back, but we had no way to carry everything we found, but there's enough of us to now. There aren't many cold ones in Andale
either. We got most of them."

Martin cackled. "Jeez, Rach, that's damn near perfect."

"She knows," Theresa began, "she knows if she tries anything, *one single wrong move*, and she's dead." She cocked her head. "Right?"

Rachael gave a shaky nod. "I won't try anything. I swear on my life."

* * *

The air grew chillier as they traveled and Martin shivered. He had no tolerance for cold. Georgia heat and humidity would be welcome.

"There!" Rachael announced, pointing at an upcoming railroad track. "That leads to it."

*Seriously?* He breathed a laugh.

The sky told rain, and Martin guessed the temperature at about forty-five degrees. He frowned. Because nature had no concept of kindness, the drizzle started just as the biters appeared. First ten, twenty, then thirty.

"No use in going around them," Theresa said, preparing her knife.

"Gina," Gareth began, "careful. Stay near the back. Use the gun when you have to."

Jack's gun silencers offered a useful addition added to Gina's firearm as she picked off a few of the undead. A stress-relieving biter-bashing would be welcome—especially with his new machete—but the cold rain ruined Martin's mood. He slashed through several, omitting any fun and games. The exertion created a film of sweat on his skin that had him shuddering.

A hand shoved him off of the tracks and he toppled to the ground. He groaned and rolled over to Gina knifing a biter in the head.

Martin stood up and wiped the mud from his clothes. "Did you have to push me!?"

Her eyes went wild and she held her arms out. "You're welcome for saving your life!"

His shoulders fell. "Sorry. Thanks."

She rolled her eyes and stepped back as the others finish killing the creatures.

Gareth brushed the wet hair from his forehead. "Rachael? Any shelter nearby?"

She sheathed her blade. "I don't know. Jack and I stayed on the tracks."

The rain became a downpour and they bolted into the woods. They huddled beneath a tree with heavy foliage and tried to shelter each other. To Martin's surprise, Gina didn't protest when he unzipped his jacket and pulled her against him.

This was what Negan had driven them to. Holding each other for precious shelter in a chilly rain. How long ago had he had his own room, a schedule, rec time, a tolerable girlfriend, and a roof above his head? Nothing lasted long, he knew that. No use in getting used to anything. But god, he missed it.

Oh, it was sad, and he couldn't help feeling sad. A whine of discontent built in his throat from the
cold, homelessness, killing, and scavenging. He stole a glance at Alex, the cock-eyed idealist who wanted better. Who spit out precious meat because he wanted better. Who let Martin into Terminus' gates because he wanted better than what they had: killing arrivals without offering them a choice. But the search for better was often an endless one leading right into one's grave.

* * *

At last, shelter provided itself as some dead fool's attempt at building a shack. The inside was wet enough that they deemed it safe to light a tiny fire inside. The rain had stopped for the time being and Martin joined Theresa outside for watch. She sat flipping through Alex's sketchbook, a few of the pages warped from the wet conditions.

"Is that caricature he drew of me in there?" he asked.

"Sadly I don't think he brought it along."

"Just so you know, me and your cuter half are best friends now. All is forgiven."

"Good to hear." She paused. "But he doesn't appreciate that, you know. Comments about being 'cute.'"

"He say that?"

"Not out loud, but I know he's tired of that sorta thing." He would definitely vault his secret 'chinchilla' title. "Negan and his nicknames kinda got to him."

"Okay, I'll retract and alter my statement: me and your hairier half are best friends now." She smiled a tad and turned another page. "So, I haven't gotten a chance to ask how you feel about Rachael."

"She's useful. Until the second she's not. But I've been her before, so I get where she is. Except I had people I could trust and who trusted me back. She doesn't, but wants to. Last time she did trust she paid dearly."

"You tell her you've been her before?"

"No. Don't want her getting ideas in her head about us being pals, or us having a soft spot for her. Not like sharing it would change whether or not she's worth keeping around for long."

"If we could all be magic besties over our shared shit this'd be a much nicer kinda world."

"Yeah. You know... I feel like I've forgotten where I've been. I've been too trusting which I promised myself I'd never be again. I started to believe that Sipsey would look out for me. That giving them what they needed would make them grateful. Giving something without expectation of return. That they'd never hurt us because of what we gave. That they'd give us a chance after our mistakes or at least let us explain." She turned her head to him. "That sound familiar?"

"Yeah, yeah it does."

"'Never again, never trust.' I've been telling myself that every day since Kaylee and I had our shirts ripped of."

Martin understood now. Why they had a memorial room at Terminus. Why they painted those words on the wall. Why residents would spend an hour in there reflecting.
"It ain't like you're alone in getting too comfortable. Letting your guard down. I did too."

"You? Mister enlightened?"

"Yep. You saw it. I loved that goddamned place."

"So did I. Even with The Saviors taking half of everything, we still had just enough to get by. We're used to not having a horn of plenty."

"Yeah. Original residents had a snit, didn't they?" He bit his lip. "I don't think Melanie's gonna make it out here."

"I don't want Kaylee to go through that."

He shrugged. "Sorta inevitable. That chick is so not cut out for this. Those ladies don't seem so cuddly all of a sudden neither."

Theresa rubbed her forehead, blowing out a foggy breath. "Martin… what do you think Negan would do to us? Honestly."

"You wanna know? Really know? Because you know damn well I won't sugarcoat it. Gareth acts like he's all direct and honest, but even he sugarcoats shit to keep up morale. 'We might die horribly, but not if we're the bestest.'"

"I don't want that."

He paused for a second, knowing what he was about to say would cut. Theresa was the one who gave him the empathy and friendship he needed and he had to return the gesture even if it hurt. Because what she needed was cold, hard reality.

"You, his peach, he wouldn't kill you. Probably wouldn't lay a single hand on you. He'd Lucille one of us 'cause we didn't just lie or defect, we killed five of his ladies and gents. Gare said he all but threatened Alex right out, so it'd probably be him to get clobbered. He'd leave Gareth alive, obviously, to make him live with the ordeal. Then the worst part is you'd all have to live at The Sanctuary 'cause he'd still want you all up close to him. And you'd have to accept because after seeing the love of your life's head smashed to a pulp, you'd have nothing left. No fight. Just 'I am Negan.'" Theresa's chin trembled. "Want me to stop?"

A tear rolled down her cheek. "No."

"Good, 'cause Negan won't stop if you ask. Hell, I knew the guy the second I saw him. Honestly, I was surprised we're just crossing paths with him now." He took a deep breath. "This is the single most dangerous thing we've ever done and there's a decent chance we're gonna fail." She blinked another tear down her face, her features still as stone. "Now get over it, Theresa. Finish this watch, go to sleep, wake up, and get us as far the fuck away from that outcome as possible. That's your job."

Her chest collapsed in a sob. "That's my job."

"That's all our jobs. Take all that fear and do something useful with it."

* * *

Andale was real. A ghost town with a few undead meandering throughout. And with the sun shining, Martin could enjoy his biter-killing therapy.
He sliced off one's head with his machete. "I see why that scary bitch with the sword chose it as her primary weapon."

"Don't mess around too much," Gareth lectured, frowning at the hissing creature's head. "I'm not too keen on decapitated walker heads snapping at our ankles."

He stabbed the biter's head with the blade, rendering it motionless. "Wasn't gonna. Who pissed in your cornflakes?"

"I feel exposed here. I don't want to stay long."

"Aw, but Rachael said it'd be like, so totally perfect!" He yanked the machete from the dead.

Gareth shook his head and led the group toward the shops along main street. They had indeed been cleared of all immediately useful supplies. Upstairs above a gift shop, were spacious living quarters. A bay window overlooked the street.

"Can stay here a day and half, tops," Theresa said, sliding open the closet. "I know we can't afford to be picky, but the clothes at those houses were white trash chic. These people looked to have been wealthier so—" She gasped. "Oh my god." Her face lit up.

"What?" Alex asked, moving beside her.

"Look at these shoes!" she beamed, throwing open the door and revealing a display rack. Taking a pair of strappy sandals, she discarded her boots and socks before slipping on the sandals. "And they're my size."

*Lead us into safety, fearless leader. But first try on some super cute shoes.*

Alex gave his crooked smile. "You have fun with that." He patted her shoulder before heading into the kitchenette area.

"Oh god, oh god," Theresa continued, lacing up the shoe. "Yeah, that's it."

"You're making me a little uncomfortable," Gareth said. "You want us to leave you alone to do your moaning and 'oh yes-ing' in private?"

"Hush. I'm allowed to have a moment."

"Ain't Gina into shoes too?" Martin asked.

"Yeah," Theresa replied. "Where is she?"

"She was downstairs with Albert," Kaylee said as Albert came up the stairs. "Hey, Gina down there?"

Albert shook his head. "No, I was just coming to see if she was up here."

Gareth stepped over to the top of the stairs. "Gina?" No reply.

"When's the last time you saw her?" Theresa asked Albert.

"Right behind me as I was coming in."

Martin peered out the bay window. No sign.
"Where's Rachael?" Gareth asked.

The stairs creaked as Rachael made her way up. "Here."

Theresa narrowed her eyes. "Have you seen Gina?"

"Uh, no."

Gareth unsheathed his gun. "Come on."

Theresa hurried out of her fashionable shoes and back into her boots. The seven searched downstairs, calling Gina's name, but found her nowhere. Gareth and Theresa stopped in an alleyway between shops.

"Where is she, Rachael?" Theresa demanded.

Rachael furrowed her brow. "What?"

"Where is she?"

"Wh—you think I had something to do with this?"

"Duh," Martin said.

Theresa stepped forward. "I'm only going to ask nicely one more time. Where is she?"

Rachael shrunk back. "I don't know."

She pulled out her knife and shoved her against the brick building, then pressed the tip of the blade to the other girl's gut. "Tell me where she is or I will gut you alive."

"I don't know!" Rachael cried. "I don't know. I swear."

"I knew we shouldn't have followed her," Martin said. "Lying little bitch."

Rachael broke into tears. "I don't know where she is. This place was abandoned when we left. M—maybe..."

"Maybe?" Gareth inquired.

"Other people got here."

Gareth stooped down to her level. "Are you a Savior?"

"A what?"

"Is this a setup?" She just shook her head. Gareth bent her index finger. She yelped. "I don't know, I don't know, I don't know!"

Martin brandished his machete. "Sounds like damsel in distress used us good. Got us to kill the bad guy, then lead her safely back to her crowd."

"No!" Rachael exclaimed. "What do I have to gain here?"

"Until you want to tell us what's going on," Gareth began, "if it sticks out, I'll break it." He wrenched her finger to the side and twisted it, causing a snap. Her wails filled the alleyway.
"Whoever else is here has got to have heard that! Your girl's going to have a hand of lame fingers pretty soon."

Rachael whimpered when Theresa increased the knife's pressure. A dribble of blood seeped through her shirt. "You are in for a rough surprise if you think we're going to run from people who hurt us again."

Gareth whistled. "Theresa, dial down it down a notch. Gut her now and she won't answer."

Theresa's gaze flickered to Martin and he mouthed, "Get over it."

Turning her attention back to Rachael, she lessened the knife's pressure.

**Atta girl.**

"Guys!" Gina's voice rang through the air. She turned the corner from behind the building.

"See!" Rachael shouted. "I told you I didn't do anything!"

Gina caught up to them and tried to catch her breath. "Y'all, no one attacked me. Let the little bit go."

Theresa and Gareth backed away and Rachael collapsed to the ground. Kaylee rushed over and tended to her injured finger.

Gareth rubbed his temple. "What the hell—"

"It was another pain," Gina interrupted, holding her stomach. "Was really bad this time."

"So where were you?" Melanie asked.

"A broom closet in the bookstore back there. I'm sorry, I got off track 'cause I got distracted looking at stuff. A walker came at me and my stomach started hurting so I leapt in a damn closet. I heard you, but I could barely make enough sound. Once the pain stopped I ganked the thing. I'm so sorry."

Theresa's lips parted, a speck of blood falling from her blade to the pavement. She whirled around and stalked down the alleyway.

"Hey, Tess! Wait!" Alex called and chased after her.

"Sorry about that, Rachael," Gareth said, his throat clicking. "Gina, if those pains are getting worse... You should go back to The Sanctuary."

Gina blanched. "What!?"

"This only started getting worse when we left. They have real medical care. Negan wouldn't hurt a four-months pregnant woman."

"No. **Fuck no!**"

"I am not letting my negligence be the reason you or your kid dies. When or if you lose your it, you'll wish you'd gone back."

"There's no guarantee the stress of this is the reason. You'll have to hog-tie me and haul my ass back to the factory. I am not going back."
"You were the one who didn't want to leave."

"Changed my mind."

"Should ask the doc," Martin suggested.

Kaylee sat holding a hand over Rachael's bleeding stomach. "I don't know."

Gareth placed a hand on his hip. "You don't know?"

"Maybe we'll have to take a risk and stay put a little longer. Not be constantly in motion. That might be making it worse."

"Anything but have her go back," Albert said. "Really, Gareth?"

Gareth's vision lingered on Albert's face bandage. "Well, we'll have to talk to Theresa about it, but I think she'll agree with me."

Martin quirked a brow. "She doesn't usually, so…"

"You have an opinion on this or are you just being cute?"

Irritating the guy was still fun, as was watching Theresa do the same. Whether it be because he was being particularly insufferable or just because watching him tick was gratifying. If they had been in high school together, Martin would have thrown erasers at him in class. Then masturbated to him every night.

"None of us needs to be running back with our tails between our legs."

"I'll take that into consideration," Gareth said before crouching by Rachael, giving her his sympathetic slow blink. "Hey, again, sorry about that. As you can see, we protect our own. We'll make sure you get your injuries taken care of." Rachael lifted her head and gave a nod. "Could be worse." He held up his left hand. "You've probably noticed Gina and I are twinsies."

Rachael sniffled. "And Albert's face. Those—those people you're running from, they're bad news, huh?"

"Actually, I lost these fingers way before we ran into them. Bad news folks decided it'd be oh-so-funny to have me and Gina match."

"Why are you running from them? Who are they?"

"That's on a need-to-know basis."

Theresa and Alex turned the corner, Theresa announcing, "She is not going back to The Sanctuary."

Gareth stood. "Okay, nevermind on that 'I think she'll agree with me' thing."

"You'll have to fight me before I let her leave. And there's not even a way to get her back safely without us being detected."

"There's always a way. You convinced me of that."

"You wanna fight me?" She held her arms out. "Go ahead."
"I am not fighting you."

"Then what do we do?"

*Wish that haul had some popcorn.*

"I might have to trust your judgment. And Gina's."

"We made our bed," Albert interjected. "And we have to lie in it."

Chapter End Notes

I think I've said this before, but it's always such a treat to write from Martin's POV. I don't keep him as part of the main Gareth/Alex/Theresa POV rotation because I feel like he's only 'needed' at certain times. His take on everything is very sobering.

Also a little refreshing to write someone who doesn't angst about things so much. :P Going from doing the POV of Alex to Martin was quite the whiplash.
"You have to understand that we don't hurt or kill unless we have to," Theresa said, sitting opposite Rachael in the upstairs living quarters.

"This was never our intention when we took you with us," Gareth added, glancing at her wrapped finger. "We need man power. That's why you're useful."

Until you're not, Theresa thought.

Rachael gave a nod. "You thought I hurt your friend. So you hurt me back."

"Exactly. Nothing personal."

The time wasn't right to confess their cannibalism. Theresa was uncertain when the time would be. New arrivals at Terminus were told within a week, but no one could ever truly be ready to hear such news.

Theresa brushed a lock of hair behind her ear, exchanging a knowing look with Gareth before saying, "Those bad news people we told you about yesterday, they're called The Saviors. You're damn lucky you haven't run into them. They—"

A bang and the bay window shattered. Rachael's neck burst and a stream of hot blood spurted on Theresa's face.

"Oh fuck!" Theresa exclaimed, bolting up with Gareth as Rachael wilted to the floor. She reached for her gun and the two sprinted away from the window to the top of the stairs. Her finger wrapped around the trigger. "They found us, they found us!"

"Alex, Albert, and Martin are across the street," Gareth said, cocking his head toward the first floor. "Come on."

They skulked downstairs, Theresa holding her breath as they made it to the first floor of the gift shop. An assortment of footsteps neared the front door. Theresa recoiled when it flew open, firing her gun but missing and hitting the doorframe. A bullet knocked Gareth's gun from his hand as ten people filed inside.

Her heart palpitated at who stood at the forefront of the group—Simon. She hadn't interacted with him much, he always seemed to be attending other matters when she spoke to Negan, but he was known for his fierce loyalty to his leader.

"What an easy catch," Simon declared, the other eight holding their firepower at the two. "Your route was as predictable as all hell. Thought you were some sorta boy genius there, Gareth."

If they hadn't taken an extra day because of Gina they wouldn't have been found. Theresa gnashed her teeth.

Gareth raised his hands and Theresa let her gun clack to the floor.

"Hands up, 'peach," ordered a homely female Savior.
She obeyed, putting up her hands with both middle fingers out.

Simon grinned at the gesture. "Where's the rest of the breakfast club?" Gareth and Theresa remained silent. "Oh relax, Negan wants all of you back alive to deal with himself. Even Martin. Didn't say anything about whoever that was I popped in the neck. Got a great spot on the balcony across the street in case you were wondering how." He raised his fist by his mouth. "Oh, sorry about that mess on your face."

She had forgotten the blood's presence in her haste. The warm liquid drying on her skin made her itch.

"They're not in here, Simon," Gareth said. "You would've seen them. I am a boy genius."

"Funnily enough, I'm not inclined to believe you." He motioned to the flight of stairs and four of his people moved over, collected the guns on the floor, then headed to the second story. He gripped his belt. "Why don't you just tell me where they are and we can get this over with, no muss, no fuss?" No reply. "Really? Come on. We all know this will end up with us finding them anyway. Sure, they probably heard the gunfire, but I want to start rebuilding that trust."

The urgency of the situation hit her at last, and Martin's lecture two nights prior flashed through her head. Negan would want blood for their actions. Alex. He initially held the bat over Martin's head, yet threatened that if they tried anything the victim would instead be him.

Her throat went dry.

Oh god, oh god, oh god...

How were they going to get out of this? The others were across the street. Maybe they had an idea?

Please have an idea.

The four Saviors returned empty-handed.

"Tie them," Simon ordered. A woman pulled two strings of rope from her bag and bound Gareth and Theresa's hands behind their backs.

A bolt of confidence struck—she recognized the knot Miranda used, and she knew how to get out of them. Gareth did too. The Saviors themselves taught them how to do both. But not yet, she had to wait for an opportunity.

Simon sauntered before the two. "Kneel." They complied and got on their knees, fury prickling the back of her neck. "Now that is what I like to see. We're off to a good start. Now let's keep the good times rolling. Where are they?"

Theresa gazed up. "I'm going to kill you."

"Wrong answer. Where are they?"

"Why don't you untie us," Gareth began, "we'll head out there looking like we've escaped. If they're somewhere they can see us, they'll come right out."

He shook his head and crouched to their level. "Not gonna happen. I'm more inclined to think this will." He pulled out his knife. "Another strict order was not to hurt Theresa, Negan's favorite. You on the other hand? Doesn't mind a few scratches on you. How's about some matchy-matchy?"
"Please don't say losing fingers. I am so over things to do with fingers."

He held the knife to his temple, smile fading. "I was thinking, you lose half your face. Don't have an iron on me so this will have to do. Where are they?" No reply. "Suit yourself." He dug the blade into his skin with a sickening scrape and slicing downward. Blood ran down his face and low mewl shook his throat.

"Stop!" Theresa begged.

Simon continued, a slab of skin starting fold down. "Only when you tell me. I can drag this out for an extraordinarily long time."

"I'll tell you!"

"Still not hearing those specifics." Gareth's blood pooled at the top of his shirt.

"Across the street, and to the left."

The cutting stopped and Gareth croaked, "Theresa..."

Simon quirked a brow. "Oh? Because we cleared those places before spotting you."

"Even the end of the block? Because that's where Alex, Albert, and Martín were. It's a restaurant called Cindy's. The girls were checking out the bookstore next block after that."

Simon withdrew the knife. "See, now was that so hard? And of course if you're lying to me, pretty boy gets the rest of his face sliced clean off." He wiped his blade on the rug before standing. "Wait, before we continue, I have got to say something. I met the group who destroyed your barbecue joint—Rick and his pathetic ensemble. In comparison, you really are alike, and you know why? It's because you thought were the hottest shit around. Making those empty 'I'll kill you' threats then as soon it gets real, you crack like that." He snapped his fingers.

"We both want to live on our own terms," Gareth countered, his chest heaving in sharp breaths. "Imagine that."

"No such thing as 'your own terms.' You're not special. You're not stronger than us. You're not better than us. You're just another group. That's all. Only thing that sets you apart are some questionable eating habits."

Theresa's eardrums thumped with her pounding heart and her nails dug into sweaty palms. Two Saviors hoisted up her and Gareth and escorted them to the open door.

Simon stepped outside and cleared his throat. "If any of you are up there hidden away thinking of picking us off, just know any shot fired will result in his death." He pointed to Gareth. "Negan wanted all of you back alive, but sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do."

They moved through the street, approaching the restaurant at the block's end. Theresa's arms were aching from being bound.

Simon stopped at the glass door and clicked it open. "Hello?" he called as they entered the dining area. Theresa wanted to smash the mocking 'Please seat yourself' sign. "Got Gareth and Theresa down here. And your boy's missing some skin."

Gareth kept his head bowed as they searched the restaurant. Theresa's heart ached knowing he was in agony.
Simon lifted a blue bag from a dining table near the back—Alex's bag. Theresa stiffened. "This looks outta place," he said, digging inside. "Where'd you get the supplies? This isn't what you took off with. We'd avoided coming up this far into the mountains because of how treacherous it is. Figured it'd be a shit ton of wasted time, but if you found all this we might have to extend our reach. Maybe there's some freaky mountain people up here with a cornucopia." He pulled out a granola bar. "Ooh, seven grain." He stuffed it in his pocket.

Theresa saw red when he found Alex's sketchbook.

"Sir," began a younger male Savior, "we should probably—"

"Shut the ever loving hell up. I am looking at these lovely illustrations. This your hubby's, right?" he asked Theresa. She glared. "I'll take that as a yes. Wow, he is very talented. Complete real talk here—pretty incredible he still takes time to do this. Oh..." He halted on one page. "He draws you? Holding tulips? Pardon me, but I'm about to puke up lunch along with some rainbows."

*Rot in fucking hell you son of a fucking —*

"He does obituary pics too," he continued. Theresa's brows furrowed and Simon raised his. "Did you not know?" He held out the notebook and revealed an incomplete penciled sketch of a smiling Cynthia.

A stab of pain punctured her heart. She never thought she'd see her face again. Cynthia's sparkling eyes as real on-page as they had been in person. Alex never said he was drawing her.

Simon snapped the book shut and Theresa winced. "You know, I for one was surprised you took off without knowing the where's and how's and in how many pieces of her body. Thought at least you would've stuck around until you found out. But no, you just left. Albert who was ready to off himself over her shrugged and went 'eh, just leave her to rot god knows where.' So much for that 'we first, always' mantra thing Gina mentioned."

Theresa's face burned with grief, trying to fight away the tears threatening to spill. He had no right to say such things...

Gareth kept his head low. "Let's just get on with this," he seethed.

Simon placed the book back in the bag and handed it off. "Yeah, let's do." He took his blade and started for Gareth.

"The bookstore," Theresa reminded, her throat aching. "You're a reasonable man, Simon. Don't you want to check the second place I named before you start up on him again?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Now why exactly would I do a thing like that?"

"Because that's what Negan would do."

"Oh, you're gonna 'what would Negan do' me. WWND. Fair enough, I suppose. But my reasonableness only extends so far. If they're not there either or anywhere within let's say, thirty feet, I'm taking off both sides of his face."

She choked back a whimper. "Fine."

"Your canned bravado is showing," Gareth said to Simon.

"Will someone gag him?" Simon asked. "His voice grates on my nerves." A woman removed a rag
from her jacket and stuffed it in Gareth's mouth.

Simon led them back into the streets. A smattering of clouds had obscured the sun and darkened the sky. "Hey, Theresa," Simon started with a spring in his step, "remember our first excursion back to Sipsey? You, me, Negan, and some other Sipsites played poker?"

The memory surfaced, and it wasn't an unpleasant one. Though the gin likely had a heavy hand in that. "They prefer to be called 'Sipseans,'" she replied.

"I don't give a fuck if they prefer to be called 'Sipsey-dipsey-fipseys.' That was a good game. I thought we were friends." He snickered. "You people had a yellow brick road laid out in front of you and instead you chose to leap off into a pile of shit and vinegar."

"Melting the side of my people's faces put a damper on things. Not keen on that. Sorry."

He stopped and turned around, grinding the group to a halt. "I am not too keen on people who break the damn rules. Was it really so very difficult of little Albert not to stick his three-inch pork sword in Annette? Was it?"

"Says you in defense of the man who has six wives. Oh, sorry. Five. Annette dumped his ass for those people you consider so pathetic and breakable."

"Whew. That bite you have was why you were this close to having it made. Tsk tsk, but you got your sensibilities hurt too easily."

She recalled Amber's affair. There was nothing to lose from spilling the information now.

"You know, Annette, whose real name is Beth, isn't the only one who got sick of him. Amber's been going back to Mark."

"And you would keep that secret because...?"

"We were blackmailing them into sneaking us more food. Back when we first got to The Sanctuary."

"Sure you were." He was silent a moment before towering over her. "You know, you people. You act like we tied you up every night and prodded you with hot pokers 'til you shit fire. Like you're the victims when as of this second, you've done far more damage to us than we have you. We're the only ones who've accepted and protected you, warts and all. Who took you in when the Sipsites kicked you out? Who, if I may ask, was the one who bashed in the head of the fucker who ripped your shirt off? Who was more pissed about someone doing that to two women, especially you, than he was about them fighting back? It was Negan. And this is how you express your gratitude."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I did thank him. And I am grateful for that. But that doesn't change—"

"Change what? That you're so much more moral? That you stand on higher ground? Newsflash, you're just as rotten as the rest of us."

"I know I'm rotten and I know I am not on higher ground. All I want is to live on my own terms."

"Dearie me, if you aren't the most stubborn assholes we've ever come across." He relaxed into a laugh and smacked his hands together. "Come on, have to find the rest of you because damn if don't wanna get this over with so I can dig into that granola."
A cold dread crept through her body as they continued to the bookstore.

As they combed the empty store rooms, Theresa wondered if this was the last straw. The Saviors’ wrath being what finally broke them beyond repair. What tore out their hearts and turned them into the living dead once and for all. What—

*Stop it!* she exclaimed to herself. Martin's words two nights prior streamed through her head, *"Get over it, Theresa. Finish this watch, go to sleep, wake up, and get us as far the fuck away from that outcome as possible. That's your job."*

Gareth's wound still oozed blood and she clenched her fists. They were going to get out of this.

Simon was listening to himself talk when she saw it: among the litter in the place were tokens from her missing group. An empty pack of Virginia Slims, rolling papers, a hair bandanna, a snippet of bloodied gauze, hand sanitizer, and a butterfly clip. Dotted behind the register where by the cellar door. The cellar! Hidden beneath the rug was a door leading downstairs. They had missed it when searching the shop before. Rachael had to point out its existence. And clearly, Simon and the others missed it too.

What now? No doubt her people could hear them, so they must be waiting. She needed to get her captors' guard down. She had no idea what she would do or say, but she had to try.

Theresa squared her shoulders and put on her best negotiator face—she thanked Gareth for that lesson. "Simon?"

He smacked his lips and turned. "Yes, your royal huffiness?"

"I think we should sit down and talk about this like adults."

He cracked-up. "Oh, oh now you wanna be all negotiable? What happened to that death stare and —" He stooped down and locked eyes with her, imitating her scowl. "*I'm going to kill you?*

She suppressed a growl, keeping her voice stern. "Walking around looking for them while peeling off Gareth's face will just waste time."

"Like this conversation is?"

"We all know where this is going to end up, you said it yourself. No one else has to get hurt today."

"What exactly is it you're suggesting we do?"

She had no clue.

She opened her mouth to reply when Simon sighed and pulled out his knife, saying, "Intermission over, time for the show to resume."

Gareth shot her a wink, indicating he had an idea.

Though she kept up her protests when Simon's knife neared his face. "We don't know where they are! Carving him up won't magically grant us with the knowledge."

"Don't believe you," Simon said, pressing the knife to Gareth's hanging skin. His eyes rolled back and he slumped to the floor.

That was fake. The man had likely never fainted in his life. But would Simon buy it?
"Gareth!" she called.

Simon eyed Gareth's form. "This is just embarrassing. I have honest to god second-hand embarrassment right now. You people have got to be kidding me. One measly cut and you're fainting? Guess I shouldn't be surprised, but still."

The man considered them so pathetic he believed the ruse.

*Just you wait, asshole.*

"None of us have eaten enough today," Theresa explained, noting the other Saviors' loosened holds on their weapons. She carefully started to fiddle with her ropes. "The stress of this is too much."

"Not like I can't keep cutting while he's having a siesta, you know. Actually..." He stepped over and pulled the sketchbook from the bag a Savior held. Theresa tensed. "No, I'm not going to tear it up. You'll need something to remember him by. Speaking of..." He placed it on the end of the checkout counter, found a blank page, and pulled out a pen before starting to draw.

Theresa moved opposite him, and the counter obscured view of her busy hands. Simon's knife rested in his holster, but she doubted she could whip around quickly enough to grab it without notice.

Once finished, he set the pen down, leaving the cap off. "Now, I'm no artist, but keep this game up and well, it'll just get worse." He held up the book and showed his shoddy illustration of five stick figures crying—obviously supposed to be her people. Two figures lay on the ground with their heads turned to mush. A speech bubble above one of the female sticks read, *"Alex! Martin! My boyfriends!"*

His haughty smirk set fire to her blood. When she didn't reply, he breathed a laugh and let the notebook fall to the counter before resting his hand palm down beside it.

Pulling free from her ropes, she grabbed the pen and rammed it through his hand. "Now!" she ordered as Simon roared profanities.

The cellar door burst open and out jumped Martin, Alex, Gina, Albert, Kaylee, and Melanie. Theresa took advantage of Simon's shock to pull the gun from his belt and fire at several stunned Saviors. Alex and Gina sprayed a barrage of bullets at their adversaries, ducking behind the counter as they returned fire. A male Savior's bullet grazed Alex's arm. Gareth sprung up from his resting place and elbowed back his brother's shooter.

Theresa fired a round into the shooter's head before ordering, "Drop them and kick them over! Now!" The two remaining of Simon's party dropped their weapons and kicked them forth.

Gina took the knife from Simon's belt and cut away Gareth's ropes.

Theresa trained her gun at Simon who stood gripping the pen that stuck in his hand. It hadn't gone through, but it must have hit an artery from the way his blood was still running.

Pride swelled in her chest, a sadistic pleasure at the twinkle of fear in his eyes. "Why the silence, Simon?" she asked. "You always have something to say."

He exhaled a shaky breath and glowered. "Kill me and Negan will move heaven and earth to make you all suffer."

She exchanged a look with Gareth. What would they do now?
Should they kill him? He could point The Saviors toward where they were. Though by the time he got back to the factory, the hunters would be long gone. What bigger insult to Negan than his right-hand man showing up at his doorstep defeated? She imagined the shock and anger on Negan's face when Simon recounted the incident. Knowing they held his life in their hands but let him go just to send a message.

_You think you can toy with us, Neegsy? We can play right back._

"We know how unhappy that'd make him," Gareth said, rubbing at the dried blood on his neck. "And we've made the mistake of not tying up our loose ends—i.e. Naz—before. No matter what, Negan will have a bad day over this which gives me all sorts of warm fuzzies. They either find all your bodies or we make you walk home and think about what you did like the bad little boy you are."

She knew what he was getting at, and added, "Because we're just as rotten as you, I'd take much more pleasure in your having to go back home all by yourself and tell Negan how you failed and got stabbed with a pen because you were drawing some stupid picture. Because you underestimated us. Fatal mistake.

"Well whoop-dee-doo," Simon retorted. "I'm a lucky motherfucker, aren't I?"

_"You are," she said, then shot a female Savior through the head._

Gina took aim at the last male who attempted to duck just before she pulled the trigger. But the talented shot she was, she got him right below his temple. "My left-handed aim's gotten a ton better," she said. "But seriously, fuck you, Simon. Fuck Negan too. You have any idea what a bitch it was to learn to become left-handed?"

Simon imitated sobbing. "I'm beside myself in grief. We should've given them a funeral." His face hardened. "Oh wait, funerals are usually reserved for people who die. Like when they get stabbed in the neck or shot."

"It's humiliating, isn't it?" Albert questioned. "Being hurt and defeated like this. Now you know how it feels."

"Cry me a river, Alvin."

He scowled. "It's Albert."

"I like Alvin better."

"Where'd you park your vehicles?" Gareth broke in. "Think we'll take those."

"Eat me."

"Such big talk from a guy with a pen sticking out of his hand."

"You know why? It's because if we don't find you, you'll die out here on your own. You dug your own graves."

Gina stepped up and placed the knife by his face. "How about I cut you until you tell us where your wheels are?"

He rolled his eyes. "By the back. Near that railroad intersection."
"Keys?"

He was silent. Gina searched his pockets and came up with one set and the granola bar. Gareth searched the bodies of the fallen Saviors and came with two more pairs as the others collected their weapons.

Alex grabbed his sketchbook and peered at Simon's drawing, then at Gareth's injury. His fist connected with Simon's cheek.

"Ow," Simon pouted, bringing a hand to his face. "That smarted a little."

"Don't fuck with my brother or my stuff," Alex snarled.

The hunters gathered their belongings and started toward the front door. Theresa caught Simon's death glare and said, "Don't be sad, you're burly and have a mustache. You'll be fine out here. It'll be good to flex your survival muscles."

"Remember what I said," he replied with a cold smile, sending a chill down her spine.

They exited the building and sprinted toward the rail intersection. Turning a corner, Rachael's reanimated body lumbered through the open gift shop door. Theresa considered stopping and taking care of her, but leaving Simon to deal with the walker he turned was fitting.

Two trucks and one van rested at the railroad intersection. Simon had told the truth much to Theresa's surprise.

Gareth stopped on the tracks and raised a hand. "Wait. They left them alone."

Oh.

Paula had explained this trick to Theresa. Placing sharp tacks on the roadway that would slice the tires if the vehicle were stolen. Martin and Kaylee searched the road for tacks and Theresa looked over her shoulder. Simon coming after them unarmed was unlikely, but the fear had not yet subsided.

"Got 'em!" Martin declared and kicked the tacks away.

They fiddled with the car keys until they found the matching ignitions. Martin started the van and Theresa hopped in the back seat beside Alex. She pulled him into a tight hug and inhaled the musky scent of his jacket.

"Hey, hey. I'm okay," Alex said, embracing her back. "It just nicked me."

She placed her hand over the torn hole in his sleeve, blood from the shallow wound wetting her palm. A sob escaped her lungs. "It's just that... Negan warned us that it'd be you. And when I saw Simon, I thought about—"

"Shhhh." He petted her hair and pulled her close. "I ain't going anywhere."

* * *

The Sanctuary-quality supplies in the cars made them feel decadent. Foodstuffs, blankets, bullets, medical equipment, and even gin. The latter Martin was grateful for since they left behind the tequila in the gift shop. Kaylee had cleaned Gareth's wound with rubbing alcohol and sealed it with gauze before doing the same to Albert. At one point, Gareth offered his hand to the younger man to
squeeze for the pain.

Night had fallen and they parked off-road. They debated heading south to throw off their hunters. Yet the mountains held the most promise of evasion. Simon and his crew had found them, but only because of their extra day spent stationary. That meant they would have to keep moving despite Gina's delicate state.

Theresa rested her head on Alex's chest and tried to clear her thoughts so she could sleep. Listening to his heartbeat and breathing in the quiet of the back seat. But Simon's words proved louder, slithering their way into her mind.

"You know, I for one was surprised you took off without knowing the where's and how's and in how many pieces of her body."

Cynthia's body—no, her corpse—was still out there. Who knew if she were buried or left out to rot.

"Thought at least you would've stuck around until you found out. But no, you just left. Albert who was ready to off himself over her shrugged and went 'eh, just leave her to rot god knows where.'"

Her kidnapper was still at large. Lana. The only missing Sipsean and the one who faked Cynthia surviving the gunshot. Who stole her body from the grave Melanie and others were kind enough to give.

"So much for that 'we first, always' mantra thing Gina mentioned."

Theresa inched up and nuzzled her face in the crook of Alex's neck. "Alex?"

"Yeah?"

"There's something Simon said—"

"Ignore him."

"Hard to ignore when it's something you've thought yourself." Since Albert and Gareth were in the seat behind her, she was hesitant at first to say it out loud, but forced it out anyway, "We abandoned Cynthia."

"He was just tryin' to get a rise outta you."

"A broken clock is right twice a day."

"We've left them behind before," Gareth chimed in. "Left them all behind at Terminus. It's no different."

"But we knew where they were," Theresa countered. "What happened to them. How it happened."

"Cynthia wouldn't have cared," Albert said. "We had to get out."

She sat up. "I don't care that she wouldn't care."

"Theresa," Gareth started, leaning toward her, "don't dwell on it."

"Don't pretend you haven't felt the same way."

"I have, but I can't."
Alex rubbed the small of her back. "It's okay. I think it too. But Gare's right, we can't dwell."

She swallowed. "I saw your drawing of her."

"What?"

"Simon, when he had his ugly mitts on your book. That's when he said what he did. I didn't know you were drawing her."

"Really?" Albert asked, a hint of a smile on his lips. "You are?"

"Yeah," Alex replied. "I, uh, I wanted Gina's kid to be able to know what she looked like."

Gareth rested his arm on the seat. "You always told me it was too painful to draw our dead."

"I know, it's just you know when you try to picture someone's face so much that after a while you start not being able to? Well, I didn't want to forget what she looked like. And I was starting to."

"You forget what mom and dad looked like?"

He nodded. "Pretty much. I regret not drawing 'em when I could remember. And you know how even though mom's parents died when we were too little to remember 'em, mom told us so many stories about 'em it was like we did know them?"

His face softened. "Yeah."

"I want to make sure Gina's and—" He paused, eyes lingering on Theresa, "—our future kid know 'em like that. And to have pictures to go along with it."

"Then try to draw Mary and Michael," Theresa said. "Even if you can't remember what they look like. Doesn't have to be exact. Does it?" Alex shook his head.

"Would you draw me?" Albert blurted out. "I mean, with my whole face."

Alex sat up on his elbows. "You'd want that?"

"I don't want to forget what I look like."

"I don't know how soon, but I can swing that."

Chapter End Notes

Simon stabbed with his own pen. Yes, I do in fact feel I am hilarious. :P I know I hurt him pretty bad here, but I have really grown to love Simon. I don’t know why I didn’t at first, so I regret not using him before. I will say he was a challenge to write. I had to rewatch his scenes several times to get a good feel for him.

Also, I want to clarify that there will be an answer to the whereabouts of Cynthia's body and Lana. I'm not leaving that end loose.
Works inspired by this one.

Gareth/Martin (the walking dead) FanArt by gubbspanna

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!