Runaway

by B_Kilroy

Summary

Max preferred being alone. He had avoided people for the longest time after he tragically failed to save those that he had promised to protect. That way, he would never have someone else’s blood on his hands again. The world had a different plan for Max, it seemed, as he sat in the Interceptor with a Citadel war party on his tail and a one-armed woman curled into the passenger seat with a knife in her hand.

Notes

This work is based off an old prompt from the madmaxkink dreamwidth community that you can find here – and I hope I can do it justice. There’s definitely going to be divergence from the canon, and at this point, a lot of things are going to be up in the air. There will definitely be differences between canon and what’s written here.
The Meeting

Chapter Summary

Max doesn't stand alone above the Powder Lakes.

The Powder Lakes went on for miles. The wind-swept sand continued on towards the horizon, and it probably continued on for another horizon after that. It wasn't to be confused with the Salt, which seemed to never end. Perhaps it didn't. Max remembered seeing pictures of the water himself, the Big Wet before it went to salt. He looked over the featureless basin, wondering if at some point it was full of water and life. Didn't matter now.

He eyed, for now, his map inked in oil and blood. The center of the map was tattooed in red with the symbol of Immortan Joe. Next to it was a cross marking cardinal directions. The cloth was ragged, pockmarked with dots and marked with lines and shapes that only he would be able to make out and understand if he handed it to someone. It didn't matter, because he never would.

Hello? Where are you?

He sighed.

Where are you, Max?

Max Rockatansky.

You said you would help us.

Here they come again. Worming their way into the black matter of my brain. Max's voice found a moment of silence in his head.

Help us, Max.

You promised to help us.

A soft shuffling sound came from the sand below his feet. With a strike of his heel and a swipe of his boot, he nabbed the source: a two-headed lizard. Food. Swiftly, he popped the dead reptile in his mouth, eager to get the raw bony animal down his gullet. It was then, in the middle of Max's meal, that his car's engine turned over.

He turned to his car, lizard dripping out of his mouth, and saw a woman sat in the driver's seat, desperately trying to get the thing going with only one arm. Max rushed to the door, grabbing at the woman to drag her out. She resisted fiercely, hooking onto the wheel with the rest of her missing arm and jabbing at him with the other. He knew what she was doing was futile; she wouldn't be able to shift for her life. Max pulled again stiffly, blocking her jabs. Eventually she got a good one in, slamming a fist into his nose. He staggered back, and she lifted herself out of the car to come at him. With no hesitation, Max produced his shotgun from inside his jacket and pointed it at her.

The engine had turned back off, leaving them in silence. Max took this opportunity to get a good look at the woman who tried to steal his car. Her hair was cut short, and she appeared to be well-fed and well-dressed, but not for the rigors of the wasteland. She had nothing with her but the clothes on
her back, and definitely a knife in her boot. Her eyes told a greater story than she would let on, one of fear, grief, and desperation – a look Max was all too familiar in seeing and having. Max was tempted to just wave her off with his gun and wash his hands of this meeting forever, and pretend it didn't happen. Or maybe he should shoot her, knowing the former would just have her die slower. He didn't have time to make that decision.

They both heard them coming, and she was the first to act. She was back in the car, turning over the engine by reaching her right hand to the left, but he stopped her. “Move,” was the growl he let out, pushing her over into the passenger's seat. The woman didn't fight, but pulled her knife out of her boot, keeping it close. He threw into the car his pack, his pot, his sleeping roll, some of it falling into the woman's lap. Neither of them cared, because the only thing that mattered now was making distance, and fast. The supercharged V8 engine roared to life, and the Ford Falcon sped down the rocky hill towards the Powder Lakes.

Their pursuers soon appeared behind them. War Boys. Max wasn't new to them, and the woman was at least smart enough to fear them. He watched, sometimes from miles away, as they chased people like ghosts across the Wastes, taking their cars, bodies, even lives if it suited them. He envisioned himself overturned by one of their lances, crawling out of the corpse of his car, chained to the end of one of theirs, forced to chase them back to the Citadel on foot. Max prayed for a quick death, at the very least, and shifted into a higher gear.

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Furiosa wasn't sure who to be more afraid of, the War Boys coming to kill her, or the raggedy man driving the car. He looked more animal than man with his hood down and his cap off. His hair and beard were long and knotted. In some places it clotted into a solid mass, and he seemed not to care. The man had spoken in a deep, grating voice as if words had been lost on him for a long time. She clutched the knife tighter in her right hand, not sure if she was better off in the car or out in the sand.

The War Boys had been following her from the Citadel. She had a head-start, jumping one of the cars out of a lower Garage exit, and drove away. She dared not head East – they'd follow her into the Salt if they had to. For now she had gone South-west, angled away from Gastown, into the craggy hills that bordered the great stone towers. Eventually, her great jump caught up to the car, leaking oil until it couldn't go anymore. Furiosa had continued on foot, trekking over the peak of the crags, until she saw the man with his car.

She was torn between asking the man, killing him, or just trying to speed away with the car. Asking the man seemed out of the question. Furiosa had been surrounded by bad, bad men ever since she was stolen away from the Green Place. She found loyalty in her crew, but nothing more. Ace respected her and followed her, but she knew Immortan Joe trumped her every time. She wasn't sure if a man could find it in their heart to help. Killing was ugly. Furiosa knew how to kill, and who, and when, but she didn't have a taste for it. She had grown close to the wives, especially the Splendid Angharad, and she didn't know anyone else that was so protective of life, hesitant to wish death on anyone but those that truly deserved it. For a second, she was watching herself on the hill, piking the man in the neck with her knife, and she knew he didn't deserve it. She would steal the car, then.

Furiosa knew she was fucked as soon as she got into the car. The driver's seat sat on the right instead of the left, and her missing left arm put her between a rock and a hard place. At this point, it was do or die, so she did – or at least she tried. The man easily caught her, and she swung wildly even though she knew how to fight. She hardly cared, only wanting to find her foot on the gas and nothing in the rear-view mirror. Still, he tried at Furiosa, trying his damndest to get her out of the car.
With a moment's hesitation, she spotted a weak spot and rammed her fist into his nose. He stumbled back, and she took the fight out of the car, even though she should have taken that moment to get the car driving down the hill.

When the man pulled out his shotgun, Furiosa knew she was double fucked. *End of the road.* She thought of the Vuvalini, of her mother, of Katie, of the Wives, of the War Boys still barreling through the Wasteland with her in their sights, and now she stood in front of a shotgun, in front of a wild man, between him and his car. She was almost ready to face Immortan Joe himself instead of standing in front of this person. His long shaggy hair made him unreadable, hiding his face. The clothes he wore bulked him up, hiding his stature. She was afraid and completely alone.

It didn't take long for the War Boys to get within earshot. The man was distracted, and she took her chance. Furiosa clambered back into the car, clumsily reaching to turn over the engine, but found herself pushed further into the vehicle. She drew her knife out of her boot, watching as the man quickly tossed his belongings into the car. For a moment, Furiosa watched with envy as he operated the car smoothly with two hands, and cursed Immortan Joe for taking her left arm. The car roared to life, and they sped down the hill into the Powder Lakes.

She curled up into a ball on the passenger's seat, knife always between her and the man, even though she was pretty sure he had more important things to do than mess with her. Begrudgingly, Furiosa admitted to herself that she wouldn't be getting anywhere fast without him. Still, she looked behind them, at the dust plumes getting closer and the dark shapes taking form. Cars and motorcycles: the standard patrol. More than enough to take them down. It seemed useless to run.

A heavy weight fell against her. Furiosa held up the knife in response, unsure at first what it was, but she saw it well enough. It was a gun. Hesitantly, she took it in place of her knife. “Use it,” the man told her, shifting higher. He knew she wouldn't be dumb enough to shoot him, and he was right. It was better off used against the War Boys following them. And so it was.
Max and Furiosa continue their flight into the Powder Lakes, and Furiosa finds a chance to go her own way.

It was an odd situation, if you sat and thought about it. She was in the passenger seat of the car she tried to steal with the man she tried to steal it from. Furiosa was handed a pistol by a man who not a minute ago had a shotgun in her face. They were united on one front, at least, and it was in the battle against the War Boys that threatened to kill them – or worse, take them to the Citadel.

It was a Glock that he tossed her way, not unlike one Furiosa had hidden in her War Rig. She knew the only time she'd see it again is if it were barreling straight towards her, intent on running her down. “Chambered,” he said again, knowing she wouldn't be able to cock it easily with one hand. Weirdly thoughtful. With the pistol tight in her hand, she swiveled in her seat to aim out of the window. The party grew dangerously close, and they wouldn't let it get any closer.

Her shots fired true, hitting the mark that was the driver of the closest vehicle. It swerved to the right, taking out two of the following motorcycles with it as it began to flip. Furiosa fired again at a War Boy in another car who was poised to throw a lance, and he instead tumbled off into the sand. She shot his companion, too, leaving only the driver in the vehicle who decided to turn away from the engagement. More gunfire startled her, and she turned to see the man firing his own weapon at the War Boys.

His shotgun fired at the car to their right, blowing a wheel off its axle. The man fired its second round at the last motorcycle, filling the rider with buckshot. The weapon laid empty in his lap for now, focusing again on driving. The engine was in its highest gear. The three remaining vehicles fell into formation behind them, and they were big ones. What few rounds were left in Furiosa's pistol were gone into the bodies of the War Boys riding on the vehicles, leaving the drivers – and one lone lancer – to chase them across the sand.

Out of bullets. Max knew he only had that one precious magazine for the pistol, and his shotgun only had the two shells inside of it. Oddly enough, that was more than what he usually had. The pistol was a relatively new find, half-buried in the aftermath of some road battle he had come across. He was fairly sure it was 9-millimeter ammunition. Standard. Max had tried to trade for more in several places, including Bartertown, but buying bullets meant you wanted to kill a man, and Max definitely looked the part. The price was high, and his scrap was nothing to the traders.

The back of the car was strapped now with all different kinds of parts and containers. It was good steel, nothing too rusty, and definitely worth more than the junk he had before. It was good for trade, but he found himself on the wrong side of the Citadel and the Last Road, South instead of North. Trading wasn't necessary – not yet. He had some water and guzz, and eating was good if you didn't mind reptiles and insects. Max didn't. The plan was to skirt around the Northern rim of the Powder Lakes and find a way across the plateaus that lay West of the Citadel. Of course, it was all different now. Max was being chased into the Lakes with the rest of the War Party behind him and a one-armed woman in his passenger seat. Max hoped that one of the Citadel vehicles survived this so she
would be able to go off on her own. He desperately sought a reason to absolve responsibility of the woman. Max didn't need another worry, or another ghost.

Max scowled as the engine reached its highest gear, peaking at its top speed. It wasn't fast enough to elude the War Boys, who stayed hot on their tail. He envied the rev-heads that modded their cars with nitrous intake, himself deciding to remain a purist. Max would give anything to get an edge now, even if he didn't have much to lose.

He watched in the rear view mirror as the lancer moved from car to car, slowly making his way towards the vehicle right behind the Ford Falcon. The War Boy poised himself on the back of the car, taking aim with a lance. Max reacted quickly, turning a sharp right. Without thinking, he grabbed the woman and pulled her into him as if the weight distribution would keep the car from turning over. It didn't, thankfully, and he didn't care when the woman tore away and pushed back against the passenger side door, knife back in her hand. He was facing North-west now, shifting lower to handle the drop in speed. The War Boys behind him struggled to follow in pursuit; the tallest vehicle toppled over from the tight turn, leaving two cars and the lancer left.

"Just go away. Return to your master, Max hoped to himself, watching their pursuers in his rear-view mirror. Your brothers have fallen. He huffed to himself, figuring the War Boys would probably be more eager to join their comrades – or succeed - than to head back alone. However, the opposite happened. Slowly, the dust plumes disappeared from the rear view mirror, and he eventually found himself alone with the woman on the Powder Lakes. Max knew that with this would come back to get him. The Wasteland does not give without taking back.

"They'll come with more," said the woman next to him with a shaky voice full of fear.

"Mm."

He continued to ride into the Powder Lakes, hesitant to turn around until he hadn't seen anything on the horizon for hours. It was into the afternoon when he finally turned the car to travel back down his tracks. The woman sat still, knife still gripped in her right hand. He didn't know what was going on in her head, and didn't care to know. All Max hoped for was for something back there to be working so the woman could be on her way.

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Furiosa watched the remnants of the War Party grow smaller until they disappeared over the horizon. That would be three cars that make their way back to Joe. At least three to say what they faced and where they were headed. She knew they'd come back with reinforcements, and their luck would run out soon enough. "They'll come with more," she told the man, not even sure if he'd understand her. He returned a sound in the affirmative.

She didn't do anything as the man continued to drive. For the most part, Furiosa just wondered how in the world she would get to the Green Place now. She failed the Wives, and she knew Joe would take it out on them. She failed to escape, drawing out a War Party to follow her and report back that she was out there. Furiosa side-eyed the man, the only reason she was still alive. He pushed her into the car instead of pulling her out. He handed her a gun instead of doing it himself. And now, he still drove, not stopping to kick her out. She could ask him to stop, but why here? Why now? For now, she curled tighter into herself, knife tight in her hand.

It wasn't a big surprise when he turned around. Nothing was to be found in the Powder Lakes anymore; its flat landscape allowed even a novice scavenger to see something a mile away. She watched as he fell in line with the tracks he laid before, going back to where they had run. A lump grew in her throat, afraid that a greater War Party would appear on the horizon. It wouldn't.
Eventually she saw why he had turned around, and why he specifically followed his tracks. They came across the wreckage they had caused, and in the middle of the most vehicles, they stopped. The man looked over at her, removed the keys from the ignition, and got out of the car. Furiosa watched him for a moment before leaving herself. The sun was hanging ever lower in the sky. Looking around at the carnage, she frowned. One car was overturned, the other was completely missing its wheel. Furiosa wandered over to the motorcycles, growing frustrated as she inspected them. Broken. She looked at the final bike left, and thankfully found it to be largely in great shape. Buckshot riddled it in a few places but it was otherwise perfect.

Having gotten the bike upright, Furiosa stopped for a moment and continued to watch the man. He was siphoning gas out of the fallen vehicles, stopping to fill his car multiple times. Eventually he began to ransack them, taking items of obvious value. The overturned vehicle had a heavy .50 caliber machine gun mounted on it, but it was welded hard onto the frame. Still, he took its ammunition. Other items of worth disappeared into his car, but he didn't take all that he could – he didn't need it. The man, apparently satisfied, re-entered his car and sat there. He didn't drive away, just sat there. Watching her.

She didn't really care. The bike looked good. It wasn't hard to scavenge some valuables and a bit of gas to top off the bike, but it wasn't until she got on the bike that she realized she didn't have her prosthetic. Furiosa's left arm seemed to mock her, reaching towards the handlebars it will never hold. Her right hand grasped the throttle tightly and seemed to wish her the best. Furiosa kicked the starter lever down, and after putting the bike in gear, eased onto the throttle. She started deliberately slow, but as she increased the speed, she fell out of balance and toppled off the bike.

It frustrated her to not have her prosthetic, to not be able to steady herself. She slid out from under the motorcycle, and straightened both it and herself back up. Again, Furiosa kicked the starter down and lurched forward with a careful turn of the throttle. Deliberately slow again, and she minded her balance. Carefully, carefully, she started to gain speed. She smiled in the moment, but knew she'd dread the moment she headed up hill or dared to make any kind of turn. She continued to gain speed, but as soon as she had it, she lost it.

A dull pop came from the front tire. The rubber blew off, and the rim caught in the sand, throwing her over the handlebars. Shit. Furiosa knew she wasn't hurt, but the bike definitely was. The tire was gone from the rim. Undrivable. A sound of disgust and anger came out of her as she slapped the body of the motorcycle. She didn't have the time or the tools to fix it.

Furiosa sat in the sand by the bike, pondering why God has decided to frown upon her today. So much has gone wrong that it barely made sense, how wrong it all was. She was angry and frustrated and sad that it had to be her despite what good she had tried to do. She stayed still, looking down into the ground until she heard the mans car. He pulled up near her and opened the passenger side door, providing her with a choice to come along.

She looked up into the car at the man. His face was still unreadable, and she hated it. Furiosa had heard stories of wild men before, how they barely had enough sense in them to walk on their two feet instead of all four limbs like an animal. They bit people, and it was a sickness like no other. He was different, and she knew it. Maybe he was human under all that hair and dust. Maybe he wasn't. With a final look around at the broken vehicles and War Boys and into the car that both projected hope and uncertainty, she sighed and accepted his offer.

Furiosa took the supplies off the back of the bike and latched them on to the back of his car. She slowly stepped in, knife coming back out of her boot to act as a shield. The door closed, the man nodded, and he began the drive North-west.
The First Night

Chapter Summary

Max finds himself heavy one companion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Max shouldn't have watched. The moment he got into his car was the moment he should have started to drive away as fast as he can, but it wasn't. He should have wished her luck and been on his way, but he didn't. He sat and he watched her make what she would out of the wrecks, gathering supplies onto what appeared to the only functioning bike. He should have gone.

The woman fell once off of the bike. It seemed to only be human error, because she got back on again. This time, she was in control. He could nearly smile to himself, if only because he wouldn't have another ghost. The feeling quickly disappeared when the bike flipped over itself. His breath hitched in that moment. *Jinx*, he cursed himself. When the woman sat up, he didn't feel relieved. Max was still tied to her. He watched as she examined the bike and didn't bother to right it. Broken. He was angry just as she was, slamming his palm on the dash board.

Max hated. He didn't hate the woman. Couldn't. He hated the Wasteland. He hated what the world had become. He hated the men he had seen destroy it. Max hated Toecutter, Lord Humungus, Aunty Entity, he hated the Immortan Joe in his Citadel and he hated the dogs he sent to fetch him and the woman. He hated the ghosts that haunted him even though he had loved them so tenderly in life. He hated himself for caring so much. He couldn't hate her just for living, just for wanting to live.

Begrudgingly, Max turned over the engine, and drove the car slowly over to the woman. He came to a stop a ways away from her, not wanting to seem eager to provide her with a choice. He opened the passenger side door and waited. Eventually, he heard her enter the car, take out her knife again, and close the door. With a nod, he pulled away from the wreckage and continued to drive.

There weren't many hours left in the day, and they both knew that. They had to get out of the Powder Lakes fast, and they had to set up camp fast. The moon was new and black in the night sky, leaving it impossible to navigate the Wasteland in the darkness. He fanged it across the sand, heading North-west, giving the Citadel a wide berth.

They drove in silence. It was nowhere near companionable, but it wasn't something kept out of anger. It was hard for either of them to accept this as okay. Both of them would rather the situation be something else, be something that would let them individually be better off, but neither of them were quite ready to make it happen. She wouldn't kill him, and he wouldn't kill her. Neither of them had cross the unforgivable line that would make anything but what they were doing right now okay.

“Gonna stick me?” he finally asks. The sun's last rays reflect off of the woman's blade, shining into his eyes. The woman looks over at him, still curled tight against the door. She looks hard at him, appearing deep in contemplation. Eventually she shakes her head no. “Put it away?” Max asks again. He can tell she doesn't want to. Max can't blame her, considering how he looks, and how she is. He shrugs away the question before it's even answered. “Just don't stick me.” The woman shifts in her seat, perhaps having her own unspoken questions answered.
They reach a series of rocky outcroppings that jutted out of the sand like nails. He drives once, twice around the structure, looking for any immediately visible danger. There isn't. Max drives closer to the rocks, pulling the car against a hollow – his door's the way in. It was intentional; he wanted her to have a way out. "Do anything but take the car," Max tells her before stepping out of the car, pocketing his keys. He grabs a series of things out and off of the car, including a bedroll, lantern, and incredibly meager rations.

The lantern provided a dim light to dance of the ochre structure, but he made sure to keep it as low as possible to avoid illuminating themselves as a live target. Still, it gave him comfort. He laid out his bedroll to sit on, and opened his canteen. Max frowned, swirling the water inside the canteen. A good rationed mouthful is what he allotted himself. Part of him wanted to drink it all, then and there, and let his body use it as it saw fit. He knew that either way it was hardly enough to sustain him, and he had to get more soon. He needed to get more of a lot of things soon. Bartertown was on his mind.

As Max stretched out his legs, kneading at his bad knee, the woman slid out of the car and sat down across from him. He didn't see her knife, so figured she at least wasn't going to kill him. He looked at her over the lantern, and listened as she spoke.

"Where are we going?" The woman's voice was soft and quiet. She sounds as though she finally resigned from her struggle to find her own way, accepting she was stuck with him until she didn't need to.

"Bartertown," was Max's reply. It's not like it could be a secret when she would be riding right next to him. "Trade," he added on to explain – as if you did anything else but trade in Bartertown.

She nodded, and paused before asking another question. "How far?"

"Get there tomorrow if we're fast."

The woman paused again. He could tell she was hesitant to say something else. Probably because he looked like he could and would tear her apart if she said the wrong thing. He wasn't sure if he could convince her he wouldn't, and kept quiet himself. "Why did you help me?"

Don't need another ghost, was what he nearly said. It was the truth, and it would have been incredibly callous to tell her. He saved her just to protect himself from seeing her face in his dreams, hearing her voice in the waking moments that his ghosts thought he didn't deserve. Max wasn't interested in the human aspect as much. "No one should die that doesn't need to." That sounded much better, and he still meant it. The answer seemed to go well with the woman, shifting to sit a bit more comfortable than she had been. He did, too.

They sat again in silence. If Max were alone, he'd be asleep – at least trying to, with his memories haunting him. The woman changed a lot of things. He sighed, deciding to give up thinking about it, and reached to extinguish the lantern. A final look at the woman provided him with silent approval. The cave went dark, barring any coordinated movement. Looking over to where the car blocked them in didn't reveal anything, just more black. "Use it if you need to," Max grumbled into the darkness as he tapped the lantern. With that, he settled with his back to the wall, and his hand on the hilt of a knife, and fell into a troubled sleep.

The nightmares came soon enough.

He saw Goose set alight by Johnny the Boy. He saw Jesse and Sprog run down by Toecutter and his gang. He saw Papagallo shot dead in their flight from the refinery. He saw the children from the airplane all fall into a sinkhole that opened in the waste. Glory the child is dead in his arms. Max sees everyone he has failed, everyone he has dragged into a situation that they failed to survive, and
they all cry to him for help, and he runs.

Max is driving in his car and the world is on fire. The jet-black asphalt is the only thing left unconsumed by the flames. The dead follow closely behind, daring to catch him, daring to kill him. He almost thinks it is better to die, but something keeps his foot on the gas pedal. He turns his head and sees the one-armed woman in the seat next to him. She is in contrast with the world, calm and relaxed. There is no knife in her hand as it gently reaches out for him.

“Hey,” she says. Her voice is muffled. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Max replies. He turns back to the road just in time to see a truck ram into the car head-on.

Max woke from his sleep with a knife in his hand, pressed against the wall not sure whether to attack or defend. Across from him is the woman who had drawn out her own knife. The sun has risen. “Are you okay?” he hears again, and it’s the same voice from his dream. He could see the concern in her face, betting she had been watching him sleep for some time. Max lets out a ragged breath, and instead collapses back onto his mat feeling as though he hadn't slept at all.

“I’m fine,” he lied to her. Max stayed on the ground for a few minutes, letting his heart come down from the adrenaline high. He got up soon enough, collecting what he had taken out of the car and putting the things back in their place. The sooner they were on the road, the sooner they could get to Bartertown, and the sooner they could go their separate ways. “Coming?” he asked the woman, as if she would actually rather stay there. Wordlessly, she got into the car, shifting into the passenger seat, and he followed. With very little commotion, they drove away from the cave, onward to Bartertown.

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Furiosa settled into the small cave, directly across from the man. He was preoccupied with massaging his leg, and for a moment she wondered if it was lame. The brace gave her a good hint. She ignored it for now, instead deciding to get some answers. She wouldn't dare to go so far with this man without having a good idea of what he was doing. He could be driving off into the Salt, for all she knew. Furiosa decided to ask, but knew he could lie if he wanted to.

“Where are we going?” Furiosa could almost blush at how softly she spoke. It wasn't commanding at all, and they both knew it. It was quiet and submissive, and it reminded her of how her crew spoke to her in the early morning hours before a run.

“Bartertown. Trade,” was his response. She accepted the answer as well as she could. Furiosa wasn't un-familiar with Bartertown, having been allowed to take her crew there a handful of times after making runs. It could have been the fourth big city of the region, but any attempt to control it would have ended badly. The town was the half-way point between the Citadel's territory and whatever laid beyond Bartertown, which was somewhere that they didn't bother to go to. She wondered if he came from there.

“How far?” she asked. Furiosa was used to taking actual roads to Bartertown, knowing that it could be a long day's drive just to get there. They sat somewhere near the Powder Lakes, but further away from the Citadel than she knew. Perhaps he had an idea of where they were and how to get to the town – she hoped he did.

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“Get there tomorrow if we're fast.” Good enough for her. She should be happy that she'll be free to do what she wanted, but she worried that she wouldn’t be able to have that freedom. People knew the short-haired, metal-armed Imperator Furiosa. Now, she only had one arm, and her title was forfeit. What if she had a bounty on her head? What if they were waiting for her? She couldn't even trade for a car. A flurry of thoughts flew through her mind, eventually setting on the man before her.
Why did he save her? She tried to take his car. He would have been right to shoot her, or take her out of the car and drive away without her. Furiosa had been provided with too many liberties than a stranger would typically have. She shuddered at the idea that he may have ulterior motives, but assured herself she could defend herself if she found out. You could ask him, you know, came a thought. It seemed innocent enough to ask. Her hand lingered over the handle of her knife, and she asked. “Why did you help me?” The man paused at the question. He seemed to know why, but didn't have the words to say it. It didn't surprise her.

“No one should die that doesn't need to.” Those words stuck with her. Furiosa remembered all the nights she had spent with Angharad, all the precious moments before runs when she would say her goodbyes to the Wives, and they told her no unnecessary kills. She followed their rule as much as she could, still following it through her flight from the Citadel. They both followed the rule, and they practiced it with each other. In this moment, she appreciated the man, shifting to sit more comfortably.

After a moment of silence, the man reached to dim the lantern. He looked up at her, and she nodded with approval. Furiosa was surprised at how absolutely dark it got, but the man told her she could use the lantern if she needed it. She heard him shuffle backwards against the other side and presumably fall asleep.

It took a while for her to do the same. The dirt and rocks weren't exactly comfortable. Slowly, she shifted in the cave, moving towards the lantern in the middle. Furiosa let the small flame illuminate the cave, but slowly drew it towards the car. The plan? Sleep inside of it. She had done the same so many times inside the War Rig, and it was almost as good as a bed. The man's car was still foreign territory to her, so she tread carefully. She moved into the passenger's seat, setting the lantern on the driver's seat. Grabbing a wool blanket out of a pocket in the back of the car, she settled down into the seat, looking out of the window into near-complete black. The smudged windows dimmed the stars in the sky, but it was still a better sight than none.

Furiosa shivered as she wondered what was going on at the Citadel. No doubt her room was being torn apart, her belongings being burnt. Her crew was probably being 'interrogated.' The Wives would suffer in their own ways under Joe. She couldn't help it at all. Letting out a shaky sigh, she curled tighter into herself, trying to forget what she couldn't help.

She woke eventually to an orange sky. It was a good sign that she was still alive, undisturbed by anything. With a stifled yawn, she stretched her limbs out, and tucked the blanket away to where she got it from. The more she sat awake, the more she could hear a sound coming from inside the small cave.

Furiosa wormed her away towards the sound, knife out. She didn't know whether or not to be relieved when she found out it was the man, grunting and whining in his dreams. He was shaking, too. “Hey,” she half-whispered, keeping her distance. “Are you okay?” With that the man grunted, then suddenly shot up from his prone position and slammed back against the wall with knife in hand. She held her knife tighter. “Are you okay?” she asked again.

“'m fine,” was the response. Furiosa kept quiet, and simply watched him.

She woke up from dreams like that sometimes. Sat up in bed, weapon in hand, drenched in sweat. It was almost surprising that she didn't have those kinds of dreams after all that had happened. Still, she knew they'd come to her some time, a matter of when and not if.

The man stirred from his bedroll, putting his effects back into the car. Furiosa watched, feeling a bit better that the man hadn't completely lost it. He turned to her after cleaning out the camp. “Coming?” Well, fucking of course. Furiosa got back into the car, getting comfortable as he sat beside her.
Silence fell between them once again and they drove away from the outcropping, into the wastes.

Chapter End Notes

Something I've been thinking about in regards to writing Furiosa for this is how she acted after she discovered the Green Place was the sour bog they had passed through the previous night, and how defeated she seemed. For now, that's how I'm writing her, and I desperately don't want to do a disservice to the character by writing her like this as if it's how she always is. She can be incredibly strong and capable, but right now she's at the end of her rope. She doesn't have her prosthetic, and she isn't sure if she'll ever see the Wives again.

Expect for me to write from both perspectives for now until it's either not necessary or a particular side interests me. Hopefully I'm still keeping them obvious.

Is the pacing bad? I'm REALLY afraid I'm going to write like ten chapters of this and only get three days in because I'm bad at managing the passing of time.

If you have any comments, questions, ideas, or concerns, you can comment below or reach me on tumblr here because everyone has one.
Necessary Information

Chapter Summary

Furiosa lets Max know why she's being followed before they get into Bartertown.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They made considerable distance during the day, going as fast as they dared in the car. Oddly enough, Max found himself thankful for the encounter yesterday, being able to siphon gas to excess. It gave them the luxury of a wider berth around the Citadel. They still kept their eyes on the horizon, waiting for a scout to spot them. None ever appeared, and they were thankful.

Max thought of what would happen if Joe had sent out envoys to Bartertown and the other Cities near the Citadel. He thought of War Boys and Imperators spreading word of the car, placing a bounty on it and whoever claimed it. It was hard to shrug off the thought. Surely they weren't that important, were they?

Were they?

“What's your name?”

He turned to the woman with a quizzical look on his face. “Does it matter?”

The woman scoffs, turning away from him to look out the window. He wrinkles his nose and faces the road again, nonplussed by her reaction. What should it matter anyways if they were to split apart today, tonight, tomorrow? Max didn't exactly plan on seeing her again, absorbed in his need to find peace.

“After yesterday, a name's nothing to you?” the woman responded.

After tomorrow, you're nothing to me, he could have shot back. Max didn't dare endear himself to another human being. Jessie lurked in his mind and in the shadows like a fallen angel. Max knew he had venom within him that could easily turn people away from him. He sighed as he thought about it – it was him that saved her. It was only by his will that he allowed her to come so far with him. He was more involved than he'd like to admit. “Max,” he grumbled.

The woman let out a somewhat satisfied sound. “Furiosa,” she replied. Max gave a nod, knowing he'd probably forget it in a week if all went well. Still, he mulled over the name in his head. Furiosa. It was a good name, he supposed. She put up a good fight above the Powder Lakes and was an outstanding shot. Furiosa was quiet, though, and at times seemed only to curl into a ball to make herself smaller. Perhaps she had lost her fury.

“Max,” she spoke after a moment of silence.

He shivered involuntarily, having not heard his name on someone else's lips in years. It was gentle. Someone wasn't screaming it at him, trying to get his attention, trying to get his help. His name was simply spoken, addressing him like one person would another. It reminded him of Jessie. Max
gripped the wheel tighter in an attempt to keep himself grounded.

“I don't want to sound like a scared pup following its parent, but...” Max could hear Furiosa's breath grow shaky. He side-eyed her, noticing she had turned away from him, looking outside. Ashamed. “Things could be bad at Bartertown for me, and I mean bad.”

Stop talking, Max wished. Don't guilt me.

“I only have one arm, and people know who I am. What I've done.”

“Well who are you? What have you done?” Max eased the car to a stop, turning his attention to Furiosa. “Why could things be bad at Bartertown?” he was headed right for the settlement with her in his car. He deserved to know if he was about to get into something that directly involved him.

Furiosa didn't meet his gaze, staring down into her lap. She shook a couple of times, clearly disturbed by the need to explain herself. After a heavy sigh, she relaxed and spoke. “I was an Imperator at the Citadel. I tried to traitor Joe, I tried to steal away the women he took as Wives. I was going to take them away to a better place, to where they could be free people. Joe found out and I got chased out of the Citadel. Then I found you.” She rubbed at her left arm, untying knots in the gnarled muscle at the end of it. “I lost my arm because of him,” she thought out loud. “Joe could have men at Bartertown waiting for me. Maybe for you.”

Max set his head down on the wheel. There weren't any words he could really find to describe just how he felt. As much as he wanted to say it wasn't her fault, he desperately wanted to plant the blame on Furiosa. Even though everything that happened since yesterday happened because he let her in the car, it wasn't like she planned on it. It was her best way out of the situation, and Max understood. It still brought him into the situation, exposing him to something he had no reason to be a part of except for the fact he helped her.

Was it worth it to push her further in, instead of pulling her out? Is it worth it to abandon her at this point? Is it worth it to proceed to Bartertown without her, or to dump her off somewhere that she could make her own way? Would it be worth the risk of her turning into another ghost? She'd be the only one he specifically abandoned to her fate. If she were to die, she'd come back to him with a vengeance.

“I want you – to listen. Mm?” He turned to face the woman who still looked down into the floor of the car. “Look at me.” Furiosa met his gaze. “We will go. To Bartertown. We will trade. If you are unsafe...” Max paused. These many years and many miles gone under his tires have been spent in solitude. He's never had a destination in mind, but instead wandered alone in the world, scavenging and trading for sustenance. Max couldn't imagine taking her in to share the lifestyle, especially for the long run.

“If there is a chance for you to leave and to live well, you take it. You can come, if not. Try your luck the next place. Pull your weight, if you're with me.” It was the best he had to offer. It was the only thing he could offer. Whether or not Furiosa took it was up to her.

The woman eventually nodded in agreement to the terms. “Thank you,” she said softly. Max let out a noise to acknowledge her answer, and continued the drive.

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“What's your name?”

“Does it matter?”
Asshole. Furiosa gave him a scoff, not pleased with the answer. She looked away from the man and out at the window. The landscape was largely featureless. For a moment, she wondered if they were going in circles, wasting away in the dust. What happened yesterday stuck in her brain like a half-stuck nail that either needed to be pounded in or taken out. She turned back to the man. “After yesterday, a name's nothing to you?” She could tell names didn't matter to him. Still, a life-saving experience was not something to throw away into the past and leave with so many blanks unfilled.

After a moment, the man replied. “Max.” It was a good name, she decided. One from the Old World, surely – nothing like the mechanical names that were assigned to children at birth nowadays. She wondered, for a moment, if he was born in the Before.

She offered her own: “Furiosa.” Max made another grunt, limiting his use of actual language. She sighed, and watched the horizon. Eventually they will reach Bartertown. She's been there before, but the same thoughts from yesterday wormed into her mind. Joe could have men in Bartertown, either waiting for her or announcing a bounty. They – she – wouldn't be able to do a single thing about it. The idea of driving straight into a hostile place scared her, and she knew it would be nothing but trouble for the man who did nothing but help her. “Max,” she spoke softly again. She cursed herself silently, knowing she was about to lay everything out in front of them.

“I don't want to sound like a scared pup following its parent, but...” Furiosa shivered. She was hesitant to talk to him about anything that would make him regret helping her, but she knew he deserved to know what she thought. Max had helped her and for the large part left her alone, and letting him go to Bartertown without this knowledge would be a dick move. “Things could be bad at Bartertown for me, and I mean bad.”

For me, she had said, as if he wouldn't be concerned. There was a possibility he could be, but she knew she would face the larger part of the threat. “I only have one arm, and people know who I am. What I've done.” Sob story, she jabbed at herself.

Max jabbed her next. “Well who are you? What have you done? Why could things be bad at Bartertown?”

The questions stabbed at her like a hot poker. She felt the car roll to a stop, and she felt Max's piercing gaze. She kept her head down, unsure if she even wanted to tell him. But she had to. “I was an Imperator at the Citadel.” She made sure to continue quickly. “I tried to traitor Joe, I tried to steal away the women he took as Wives. I was going to take them away to a better place, to where they could be free people.” She failed them, and now they probably sat under watch in the Vault, never to step foot out of the bio-dome again. Because of her.

“Joe found out and I got chased out of the Citadel. Then I found you.” Her hand found the end of her left arm, and she rubbed at it nervously, feeling at the incomplete muscles. “I lost my arm because of him,” she thought aloud. With another shaky breath, she continued. “Joe could have men at Bartertown waiting for me. Maybe for you.”

The silence in the car was deafening. Furiosa didn't move, keeping her head down. Submissive. Her cards were on the table, and she could only wait for his decision. It was truly nerve-wracking to find herself in such a position, where everything seemed to be going wrong and could hardly get better. Another wave of shivers rolled through her body.

“I want you – to listen. Mm?” Max's voice came calmly from the seat next to her. She jerked her head in what was supposed to be a nod. “Lookit me.” Furiosa carefully raised her head, looking into his hair-framed face. A smaller tremor wormed through her as she thought of the wild men again. “We will go. To Bartertown. We will trade. If you are unsafe...” Max huffed. “If there is a chance for you to leave and to live well, you take it. You can come, if not. Try your luck the next place. Pull
your weight, if you're with me.”

It was an incredible offer for him to provide. It honestly sounded too good to be true, there had to be some kind of strings attached. She barely provided anything for him in the short time they were together, and now he offered even more. Was he doing this out of the goodness of his heart? Or was he doing it for himself? Or was he looking to redeem himself by performing this kindness?

Did she really have a choice?

Furiosa nodded, accepting his terms. “Thank you,” she told Max. Receiving a grunt in return, the car came back to life and continued to pave a path through the wasteland towards Bartertown. Furiosa turned away from the man again, trying to get herself under control. Walking into Bartertown a shaky mess like this was a good way to get taken advantage of. Then again, she didn't expect the warmest welcome to be awaiting them.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter seems rather short and filler-esque to me (even though it's not filler), but I decided to write this to sort of finalize how both Max and Furiosa feel about their situation, and establish what's going to happen from this point on out. I'm having fun writing from both perspectives because both characters have their own worries, thoughts, feelings, etc. about the situation that they're on opposite sides of. The upcoming chapters are probably going to be from an extended perspective of either Max or Furiosa, using one character to push along the plot and the other to fill in at spots with their point of view.

If you have any comments, questions, ideas, or concerns, you can comment below or reach me on tumblr here.
Max and Furiosa make their trade at Bartertown and earn unwanted attention.

Max could tell they were finding their way to Bartertown, mainly by the sight of (very few) people, wagons, and cars going to and coming from the same spot on the horizon. It would not be long before they were there. He turned to the woman – Furiosa, he begrudgingly reminded himself – and saw that she was asleep. For a moment, he took in the peaceful look on her face. Max found himself envious of her. Sleep was a necessity for him, but it was not well received. It left his mind foggy and his body tense.

Gently, he reached over to nudge Furiosa on the shoulder. He gave her a second harder one when she failed to wake. While Max expected some kind of backlash from the woman, maybe a knife at his throat, she simply shrugged her body in response. “What,” she mumbled to him.

“We're close.” With that, Furiosa properly stirred from her nap, rolling cramps out of her joints. Now that she was awake, he slowly stopped the car. Max could tell the action confused and worried her, so he calmed her down. “Before we go. Those Imperator clothes?”

She looked down at herself, in the linen shirt, in the belts, in the pants that still held Joe's insignia at her crotch. Furiosa took the buckle off her person and tossed it to the floor of the car.

Max grumbled something about litter, but took her answer as a yes. With a look around the car, he made sure no one was looking to approach them, and turned to dig into the back of the vehicle. Eventually, Max produced an old shawl and a cloak. “Hide your head and your clothes,” he suggested to her, but it sounded more like a demand. She accepted the material, but immediately was frustrated by her lack of a left hand.

She was able to put on her pants, shirt, and belts just fine – especially when she had her prosthetic. They had holes and were easy to handle. Meant to cover. The shawl and cloak were meant to conceal and hide, and they were clumsily managed with only one hand. He grumbled again. “I can. Put it on you?” It was a question that still seemed like a suggestion that was the only way she'd properly put them on.

Max and Furiosa got out of the car, meeting around back. Hesitantly, Furiosa let him cover her. The intimacy was off-putting for both of them, and as such they tried to avoid touching each other as much as possible. Furiosa had never felt the gentle touch of a man before – a rough clap of the back in a fit of camaraderie, at best, and Max hadn't done anything like this for years, and it didn't sit well with him. The task was completed, though, and it was done well. The shawl covered Furiosa's shaved head and wrapped around her neck, and the cloak was draped around her to hide both her clothes and her missing arm. It would work well enough for her to blend in – for now.

Max took the time to find a satchel from his car, and let Furiosa fill it with what she had claimed from the wrecked War Party. It paled in comparison to what he had strapped onto the Interceptor, but it
was good enough to get some supplies. Some of what they carried was *contraband* - War Party salvage was valuable if you knew the right person to trade it to. “Need help, mm, trading?” Max asked before he could stop himself.

Furiosa looked at him scrupulously, thinking he may want to take her salvage as his own. “Why?”

“’m scary lookin’,” was his simple answer. “People won't short-hand someone looks like me.” Furiosa had to admit that he had a good point. She had had her own thoughts about Max, fearing what he could do. At least now, Furiosa knew he was human enough to get by with others, but the traders at Bartertown might not. With a nod, she took his offer, and they got back into the car, heading towards Bartertown. The closer they got, the more nervous they got. Each person expected something bad to be awaiting them, and all these different things could go wrong. They both feared seeing War Boys the most.

Still, they proceeded forward, and Max pulled into a gathering of cars, buggies, and wagons that appeared to belong to visitors. With one final look around, he turned to Furiosa. “If we separate. When trading. Meet me here, we'll talk. Hm?” She answered with another nod, and with that they left the car and immersed themselves in the town.

First things first, Max bartered his metal. He ended up going to a couple of vendors, getting blankets and various trinkets in return, and the trinkets in turn were traded down into a mirror and shears. Max had the idea of cutting his hair and beard to sell to a rope-maker, but figured he'd do that later. He continued to trade around the less exciting material he and Furiosa had, and got various things in return, including a jacket for the woman. The trader had wanted to stiff them, but Max had taken it upon himself to convince him they had enough for the deal. Furiosa found it oddly endearing.

All that was left was the real good stuff – the high caliber ammo belt and the flares he had confiscated from the wrecks. These, he hid on his person as they approached the man who appeared to handle the weapons. The man had bullets, knives, blunt objects, even a crossbow that he showcased, and it was all for sale. “Hello, good sir, what can I do ya for?” he leaned on his table, eager to make a trade. A man lurked behind him, favoring something in his jacket pocket. Guard.

“Have somewhere private to do this?” Max asked. The man's glow seemed to fade, but he nodded and waved the two to follow him. The guard hanged back to protect the merchandise. They ended up in a small shack that was surrounded by other small shacks – perhaps the residential district. When they arrived, Max shrugged off his jacket and presented the bandolier of ammunition.

The man carefully observed the bullets, surprised by their quality and quantity. “This is some prime concha-band ya got, good sir. Very nice. Could buy me out of house and home with this, ya could.” He provided a nervous chuckle, and was satisfied that what Max had was real. “What do you want for it?”

“Twenty 12-gauge shells. 51 9-millimeters. Magazine for the same.”

“You could get a lot more than that for this,” he said, curling the bandolier into a tight roll. “I'd take it and run but ya'd probably kill me.” The man let out another nervous breath. “Want anything else?”

“9-mill pistol. 'Nother magazine, 51 more rounds. Water and food, if it can be bought.” The man nodded in reply. He produced a pen and paper (which was, itself, expensive) and scribbled a note on the paper. “You'll find the waterman and the foodman together, that's where most everyone goes. This is credit, from me to you, that I will pay on your behalf.”

“And if you don't?” Max asked in a rough voice.
“I'm about to give ya guns and ammo that you could shoot me with,” he let out shakily. “No need to die any time soon.” The man tucked away the bandolier, urging them to follow him back to his stall. “Now good sir, I'm well pleased with the trade, and I'd love to make one like it again. Do ya have a name, sir?”

“Does it matter?” Max asked the man. Furiosa had a small chuckle to herself, remembering the similar exchange she had with him. She guessed not a lot mattered to him.

“S'pose not, sir.” Back at the table, they were given their supply of munitions, and thanked for the business. “Come back any time!” called the man, who was already far behind them as they wriggled their way around the crowd.

Max first took her back to the car, where he loaded all of the weapons. Satisfied with them, he hid his pistol and his shotgun on his body. He then handed her the other pistol, and put half of its ammunition into her satchel. Furiosa opened her mouth to protest, but he stopped her. “Take it.” He waited for her to slide it into the cloak before he did anything else. If she had a pistol, she would do even better on her own. And through that, so would he.

Their last stop was to the waterman and the foodman to claim the rations due to them. Unsurprisingly, the men were well-fed and well-protected. A line – more like a crowd - was formed at either distribution station, and they settled into the food line, waiting their turn. The people that surrounded them probably could only afford a day's rations at a time, haggling with the men just to get by. Furiosa was reminded of the Wretched, and Max simply stared off at something in the distance until they found themselves at the head of the line.

“Welcome, friends, to the Bartertown food station. How may I help you two today?” The man wore a too-happy face, a facade put up to get over with some of the more weary folk that come through. Max and Furiosa were non-plussed by him, and Max produced for him the note. The man looked between them and the note for a moment. “Weapon guy give you this?”

“Mm.”

The foodman replies with his own grunt, inspecting it further. “Looks alright to me. If he don't have the good stuff, that's curtains for 'im. Anyways, if you'll come along we can get this sorted out. How much do you want?”

“Two weeks' rations, food and water each,” Max replied, trailing the foodman with Furiosa in pace beside him. Another man took the vendor's place at the counter, continuing trade with the starving people.

“Not sure if I can trade two weeks' food for the both of you, maybe ten days at most. There's a lot of people that need feeding here, and that's twenty people that could eat that might not be able to.” Max knew the man didn't really care about the people as much as he did his inventory, but kept quiet. “Water I could get you enough of, though. Shipment came in from the Citadel a few days ago.” Citadel. The word hit them both like a ton of bricks, especially Furiosa. She had driven the Rig to make the delivery. Furiosa pulled the shawl tighter around her head, hoping she wouldn't be noticed. Max balled his hands into tight fists, hoping that would be the end of it.

The two were taken to a larger building that appeared to store both the food and the water. It was guarded, of course, to prevent anyone from trying to steal from the storage. Max felt eyes drift to them as they entered, and he did his best to hide the bulges in his jacket and his pants. He was armed, but his bullets weren't meant for them, and he meant for it to stay that way.

“Anyways, you're gettin' what everyone else is. Dense meal bars. Has what a body needs.” The
foodman called at a few workers to collect the order, and they did so quickly, presenting it to them on a sand sled. “Now the water's gonna come in those 5 liter guzz containers, but don't you worry about the water, those canisters have been cleaned well enough. Split 'em five and five each of you, and you can get by three days on one. TANNER!” The man hollers up to the top of a small silo – presumably the water storage. Someone answers - it's Tanner.

“Ho!” he calls down in acknowledgment.

“I need ten of those five liters filled and down here!”

“Yep!”

The man came down from the top, gathering the empty containers to fill. They were explained to, by the foodman, that nearly every idiot that tried to work the silo ended up letting the water start to spill out. Finally, Tanner came through and was competent enough to work it. “Honestly it's just a hose and a knob, I don't get it.” Max let out an amused grunt to humor the man.

As Tanner worked to fill the containers, he seemed to grow increasingly perplexed by the situation. After he completed the order, he looked at a gauge near the spigot. Tanner tapped it once, then another time in disbelief. It was used to show the rough amount of water inside the silo, and it didn't look good. “Boss! We supposed to have this much?”

The foodman quickly made his way over to Tanner, looking at the gauge. It didn't take him long to realize something wasn't right. “Fucking Joe! That half-dead bastard and his chalk boys shorted us again!” He took out a pen, and marked something on his hand.

Furiosa shivered inside the warm cloak. She had made the delivery. Max could sense her discomfort.

Giving a hard kick to the dirt, the foodman returned to Max and Furiosa, and more workers placed the water on their sled. “There's gonna be damn riots when the water runs out. I swear, that skag can shove a V8 right up his… anyways, here's your order. You better hope this note is worth what it says.”

“Weapon man said you could kill 'em if he's lying,” Max said. The foodman nodded, appearing to keep that in mind.

“Well thanks for the business, I s'pose. No offense, but I'd like to send with you a guard to make sure no grabby-hands try to take the stuff. Not gonna give anyone else anymore just because their stuff was stolen and they didn't protect it well enough.” They obliged him, both to protect their supplies and to keep the foodman happy enough. He chose the closest man to them to accompany them, and with that they departed from the storage building.

A path formed before them as Max pushed the sled with the guard in front and Furiosa by his side. They could feel the hungry eyes, more numerous and more ravenous than the guards could be. The chance to take wasn't worth it to those who looked on, but they both knew that without the guard, they'd be under a lot more pressure.

Eventually they reached the Interceptor, where Max simply began to load on the supplies – or at least what was supposed to be his half, when the guard suddenly spoke up. “This yours, mate?” He asked, taking a leisurely stroll around the car. Max grumbled as the man looked but didn't touch, and answered in the affirmative.

“V8...” Max didn't answer this time, preoccupied with stacking the containers inside and in the back. “You'd do well to keep it safe, mate. Lot of people would like to take this as their own.” Deciding to
end the inspection, Max stopped in front of him. The guard quickly simmered down, and nodded, returning to the sled. “Well I'll be off now. Good luck, you and the missus,” he nodded to Furiosa and paused. It was then, in that very wrong moment, that she looked up and her eyes met with the guard's. Bad move.

“Do I know you from somewhere?”

Furiosa froze. No, no, no-no-no. She put her energy into hoping he hadn't actually asked that. She hoped he was actually walking away. Maybe she would wake up again this morning, and take the same journey. Maybe she’d wake up at the Citadel, none of this ever happened. “Miss, do I know you?” Wordlessly she turned towards the car, wanting to get back into the car and get very far away. “I'm talking to you, you know!” The man reached out to grab her at her neck, catching nothing but the cloth that wrapped around her. He pulled, and it all came off.

Furiosa stood exposed to the man in her Imperator garb, in her shaved hair, showing very clearly who she was. “You,” the guard let out. He remembered. She had worked on the delivery of water to Bartertown, and at some point he must have seen her and they caught eyes for perhaps a second, but he remembered. “You're coming with me,” the guard spoke as he raised his rifle. Her hand was on the pistol in her waistband, but already a shot rang out, and the man crumpled to the ground. Blood poured out from his open head. People ran. Furiosa turned to see Max, packing his shotgun back into his jacket.

“In,” was all he said. He entered the Ford Falcon, turning over the engine. Furiosa followed, but not before talking the guard's rifle. Not like he'd be needing it. As soon as she was in, he peeled out of the vehicle lot, aiming North, hoping to abandon Bartertown to the horizon long before anyone could figure out what's wrong.

Max wanted to pound his fist on the dashboard, to rattle the steering wheel, stomp on the floor of the car. He wanted to yell at the woman for being stupid enough to get caught, to push her out of the car and be rid of her. When things had seemed hopeful, it once again fell apart. Story of my life. Instead of lashing out in rage, he slumped back against his seat in defeat, sticking the gas pedal. His hands lingered at the bottom of the steering wheel. Perhaps he should just accept already that this was how things happened.

Max looked over at Furiosa, who also sat defeated. It's not her fault, he had to remind himself. She may have made the run to Bartertown, but it was Joe that short-changed them, and it wasn't her fault that she found herself here, it was Joe's for driving her away from the Citadel. She only wanted to do good, much like he did. They were punished for it. Maybe they weren't too unalike. It scared him a bit to think about it that way, to have another reason to connect to this person he didn't want in his life in the first place. The threat of her negligent death loomed over his head, and all the broken promises and all his ghosts found themselves watching him, watching her, waiting for the wrong move to be made.

It was comforting, though, to draw those parallels. It let him know he was not alone in this world of suffering, where good people are meant to die. They would both reach the end of the road some day, perhaps one before the other, but not without trying to save the world. It was futile, but it was better than being Joe. Better than being the Bullet Farmer, People Eater, Humungus, Toecutter. They may die in vain, but no one could say they didn't try.

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Furiosa didn't know what to do. She didn't know what to do when she had left the Citadel with War Boys on her tail, but now she really did not have an idea of what to do.
He didn't owe her anything, and she didn't know how many times she told herself that in her head. It was twice that Max had saved her. Furiosa knew she could be strong, nigh invulnerable under the right circumstances, but she was weak outside of the Citadel. She'd be dead without him. To be honest, she was thankful for Max. He didn't need to do a single thing that he had done, but he had. He had given her a pistol and traded for enough rations for the both of them. All intentions lied in separating in Bartertown, with Furiosa laying low in the ghetto and Max blasting off into the sand, but he killed the man who threatened to apprehend her and let her right in again.

She felt indebted to him, but he never let on to it if she was. Max didn't seem to keep track of how much she owed him; he didn't salivate at the idea of payback. He wasn't perverse, like many men she had dealt with. He was solitary, and she was intruding on his space, and they both knew it. Maybe he was okay with it. Maybe he wasn't. Maybe he just wanted to her to be out of the way, out of his life, anything that would let him be alone.

She looked out at the sand, the harsh landscape that ruled the world. They were running from two places now, not sure when they'd stop next – if they'd even find a town elsewhere that was oblivious to who they are. Furiosa thought of the Citadel, of Immortan Joe sending out scouts and envoys and messengers to all the settlements he could reach, demanding the death – or return – of the traitor Furiosa.

Maybe she would stay a little while longer with Max, out on the road. Might not get any better than this.

Chapter End Notes

As always, if you have any comments, questions, ideas, or concerns, you can comment below or reach me on tumblr here. If you'd like to beta read this, let me know!
Bartertown was soon gone from the horizon, and the sun wasn't far behind it. They'd have to set up camp somewhere. Max missed the world long gone where a man could pull off to the side of the road and remain un-harassed for the night. It would be a lot easier to do that than to find some hole to tuck away into and hope no one finds them. Thankfully, however, they didn't have a hard time finding a nook in the crags to settle into. It was another shallow cave like the one they had found the night before, and just like last night he parked with Furiosa's door facing out. Same rules applied – do anything but take the car.

Max shimmied out of the vehicle, taking many things out of the car and into the hollow. Water, food, the lantern, and some blankets. He laid one out on what would be her side, placing another on top so it wouldn't get dirty. He laid out his own mat with a blanket for himself, and lit the lantern which sat between them. Furiosa followed him into the hollow, quickly settling into the spot Max set out for her. He grabbed a few more things out of the car, then set out a tarp to block the light from shining out into the dark world. It was a precaution that he kicked himself for not taking last night.

Still, he sat, and opened the small crate they had traded for today. Max pulled one out of the crate, and it was every single bit as uninviting as he imagined it would be. Brown, square, and hard. Meal bars, indeed. He passed her one, and before taking one himself replenished his canteen with water from the five-liter container. He swore under his breath as he spilled some, but it was no real matter to him, because it was water he wouldn't have had two days ago. Max drinks it all, and goes to down another canteen-full before he sees Furiosa, who looks like she just saw him drink the full five liters instead. He hands it over to her instead of downing it, and sits down with his own meal bar. It's better than raw lizard, he easily decides.

They sat in silence, letting the sound of eating and drinking do the talking. Each of them take in three canteens of water and two meal bars. The past events of the day hung heavily over their heads, but neither wanted to talk about it. Instead, Furiosa took the opportunity to try on her jacket, and Max took the opportunity to give himself a haircut.

With the mirror stuck in the sand, he hunched over it as he tackled his beard first. Max grabbed at it in handfuls, feeling sand sift out of the hair as it was cut. He continued to shear away at it until it was nothing but coarse stubble. Next came the hair. It fell in clumps and loose strands, and while he knew he couldn't make it look good, it didn't necessarily look bad. He cut it evenly short, not bothering to try anything with the cowlick on his head. All in all, he looked fine, and felt better now that a literal weight was gone from his head. It didn't hurt that he now looked different than the man
who shot a Bartertown guard.

Max bundled up the larger parts of hair, storing them away in a small bunch to save. After setting aside the mirror and shears, and brushing the loose hair from his clothes, he caught Furiosa's eye. He couldn't help but let out an amused huff. “Rude to stare.”

Furiosa had been watching him cut away his wild mane, slowly appearing more and more like a person instead of an animal. “You almost look...”

“Human?” Max offered a smirk.  

*Handsome*, was more along the lines of what Furiosa was going for, but she'd never let the man know. She had taken in his face that was no longer hidden by years of hair and dirt. He was a full-life, untainted by white powder and tattoos of engines. Perhaps Max could be called normal – then again, good health and independence seemed to be an abnormality nowadays. She looks down into the sand, and thought again of what happened at Bartertown. “Max,” she began hesitantly. “After what happened today... I still don't understand why-” Furiosa stopped when she met his eyes. Something stirred in her that reminded her of the wild man he looked like, that he could still act like.

“Don't worry,” he let out, but it only made her more uneasy. “It's not... to endebt you. To me. It's...” Max doesn't finish. He sits still, silent, tense, and only stares into the lantern. Furiosa does nothing, afraid to do anything to startle him. His hands tighten into fists, and she keeps her hand on her knife – no, her pistol. Max stirs from it soon enough with a shiver and a shaky breath, done with the conversation. He reaches towards the lantern. “Use if you need.” With the light extinguished, Max tucked himself back against the wall, covering himself with the blanket, and tried to get some sleep. Furiosa did the same, keeping the pistol nearby.

He can see himself sitting across from Furiosa. They're eating – no, they're talking – no, they're just sitting in silence. Max watches, disembodied, as he and Furiosa do everything and nothing. Slowly, figures emerge from the rock walls. His ghosts join him. They are voyeurs to the interaction, even though they're close enough to touch the two. Language doesn't register, emotions don't prompt responses, movements don't startle reflexes. He grows increasingly scared, wondering if he had never fallen asleep at all, and if he had died. He sees his doppelganger, knows it isn't real. Then again, he's not sure what's real anymore.

His ghosts come into focus as Max and Furiosa seem to blur. The ensemble cast has arrived. All of them turn to him now. Goose sits on his left, Jessie and Sprog on his right. He turns to his old partner, wrapped up in medical gauze to hide his burnt skin. It's a pleasant change from how he normally appears. It reminds him of mummies.

“Nothin' a year in the tropics can't fix.” Max lets loose a distressed laugh.

He turns now to his wife and child. “She's a cute girl,” Jessie gives a knowing glance and a smirk, and Sprog giggles in agreement. He reaches for them, and they are air. The calm interaction is equal parts comforting and horrifying. The rest of the ghosts look on like chained hounds, waiting for a weak link to break loose. It is not their moment. Soon.

“You gonna do good by her? By us?” Goose speaks to him again. “Or will she join us? Or will you?” Max turns to his partner, and suddenly he's back at the hospital, peeking over the curtain. His hair is ash. His eyes are glazed over, his skin melted, he is completely disfigured into something beyond human. It can't be Goose. Isn't.

It's him.
Max jolted awake with a yelp. He reached for the lantern, eager to dispel the darkness. He paused, hand poised to light it. He could still be dreaming, and he would see them. Max stayed like that, torn between the warmth and light, and what could be waiting for him. In that moment, a hand touches his, and he recoils instead of barreling forward. “Max,” he heard Furiosa say his name. He risked a peek at her as she turned on the lantern, and was glad to see that they were alone.

Max slumped back against the rock wall, and let his heart settle back into his chest. He took a peek outside of the cave, and saw it was still pitch black. It didn't matter; he wouldn't sleep again that night. With a look over at Furiosa, he could tell she wouldn't either. She had the same look on her face that he did. “Dreams?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Bad?”

“Yes. You?”

“...yeah.”

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_Furiosa turns east off the Last Road. The Wives are in the secret hold. Her crew doesn't suspect anything, and she proceeds as planned. The Buzzards destroy her escort. The Citadel War Party catches up, yellow and red flares burst into the sky. She drives closer and closer to the great storm that's lurked on their border._

_Ace faces her on the driver-side stoop. “Why can't you stop?” She doesn't react. “What have you done? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?” Ace grabs her by the throat to choke her. She swings with her left arm, but her prosthetic is gone. He opens the door, pulls her out. Her right arm reaches out to hold on, but it's gone too. She goes under the wheels of the car next to them._

_Furiosa is in the Vault with the Wives. She is restrained, forced to watch as Joe defiles the women, impregnates them. She closes her eyes but she can still see it. Hear it. Soon Joe is towering over her, and she feels it. The Wives watch not with sympathy, but with malice, not for Joe but for her._

_“Prime Imperator,” she hears him say through his mask as he rubs her stomach. Furiosa knows she is barren. That's why she was cast down into the War Boys. Her belly still grows impossibly large, swelling until it bursts, and out comes a War Boy from the impossibly small space of her womb._

_She is useless to them now. She is taken by her arms and feet, carried to the top of the elevator, surrounded by the War Pups and treadmill rats. On the count of three they throw her off and out. The last thing she sees are the Wretched, arms up and mouths open, ready to devour her whole._

_Furiosa woke with a spasm as soon as she reached the ground. Almost immediately, Max woke across from her, startling her with a shout. She slowly approached the lantern, wanting to get some light into the cave and make sure they were both alright. She hesitated when she felt another hand on the lever – Max – but he recoiled away from the touch before she could do anything. “Max,” was all she said, hoping it would put him at ease. She carefully lit the lantern, and the cave flooded with warmth._

_It wasn't hard to decipher the look on his face, especially with all the hair gone. She felt the exact same way. Probably looked the same, too. “Dreams?” Max asked her._

“Yes.”
“Bad?”

“Yeah. You?”

“...yeah.”

They both sat in silence, listening to the wind whistle through the sand. Furiosa almost missed the dull murmur that seemed to permeate the Citadel, that blanketed her sleep with white noise. It was almost deafeningly silent in the hollow, but neither of them wanted to talk to break the quiet. Max definitely wouldn't. “Wanna get going?” she suggested. The rumble of an engine was one of the most comforting sounds she knew, and it probably was for him too.

He shook his head. “Dark out. No headlights.” Max took another peek outside from behind the tarp, but was unable to tell how much time had passed. They could have slept for all of ten minutes, or they could have slept for hours and were on the cusp of sunrise. It was frustrating, especially for Max. He was often left to struggle through the nights that his ghosts claimed as their own, and it wore him down until he felt like a ghost himself.

They eventually decided to eat and drink since neither of them were going to sleep anytime soon. Neither spoke, not wanting to talk about what they woke from. All they could do was hope they kept it together until the sun came up.
Max and Furiosa decide on an itinerary, but not without argument.

I decided to split what was supposed to be chapter seven into two parts - this is part one. Part two may possibly come soon.

The sun found Max and Furiosa soon enough, and they were on their way.

Their self-imposed silence grew more companionable as time went on. Furiosa felt better in the car now that Max didn't look half-animal, and in turn Max did, too. Neither were tense or curled up against the door with a knife, and neither were trying to shoot something following them, so it was almost normal. Good enough for Max to pretend he was alone if he only looked forward.

Both the driving and the silence were interrupted around mid-day. Max stopped the car on top of a ridge, making sure there wasn't anyone around that could easily spot them. Hesitantly, he took the keys and left the car, removing his map from his jacket. It had been a while since Max had actually taken a look at it and figured out where they were, and now was as good a time as any. Using a small compass, he aligned the map to the northern direction and found their place. He hummed as he did it, tracing fingers along lines and lingering on black dots, and didn't pay any mind when Furiosa came to a stop beside him.

“Where are we headed?” He grumbled softly again as a non-answer, looking closer at the map. Furiosa took a peek at it, but couldn't make anything out. She was used to reading off maps that were clearly marked, copied from the Before maps but changed for Now. It appeared that Max didn't care for proper labelling, but his system was his own, having not needed to accommodate someone else. She could still make out lines of roads, arrows, and dots. Some markings were apparently made to represent landmarks or otherwise noteworthy geography of the region, but it still looked incredibly foreign.

Max could read it just fine, but what it told him didn't bode well for their travels. To the south was Bartertown, and further southeast were the Citadel and the Bullet Farm. To the east were the mountains. To the southwest, they would eventually find the Powder Lakes again. To their north and northwest was unknown territory, somewhere he wasn't sure he was ready to venture into just yet. To the far south, beyond Gas Town, there were settlements he knew of that Furiosa could join with. Are they still there? Are they safe? Max forces the questions out of his head, not wanting to think about what could have happened when he was gone.

“Max.”

He looked up at Furiosa from the map. She wanted an answer. With a huff, he decided on it, but neither of them would like it. “West. Big - hm, berth around Bartertown. South through the Powder
Lakes, head south below Gas Town. Some places down there. Good people.” Maybe seeing some familiar faces would do some good for him – if they made it.

Furiosa's face contorted into a combination of fear and anger. Max wanted to skirt around these places like it's no big deal. Bartertown would be on the look-out. The Citadel would, too, especially since they had killed War Boys in addition to what she tried to do. War Boys already ran down lone vehicles, and they would follow them to an absolute end if they saw even a glimpse of Max's rusted black car. He even wanted to go through the Powder Lakes, flattest place in the wasteland next to the Salt, and if they lived, finally dump her off in one of the shanties he'd call a settlement.

She had to stop herself from berating the man. She was no longer the Imperator, no longer Boss, no longer in charge. This man was her saving grace and perhaps her only lifeline, having no obligations to string her along except for some hidden reason he doesn't want to discuss. She was always provided the chance to leave, always treated like a human being. He bartered for a gun for her, for two weeks rations for her, and fuck, if he isn't going to kill himself worming back down the territory of the big three to find her a home. Max probably was mad.

“They're going to be looking for me. You. The car.” Furiosa didn't quite know what to say to counter the man's route, but wondered if he had anything else in mind.

“Got another plan?” he asked.

Green place, green place, green place consumed Furiosa's mind and flooded her mouth, so tempted to tell him about it and where to go so she could see her home again, see her people again. She stopped herself again, still not sure if she completely trusted the man. What would he do if he saw it? What kind of allegiances does he have, who could he reveal this place to? Is the Green Place still there? A worried thought brushed through her mind, and she did her best to dismiss it. “North?”

Max shook his head with a grunt.

“Why not?” she countered indignantly.

“Don't know anything about it. Off the map.”

“Well what's so bad about not knowing? It's not like you'll fall off the face of the planet if you go off the map.”

With that, he frowned. Max pocketed the map after one last look on it. “I got lost once. Lost. I can get lost if I want to. But to get lost when you really don't want to is… bad. Never found my way back. Not ready to leave yet.” It wasn't lost on him at all that the center of his map were the Citadel, Bullet Farm, and Gas Town, all three incredibly bad places to be, but he knew the ins and outs of the area, and it was the closest thing to civilization he had seen (despite how uncivilized many people were). The places to the south meant something to him. There wasn't any good reason to leave yet, but at the same time he knew he'd never had one unless he went out and found it.

Furiosa understood him, as much as she'd like to avoid the three towns. Even though she never truly got lost, she was taken away from the Green Place, and she was always stopped from finding her way back. The Green Place hanged over her head now, ever present as a very possible and very real destination. For now it would elude her grasp. Heading south and south-east - towards the mountain pass – would be impossible. Skimming around the mountains would be a similarly unachievable feat. She had no doubt that the Citadel would be working with the Bullet Farm to patrol in sweeping circles around the territory, at least for now. But maybe, if they were south enough to get around Gas Town, she could sweep up into the canyon and head east.
Furiosa remembers the deal she arranged with the Rock Riders. Guzz for free passage. It was forfeit now. No guzz, no free passage. She let out a shaky sigh, shifting inside her jacket.

“I know you don't like it,” he said to her. “I don't either.” Max moved to the car now, grabbing a couple of meal bars and the canteen out of the car. He passed her one, waiting before beginning to eat his own.

She ate her food silently, occasionally reaching for the canteen. Furiosa knew better than to argue over anything they discussed. The world stopped being fair and making sense a long time ago. For now, she'll accompany him and go where he takes them, and hopefully they'll make it in one piece.
Too Close for Comfort

Chapter Summary

The car is their shelter for the night.

Chapter Notes

Honestly, this is just chapter 7 part 2. Should have waited and posted it as a whole but got frustrated with this half and scrapped around a thousand words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It isn't long before they're off again, headed west. The engine is music to their ears once again, and they let the day pass. The map is on the dashboard and the compass is out, and every once in a while Max looks at it as if he could actually read it as he drives - "Ah, yes, that's where we are, and we ought to come across blah blah blah" - but he can't. They aren't even on a road, and he's sure this area's only something he's mapped from higher up in the landscape. All he knows is that they're headed west, and they should probably head south tomorrow.

Max stops when the sun sets. There are no caves or hollows in the rock to pull up next to and huddle inside of. For tonight, they'll have to sleep inside the car (if they manage to sleep at all). They pull into a series of hills to keep their profile low. The moon may be waxing, but there's still very little of it to show in the night sky, and the car has long lost its shine. For now, they're well hidden, but they'll have to mind the use of any kind of light.

It was hard to find the food and water in the dark, but at least he had the common sense to bring in the crate and re-fill the canteen before the sun set. He took his rations with him when he stepped out of the car, telling Furiosa he would set up a watch. Max shivered against the cold wind and felt his way forward, leaning as he made his way up a dune.

The crest of the nearest hill was his look-out point, from where he could see absolutely nothing. It was dark in all directions, barring the starry night sky. The only way he'd be able to tell if something was coming was if he saw some sort of light or otherwise heard it. Even then, it was a crapshoot on whether or not he could take them out. He didn't like it at all.

Deciding any sort of watch was useless, he felt his way back to the car. Max snatched some of the heavy blankets off the back and climbed back inside, handing some off to Furiosa. She mumbled a word of thanks and wrapped them around herself. "See anything?" He wasn't sure if it was a joke or not.

"Nothing but stars. If anything comes for us, it'll be close before we know." Max pulls out the Glock and settles it in a rough holster he had sewn under the dashboard. His shotgun followed suit, settling into the opposite side. The stress of watching wasn't worth it. His pupils would be as wide as a dog's, trying to see something in the dark that wasn't there, and the sun would blind him in the morning. Instead, he sat comfortably behind the wheel of the car, hoping the guns would kill and the engine would outrun anything that found them.
Their meager dinner was done, and while many would welcome sleep at this point, it was once again something neither of them were sure they wanted. Max could run from his ghosts (or at least try to) when he was awake, but sleeping meant the complete surrender of conscious control. He was thankful that he was able to get by with what little sleep he got, but it didn’t come without a cost. Eventually he’d go to sleep. Eventually he’d wake back up with a jump and a wild swing at the empty space in front of him. Routine.

Furiosa was here, though, and she’d be here for many nights. She would hear it, if not see it, if not feel it if it were so bad that he lashed out. The first night she had shown concern, easily brushed off. The second night, it was like looking into a mirror when he saw her face in the lantern light. She had one of those dreams, too. That wasn’t so easily dismissed. He really didn’t need another reason to connect with this woman and worry about her. Since when have I done either?

When you pushed her into your car on the first day when you disguised her when you traded for her gun and rations when you saved her when you said you would help her find a home

Well that’s that, isn’t it? Max reclined his seat, curling up on the leather inside the couple of blankets he had left. The woman huffed silently next to him, having not known of the capability. With some finagling, she reached over with her right arm to do the same, and soon they were both lying down inside the car.

It was scary, Max thought, for the both of them. They were both closer to each other than they really wanted, and it was just plain intimidating to be like this. By and large they were still strangers, no matter what they had done. It just didn’t feel right, but hopefully their trust in each other was well-enough placed that neither of them would try anything. Max certainly wouldn’t, he decided, curling up with his arms tucked into his chest, turned towards the middle of the car. Like hell, would he be uncomfortable in his own car. He settled into the padded seat, and soon enough was asleep.

Max’s dreams were dark and murky. He couldn’t see anything but he knew they were there with him. He couldn’t feel anything but he knew they were watching him. The dream he had the second night he was with Furiosa rippled into this one. They were waiting for him to make a wrong move, to see if he would succeed or fail, to see if he could make it down south again. He knows the people would want him to succeed, and they would rejoice when he finally made it and the two of them went their separate ways. Their ghosts, however, seemed to be much more keen on having new company among them.

A voice stirs him from his sleep. “Max,” it calls to him, cool and clear to rise above the haze of the dream. He doesn’t explode with energy, ready to defend himself. Instead, he slowly opens his eyes as if he were afraid to meet the source. When Max saw that there was only Furiosa laying across from him, he felt both relaxed and embarrassed. At least it was a gentle awakening.

The sun was rising, and it was a welcome sight. It was the first time he had slept for the whole night in a while. Max didn’t think much about it, but probably would have bought a lottery ticket if he could. For now, he sat his seat back upright, and left the car after tossing the blankets into the back. With a mighty stretch, he climbed to the top of the nearest hill to see what there was to see.

Sand and rocks. At least they had that going for them, which was nice.

Max came down to the car soon enough, refilling the canteen and grabbing more of the meal bars for breakfast. Furiosa had the rifle she had taken yesterday in her lap, inspecting it. “SKS,” she spoke aloud as he entered the Interceptor. “Ten rounds in it, nothing else.” He nodded in response, and she sat it in the back, within reach if it was needed.

They ate their meal, and soon enough moved out from the hills, aiming west then later south-west
towards the Powder Lakes. Yes, the Powder Lakes were wide and flat. Yes, he had left the carnage of his last encounter with the War Boys behind there. Yes, it would be foolish to cross through, but it's for those exact reasons Max believed they would pass through without encountering the War Boys. At the very least, he hoped.

Chapter End Notes

As always, if you have any comments, questions, concerns, or hate mail, you can comment below or reach me on tumblr [here](#). If you'd like to beta read this, let me know!
Furiosa had managed to sleep well enough that if she had another dream like last night, she didn't remember it. As thankful as she was for that, she was more thankful for the cushioned leather that she was sleeping on instead of rocks. It reminded her of the War Rig, the closest thing she had had to home since she was stolen from the Green Place, but it was a bittersweet memory. The War Rig was Citadel property, and she couldn't fool herself into thinking it was hers, not with the skull on the wheel and the etchings all over the bare metal. Everything was Joe's.

The sky was slowly lighting up, which was something else to be thankful for. With the world finally returning to day, they’d be able to get going any time they wanted, and hopefully that was as soon as possible.

She turned now to face Max in the driver seat. He was still deep asleep, and she let him be. Sleep was incredibly valuable, especially for people like him. It wasn't hard to deduce he had trouble sleeping most nights, and while she wasn't sure if Max had woken before in the night, it didn't really matter. Right now, the world was still getting its color back, and she'd probably wake him once the sun peeks over the horizon.

Max stirred by his own volition soon enough – or so it seemed. Furiosa turned to him again, and saw that he was still asleep, but in the middle of whatever's been plaguing him. He shook as if the cold had set into his bones, and muttered wordless sounds in response to something he was sensing. It wasn't the first time she had caught him like this. He had been curled up into himself against the rock that first night, and she remembered how violently he had come awake. Furiosa wouldn't be able to stop Max if he hit her, but he'd definitely stop before he did anything bad, and he'd be sorry.

She was stuck in the car, not wanting to make any sound or any sudden movement that he'd detect and react to, but she knew he'd wake soon enough. Hell, maybe he'd lash out anyways. His arms were tucked close to his body, nowhere near the knife on his belt or in his boot. With a huff, Furiosa figured it would be best to get it over with on her own terms.

“Max,” was all she said in a firm voice, and he stirred. She kept her right arm poised to block any incoming shots, but none came. Instead, Max gently peeked out from inside his jacket and returned her gaze. He offered a small hesitant nod, and turned away to set the seat back up, eager to get the day started and put the night behind him.

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“What's down south?”

“Mm?”
“You said there were some places down there. What're they like?”

Max almost had to stop and think about it, since he had been gone for a while. He could remember seeing the towns, being in them, and meeting with people. It was hard to remember the details, and to remember who and what belonged where, but he knew they were good places. Max had something of a relationship with the towns, and he was sure he could get Furiosa a place to stay.

“There's a couple of towns. A stronghold, even. Nothing big like the Citadel, but they're all good people. Got sense. They'll take you in alright.”

“And how do you know they'll take me in?”

“I helped them. They helped me. They'll help you.”

“How do you know they will?”

“If you can work, you work.” Max was very close to grinding his teeth. “As long as you help, they'll take you in. Guard, mechanic, engineer. Missing limbs don't matter,” he hinted at her left arm for the first time, not turning to see what kind of reaction he garnered. Still, he heard her shift in the leather seat. “I don't have an ace up my sleeve to give you. Don't got much, for that matter. Once you get there you can do whatever. Leave if you want, if you can get a car.” I don't care, Max was tempted to add, but he wasn't sure if he would mean it. Furiosa didn't say anything in response. Max didn't quite like the quiet resignation he found himself used to getting from her. For all the fight she put up that first day, it seemed to be non-existent – or at least hidden. “No arguments?”

“You want me to be kicking and screaming the whole way? Make a fuss like I'm a damn pup?” Max saw Furiosa turn in her seat out of the corner of his eye. “I can't… I'm not about to argue or act like I know any better way, because I don't. I can't pretend like I could fight you, take the car, and find my own way, and I can't pretend I haven't made it this far because of you.”

She was incredibly tempted to ask him again – why did he save her when he had absolutely no reason to do so? Furiosa remembered his reaction to the first time she asked him. If he wants to talk about it, he will. If he doesn't, she'll never know. Maybe it wasn't her business - but maybe it was. For now, she could at least assume it wasn't for any malicious purpose, having remained unharassed for so long. Or maybe he's making you soft. No, it was her fall from the position of Imperator that made her soft. Furiosa was powerless, but he always treated her as an equal. She wasn't weak, and she wasn't being coddled.


“Thank me when we make it,” Max replied in a tone that was more detached from emotion than anything, as if it weren't over until they finally went their separate ways. For him, it really wouldn't be. He would continue to be teased by his ghosts until she was gone, and it didn't seem worth it to thank or be welcome for everything that's happened so far when the future was still yet to be determined. Max had no idea how their company would end, and he didn't want to think of anything but a handshake and a wave as she disappeared into town and he disappeared into the sand. Still, he knew the world never went as one planned, and there were still many miles and many days in front of them.

Furiosa turned away from him again as he iced the warming mood. Good! Max thought. The longer he could keep up a barrier between them, the better. He just needed it to hold.
They were silent again for a long time. Hours passed until Max stopped, left, looked at the landscape unfolding in front of them, and pulled back in with more food and water. No words were exchanged. They continued.

After more driving in a south-westward direction, night came, and once again there was no cave to huddle into. The car laid low in the dunes and shifting sand, and it would stay safe. Again, he left the car to dole out the bars of food and the water. Max spoke short and simply, claiming the first watch of the night.

The moon had grown marginally larger, and the dark landscape was marginally brighter. Soon it would be no trouble to see during the night, and they could even switch drivers under the bright moon to get to their destination even faster. That gave Max some small relief, and he wandered to the top of the nearest dune with his pistol and shotgun tucked away on his person, as well as the keys. It was probably an unnecessary precaution, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Out on the dune, he felt better. Furiosa was silent, but her presence was smothering, a constant reminder of the obligation he had found himself bound to. It was probably unhealthy to take this opportunity to pretend he was once again alone, and wasn't worrying about another human being's life. Then again, it was probably unhealthy to fret over whether or not Furiosa would end up dead, and whether or not it would be a consequence of his actions.

Did it matter, though, as convinced as his ghosts were to overtake him? Would she appear even if they separated and she was happy to go?

Max shivered as he thought of Jessie, of the need to protect his family so long ago, and the failure to meet that need. He shivered as felt the echo of this need in his situation with Furiosa. The fear of a ghost was being warped into the fear of a loss. He pulled his leather jacket tighter around his cold body, regretting not grabbing his blankets from the car. Max decided to make the excuse not to – the cold would keep him awake and alert. Really, he just wanted to keep his eyes off the woman as long as possible.

“Hey,” came a voice from behind him - her voice. Max didn't turn, didn't respond. He kept his eyes on the horizon. “Hey,” she spoke again a little more pointedly, and it jabbed at his back. He didn't move. A blanket was thrown over him, and Max quickly took it off his head, spinning around to face her. “You're going to freeze out here, fool.”

Max grunted as he turned away from Furiosa, deciding that keeping watch was more important than whatever she had to offer. Still, he wrapped the thick wool blanket around his body and enjoyed the shield it provided from the cold. She cares, a small part of his mind observed, and he shivered in the warmth.

“Go get some sleep, I'll keep watch.” Furiosa had walked up to his side, nudging him with her elbow. He shuffled away.

“'m fine.”

“You drive.”

“I know.”

“You'll be tired.”

“'m always tired.”

“Max, I have eyes, I can shoot a gun, and I can sleep whenever I want. Get some rest.” She spoke
now in her best attempt to get across a pretty good point. Max didn't budge, keeping his eyes occupied with the world surrounding them. Maybe his stubbornness would keep her away. He wasn't up for any more discussion. For a moment, it seemed to work.

“Ass,” Furiosa named him, not moving from the ridge. Max could hear her chew at the food bar, and looked down at his hand to find that at some point he had dropped the damn thing. He grumbled to himself, knowing that with his luck he'd grab a rock and try to eat it instead of the bar. With a small kick at the sand, he wrapped the blanket tighter around himself and kept vigilant.

“If we're getting close to the Powder Lakes, you should sleep. You're the only one of us that can drive a manual but I can still shoot a gun. And you're gonna need to sleep sooner or later, and I'd like for it to not be when we're in a moving ton of metal.” Max frowned as she spoke again, speaking with more sense than he could somehow conjure up. “I can always knock you out and have you sleep that way.” He turned to Furiosa as if she really would try, and made some sort of nasty face at her that left her unfazed.

Max finally decided that the argument wasn't worth it, and limped back down the hill to the car. He did the same as last night, reclining the seat and wrapping the blankets around his body. If he really wanted to act like a child, he could just lay there, but he knew sleep would come all the same. So he slept.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was hell to write. It feels like more filler non-plot just like 7/8 and I'm sorry. Anyways, some content in future chapters is going to be recycled from a general collection of abandoned scraps I'm saving for later. I keep cutting content because I have no idea how to use it or transition into and out of it. Hopefully I can keep this whole thing together and have it still be a comprehensible story at the end of it all.
Unwelcome Surprise

Chapter Summary

The journey across the Powder Lakes doesn't go how they hoped.

The night passed with little incident. Max – naturally – had another one of those dreams, and Furiosa once again woke him from his haunted mind. It was a gesture he still wouldn't say thanks for – at least not yet. For him, it felt like a power play. She could wake him as soon as he entered an episode, or she could wait and wait and let him suffer, and he would never know. It was almost better to jump awake by himself. Almost.

They were approaching the Powder Lakes. Neither of them were comfortable as they saw the landscape begin to stretch out in the solid color, worn to the same texture. Furiosa fidgeted as if something would pop out at any minute. Max gripped the steering wheel, feeling his sweaty palms lubricate the leather. He eyed all three of the mirrors on his car, shrinking away when Glory appears in the driver side mirror. She is dead, Max reminded himself for the thousandth time since she breathed her last. All ghosts. All of them. An old world ritual came to mind – exorcism. With a grimace, he could imagine it taking his spirit from his body, leaving whatever should have been there had things not gone to shit.

A point had been made to make the guns easily accessible. Magazines had been loaded, rounds had been pre-chambered to pack in as many as would rationally fit in the pistols, and shells were made available for an easy reload. Max had made sure to top up the car with guzz before they rode in the morning, not wanting any surprise stops they could have prevented. Better safe than sorry was the law of the land, and it would serve them well to follow it.

Furiosa fiddled with the empty sleeve of her leather jacket, watching as the landscape slowly turned to nothing but flat sand and packed dirt. They were in the Powder Lakes now. Eyes on, she would have echoed as a command. Vigilance was important in this Fool's Basin, especially since it was only the two of them.

They weren't skirting around it; that would add on days to their journey. No, they were aiming straight through the middle of it, heading south and eventually they would turn south-east to swoop below Gas Town for their perceived end goal. All they had to do was gun it.

The sand stretched out for miles in all directions, and the Lakes seemed much bigger and lonelier than it had when Max overlooked it up on the escarpment a few days ago. Looking to the east, he could see a thin band of red-brown crowning the horizon, the iron oxide dying the hills that lay between them and the Citadel. He turned the wheel to head further west until he could no longer see it. With a grim thought, he wondered if there were sentries on the hills, looking down to where they had escaped the War Party. If so, Max hoped they were nothing but a curious fixation to them. Ignorable.

Inside of the cabin of the Interceptor, it was almost unbearably quiet. The engine may be roaring loud at top gear, but the rocks and gravel were gone beneath the wheels and left the gentle sound of sand as a purer white noise. It was silent. Their own disposition not to talk didn't help. The world sounded hollow, as if there was a void to fill. Typically Max's ghosts would take their cue here, but they too were hushed.
Dust tremored off the ground in spots a few hundred meters ahead of them, and they both saw it. *Earthquake?* Max thought to himself, before remembering vaguely they were many hundreds of miles away from any fault lines. He had neither time to think any further about it nor diverge from their path before these same spots exploded in a flurry of sand and metal, jettisonning spiked cars from holes in the ground.

“Buzzards!”

“No shit!” Max countered, grabbing his shotgun. The four Buzzard vehicles had disappeared from their immediate vicinity but were slowly gaining on them. At top gear, Max didn't dare try anything reckless to take them out yet, but knew they had to be taken out fast. His car wasn't armored. Those spikes could do some serious damage.

Already Furiosa was leaning outside of the window, firing rounds at the closest Buzzard on their left side. She ducked back in with half of the mag left, having forgotten how well-armored the dune buggies were. For a moment, she lamented the absence of her lancers and the well-protected structure of the War Rig. They were gone now, though, and they would have to make up for it. She peeked out again at the encroaching vehicle to fire off a couple more rounds, none of them doing any good. The last bullets went at the tire. It popped, but they seemed to have no trouble keeping their speed.

Settling back into her seat, she saw Max waiting with a full magazine in his hand. Furiosa quickly moved the gun down on it to load the weapon, and with a firm slap and a pull of the slide, it was ready to go again. For now she stayed put, only firing on them when they tried to draw closer. The Buzzards could be held at bay, but not for long.

It was Max's turn to shoot. The shotgun was a great deal more powerful than either pistol they had, but it needed a frighteningly close range in order to be effective. As Furiosa had kept their left flank secure, Max let them come on the right side, distance slowly shrinking between them and the Buzzards’ lead vehicle. At a carefully chosen moment, Max reached out of the car with his shotgun and loosed both shells at the wheel well of the buggy. The rubber tire was shredded by the buckshot, and spun off the rim. With another reload, he fired again and the rim fell off. The Buzzard was unable to control it, and it turned left before flipping over. The others were quick enough to avoid it as it tumbled, and they soon left it behind as they continued their mad dash across the Powder Lakes.

The remaining three Buzzards fell into a reverse V formation behind them, its point facing away from Max and Furiosa. The closest two teased at the Interceptor, failing to get close enough for either of them to do any real damage. Neither Max nor Furiosa dared to waste their precious ammunition when they could simply provide the threat of being shot, but they knew they couldn't outrun them forever. Damned if they do, damned if they don't.

A buggy dared to come closer on the right side. Max waited with his shotgun, letting it approach as close as he'd let it. When it was just the right distance away, he aimed out of the window again to shoot at the nearest tire. It was the perfect opportunity for the Buzzard to aim his own weapon at Max and fire. He yelped in pain as the projectile met its target, his forearm, and he pulled his arm back into the car. Crossbow bolt. Thankfully plastic, nothing like the rusted metal they always had handy.

Furiosa turned to him, having been poised to shoot out of her window. “You okay?” He offered a meager nod and waved his arm at her. The sterile white plastic was alien against the dirt, blood, and brown of the wasteland. She moved to help him but he pulled back. The bolt would act as a plug for as long as it was in his arm, but he hoped it missed the big arteries. For now, she took hold of the wheel as he moved to shoot with his left arm. It didn't do anything to the vehicle, but they at least
knew he wasn't out of action – not yet.

The Buzzards weren't above running their prey dry. They had no proper sense of what waste truly was, willing to use up their supplies in order to get someone else's. As long as they could claim it as theirs and use it for their own purposes, they'd give it their all. Max felt like that was their plan. The crates and containers lashed onto the back of the car were a dead giveaway that they had something worth taking. He wished that there was instead a guzz tank back there that would let them keep going, drive out of the Powder Lakes without stopping and let the buggies behind them blend back into the horizon.

There wasn't, however, and he guessed that they would run out of guzz before the Buzzards would. Might be best to leave two bullets for the both of them.

“Something's coming from the east,” Furiosa pointed out, nodding towards her window. Nothing good could come out of the east, the direction of the Citadel. Another War Party, he bet, should the dust cloud grow into a more solid object. “We might be able to keep them interested in the Buzzards and get out of this.”

“They could follow us.”

“They're following us now.”

“If we get any closer they'll be able to tell this is the car that the other party followed.”

“You think they don't have spyglasses?”

Max mumbled some failing sound of disagreement, but he knew she had a point. Furiosa, after all, had spent years in the Citadel and knew what happened and how it happened. He should have a reason to trust her advice and knowledge in this fact, but he was hesitant.

“We can actually shoot the War Boys, you know.”

With that even better point, Max turned the wheel with his one good arm, aiming east towards the growing cloud of dust. Out of the pan and into the fire. Hopefully they would be fast enough to roll out of the embers and pat themselves out before they got into even more trouble.

He could see that the Buzzards were falling behind him into a closer formation. If he strained his ears, he could barely hear them shouting something – Russian, right? - to organize themselves. They were wisening up to their plan, and acting accordingly. The Buzzards knew their three vehicles were more tantalizing than one, and at the same time the idea of having the War Party as its spoils was greater than the meager prize Max and Furiosa had seemed to offer. Whether they were falling in line as quick allies or simply to be a bigger group than the War Party was unknown, but at least for now they weren't the Buzzards' target.

It was unnatural to drive towards an enemy that was also moving towards them. It was, in fact, to be avoided by all means because of how unpredictable a wastelander with a car could be. Doing it now with kami-krazy suicidal War Boys seemed like an outright death sentence. Maybe it was. Hopefully it wasn't.
No Way Out

Chapter Summary

With War Boys surrounding them on all sides, Max and Furiosa have no choice but to stop.

Chapter Notes

it only took ten years

The distance between the War Party, and Max, Furiosa, & the Buzzards grew shorter. Black dots formed out of the dust cloud on the horizon, and they grew into hazy blocks that soon sprouted pasty white boys and slender thundersticks. There was no mistaking that they're from the Citadel. Bikes, cars, and a truck that screamed “higher rank.” He held steady.

The plan was simple – turn away from the War Boys at the last minute and let them and the Buzzards ram into each other, grow entangled in their own fight so they could escape. It seemed simple enough, but there was a lot of potential for it to go wrong (though it wasn't like much would go right anyways). What if the move was pre-empted? What if they turned with him not only to follow, but to collide into them or lance them? It was too late to deviate now, he supposed as the pale faces grew more detailed.

Twenty meters out, they turned north. It wasn't as sharp as Max wanted; the bolt in his arm restricted its movement. Still, he skirted past the closest Citadel vehicle and continued in an angle behind them. Of course, the Buzzards rode through the party with little trouble and fell back in line behind the Interceptor. In turn, the War Party caught up to the Buzzards and fell behind them like some sort of wasteland parade.

Not far behind them, they could hear explosions. The War Boys were putting their thunder sticks to good use. They could see the fireballs rise above the Buzzards behind them and it only made them wish they could get out of there faster. Still, they were followed closely and no amount of maneuvering would shake them now. Their guns laid at the ready, waiting for the right opportunity to come into play. None had appeared so far, as the vehicles trailing them maintained a narrow column, but the War Boys were slowly flanking the Buzzards.

“Let them take out the Buzzards. We don't have what it takes to get them all. Let's see what we're left with.” Max accepted Furiosa's advice, keeping the wheel steady. His arm still throbbed with pain, blood dribbling occasionally from the wound. For now it was the least of his worries. The Buzzards were the only shield between them and the War Boys, and when they were gone, the real dirty work began.

A larger explosion behind them sent a flaming Buzzard vehicle careening towards the left, and it was quickly abandoned as it lost speed. To their right, a motorcycle driver was shot with a crossbow, making him and his passenger lose balance and fall behind the party. Witness came bitterly to her mind. These boys would die trying to get her for trying to do something good, and their mates would
cheer them on as they fell. Perhaps in some other life they would have known better, or at least been taught better.

Directly behind them, the closest Buzzard nudged their bumper. Max swerved right to allow him to pass or do whatever he wanted to do, not wanting the car to get impaled on the spikes that covered the buggy.

The Buzzard eased forward to flank them on their left. The passenger opened the window and pulled down the cloth around its mouth. It shouted at them in its native language, trying to gesticulate and say something in a manner that they hoped Max and Furiosa would understand. She still gripped her pistol tightly, not sure what the Buzzard was even saying. It didn't matter anyways; the buggy erupted in a sudden flash, rattling the car with shrapnel (but thankfully nothing hit them). The flaming wreckage was quickly left behind.

Furiosa saw a truck emerge from the other side of the smoke and fire. Standing in the bed of it was a War Boy – no, it was no War Boy. This man was unpainted, still marked with black on his forehead. Imperator. Still, he stood with a very familiar grenade launcher and very familiar goggles. If she strained her eyes, she could swear that she saw very familiar tumors. “Boss!” he called, muffled by the roaring engines. An overwhelming sense of dread filled her, hearing him call out and wave at her. Ace.

“Turn hard right,” she told Max at an audible volume, and he followed her directions. They turned suddenly out of the group, heading east. She could see something change in Ace's features, but she wasn't sure what it meant and didn't want to know. “Right again!” They were clear of the pack of War Boys now, heading south again. Behind them, they surrounded the last Buzzard and took it out. It didn't take them long to turn again and come back towards the Interceptor. There was no question now that they knew she was in the car.

“Can this thing go any faster?”

“Whaddaya think!”

They were getting closer. A bike was the first to pull up parallel to the car. Max moved to aim out of the window, but the driver quickly pulled away, his passenger only offering a hand in the air to him. Still, he remained wary and kept a tight grip on the wheel. His left hand was curled tight around his shotgun. Furiosa's hand was tight around her own, but it shook with nervousness. Ace was the leader of the pack now, and she'd have to kill him.

A car approached them on the left. Furiosa leaned forward in her seat with pistol at the ready in an attempt to get a better look. It was an old open-top jeep with a spear launcher attached to the rear, a vehicle she recognized from her regular convoy. To her surprise, the gun wasn't pointed at her, and the lancer was not ready to strike. Instead, they posed in the bed of the jeep with their arms overhead and fingers interlaced. The V8 salute.

*What is this? She wondered. Sick joke?* It certainly seemed like one. Her pistol was just inside of the car, kept out of the sun where it would shine. She was tempted to pull the trigger and cut the taunting short when a bike pulled up alongside it, and its passenger offered the same gesture. Either the joke was growing, or something was happening that she didn't quite understand yet. Furiosa wasn't sure which one she wanted, even looking behind them to make sure the Gigahorse hadn't come to make a surprise appearance. It hadn't.

Max sat as ready as he could with his favored arm out of action. With some small adjustment to his posture, he found a better way to aim out of his window and at any coming War Boys. Pistol primed to fire, Max let a car pull up next to the Interceptor to line up a good shot at the driver and lancer.
Something stopped him, though. They held their arms above their head, locking their fingers between each other. Peeking out of the window, he saw the buggy behind them, and the War Boys were doing the same thing. “What are they doing?”

“They're saluting us.”

“Why?”

“I don't know, but don't shoot unless they try to do something.” It was a huge gamble to take part in this non-violence. They were surrounded and neither were sure they could do anything much to stop them all from chucking a thunder stick at the car to kill them. Even if the War Boys did nothing, what would happen? What would be the purpose of the salute, and why would they surround them just to do nothing?

Furiosa’s questions found an answer in the truck that pulled up close to the Interceptor. It was Ace's. He was stationed now at the driver's door, trying to get as close to them as he could. “Boss!” he called out sharply to her. She shivered in response. “Will you stop?”

“Why should we?” She called back to Ace. The man accepted the question well, and understood where she was coming from. While they were her crew, they had belonged firstly and foremostly to Immortan Joe, and his will was beyond hers. They shouldn't expect to be trusted after how quickly shit hit the fan for her after she tried to traitor Joe. Still, War Boys weren't ones for tricks, and here they rode with apparently no ill will.

“We need to talk!” Furiosa didn't know what to do. This was Ace, and she knew some of her crew was accompanying him. Part of her wanted to trust in them, much like they had put their trust in her. The other part of her knew how fanatical they were, and how large a prize they would get for capturing – or killing – a traitor. She didn't say anything to him, trying to concoct a plan to get them out of there.

Ace was apparently dissatisfied with the lack of an answer, and reached into the cab of the truck. Furiosa had her pistol ready to take the shot, waiting for the shape of a gun to pop out at her. For some reason, she wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt until the last possible second. And she was glad she did.

Out of the truck came a beautiful, intricate metal prosthetic. Three fingers and a thumb, all pneumatic and articulated. The metal was polished, and the leather bracing belts were oiled. Through Ace, it called out to her. It seemed to beg to become whole again with her. With careful movement, she reached out of the Interceptor. Furiosa was afraid it was just a way to to snatch her out of the car, but it was no game. She took a solid hold of her metal arm, and Ace let go, pulling back to the truck.

It sat now in her lap, solid and tangible. Furiosa felt a smile tug at her lips as she tested the joints that she found to be freshly lubricated. Her arm hadn't been treated like a bargaining tool. Instead, it had been respected as an instrument, and as a part of her. She allowed herself a moment to take it all in, and turned to Max, who had been watching all this time. “Will you stop?”

Max had all the reason in the world to say no to her. They could get him, her, or both. They could be taken to the Citadel and become worse than bloodbags. They could be killed right out. There was nothing to be gained from stopping, even though they weren't going to get out of this situation without divine intervention anyways.

It's your chance to be rid of her! Rid yourself of the responsibilty of protecting another human! It's not like you wanted it…
Fine chance to get a ghost if you let them take her. You'd be doing nothing but failing everyone that came before her.

It's not like one more's gonna be any trouble! His mind was torn between stopping and keeping speed. It would be foolish to stop and be at the greatest disadvantage he'd ever find himself at. The War Boys could be foolhardy with their vehicles; they had a garage to go home to. His Interceptor couldn't be pushed to speed away and escape the claws of the nitro-boosted War Party that surrounded them.

'Ve need to talk!' the War Boy had shouted. What was there to talk about? Terms of surrender? Like hell he was going to stop and have any sort of talk with -

“Will you stop for me, Max? Please?”

She's not yours to keep, Max. She's not a thing. Something clicked in his head, and he finally gave in. “They won't take you,” he assured her as he released the gas. I won't let them. Furiosa waved out of the window to communicate what they were doing, and the War Boys responded accordingly, falling in line ahead of them. Max braked once they were down into double digit speeds, and it wasn't long before they had stopped.

The War Boys stopped a short distance ahead of them. In another time, he could have been pulling these rowdy boys over and swaggering up to their window to deliver a ticket. Things were different now. He had a pistol tight in his hand, ready for them to come out and try something. None came forward, however, except for the one Furiosa had talked to. The old War Boy stopped a fair distance away and allowed them to keep their space.

Furiosa slowly got out of the car, and Max took the cue to do the same. He didn't quite brandish the pistol at them, but they knew he had it. Looking over to Furiosa, he saw she was pre-occupied with putting on the arm. Seeing the way it worked was interesting to see, considering how it's been years since any real medical tool like this had been created. Max could tell she truly appreciated it, and he could tell she felt whole again now that she had it. Something changed in her face as she faced the War Boys. Max couldn't decipher it.

She slowly made her way towards the War Boy, and the others behind him quietly observed from their cars. Max couldn't do anything obvious to aim the pistol at them, but he was confident that he could shut anything down. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to. Furiosa stopped a few paces short of the man.

“You wanted to talk, Ace. Let's talk.”
There she stood. After four days they were finally able to find Furiosa. The man accompanying her didn't matter – if anything, it was nice to know she found some company. Ace didn't dare question her ability to survive, but without her arm it would have been a lot harder outside of the Citadel simply by principle. It's why he always brought her arm with him. Immortan Joe had asked, demanded to know where it was, and he hastily claimed the Boys were already scrapping it to put to other uses. It was a good enough answer for Joe.

Ace kept her arm on the off-chance he'd ever see Furiosa again. It was better for him to keep it than anyone else. He couldn't trust any of the War Boys or the Pups with it, and he was damn sure no Imperator would tolerate it. Initially he kept it just to keep it. Maybe he would have had it scrapped sooner or later. After all, she had traitored the Immortan. She didn't deserve it.

But Ace had looked after Furiosa since she was a Pup, and in turn she had looked after him when she became Imperator. They had something between them, something that reminded Ace of family.

But she had traitored the Immortan.

The day when Furiosa had been ran out was hell. Her crew was gathered together and interrogated, pushed for the smallest bit of information on where she could be going, and what else she had planned on doing. The Immortan knew only that she was planning on taking his Wives, but where was a complete mystery, and he needed to know. One of the younger ones, Axel, had said something or done something to upset the Immortan, and in return Joe sent an awful backhanded fist at him.

When Joe had left them with nothing to go off of, the crew dispersed, all of them left shaken by the encounter. Little Axel especially, who only got up once the Immortan left. Ace could have sworn he heard him sniffling as he disappeared into a tunnel. The next morning his eye was black and red, almost dark enough to forgo his paint.

The first night was the tipping point for Ace. He had been alone in the Garage, inspecting the War
Rig for any sort of hint to where Furiosa might have gone. There had to be something, even if it was just a word. He found nothing.

He was heading back to the dormitory when he heard the screaming. Desperate to find the source, he eventually found himself on a crosswalk between two towers and staring at the Great Tower with its Maw opened to the world. Something was happening in the Biodome – the Wives' chamber. Shadows danced across the windows, and the screaming continued. Words were being spoken, but he couldn't make them out. They were angry.

A panel of the Biodome shattered. Something was being held outside of it, wrapped in white. He could hear shouts of “no” mixed into the screaming now, countered by the deep bass of Immortan Joe. It continued on for some short time before the white-garbed object – or person - was pulled back in. With nothing else coming from the Biodome, he hurried back to his bunk and tried to sleep the day off. Three of his crew was taken during the night. He'd never find out where they went.

It was then that he decided that Immortan Joe wasn't worth following anymore.

The next few days went by at an agonizing pace. Furiosa's crew was drilled, drilled, drilled again. They replaced the treadmill rats and ran the platform up and down as patrols went out to look for the traitor Furiosa. They made the food, served the food, cleaned the shit out of the latrines. Ace was made Imperator – more insult than promotion – and the crew was relegated to the most menial tasks. Another Imperator took control of the War Rig, but he didn't care who.

All this time, boy after boy quietly asked him what happened to their three comrades. Each time he would tell them he had no idea, and instead told them what happened at the Biodome, and reminded them of what happened to Axel. Nothing else was spoken, but they would share knowing glances when they saw each other. They all kept up the facade that they knew nothing and that Immortan Joe was justified in seeking out Furiosa. In fact, they pulled it off so well that Joe finally let them go on a patrol as a single unit to go find her, and let them know a prize was on her head.

Once they were gone from the Citadel and poised on the other side of the hills to the West, Ace stopped the party and gathered the boys around. “War Boys!” They cheered as he addressed them. “Today, we seek out Furiosa!” Another cheer. “If we find her, I don't want anyone to use guns, flamers, harpoons, or thundersticks. Understood?” The War Boys responded positively.

“We all know something's going on. We know she tried to take his Wives, but Joe's not telling us everything. If we find her, we hear what she has to say. If we believe her, she goes free. Aye?” Another cheer came from the War Boys, perhaps smaller than the ones before it. “If we don't, we take her back. Aye?” A noticeably less enthusiastic sound came from the group. After a pause, Ace spoke again. “These are the rules from here on out, whenever we're out. Got it?” He got a positive answer.

For a moment, he reflected on the group. They were good boys, the lot of them. Nothing like some of the real fanatics he had seen at the Citadel. It seemed like Furiosa had groomed them – him, included – to be tame and loyal. Maybe that was a good thing. But maybe she did it deliberately, maliciously, so she'd get into this very same situation and be able to run off. Or maybe she did it so they could cling on to the last strings of humanity Joe so desperately wanted to cut them from. He'd go with the latter.

It didn't take long for them to see a party on the horizon, and they quickly became entangled with the group: Buzzards and another car whose faction he didn't know. His truck pulled up next to a Buzzard, which he swiftly took out with his grenade launcher. The mysterious car was on the other side of it, and once the smoke cleared, he could see her. Furiosa. “Boss!” Her car turned away from them, out of the mass of cars and headed south again.
The War Boys made quick work of the rest of the Buzzards, and the party aimed again at Furiosa’s car. She doesn’t know you won’t hurt her, he finally realized, and he called out to the boys. “It’s her, it’s her! Salute the car! Salute it!” Ace laced his fingers together overhead to reinforce the command. They continued towards the car, slowly surrounding it. One by one, the boys popped up with the V8 salute. It was the only gesture of respect the boys knew; anything else would give her mixed signals.

Ace got his driver to pull up to her window again. “Boss! Will you stop?” he was hanging now from the side of the truck in a position not unlike the one he’d be on the War Rig.

“Why should we?”

“We need to talk!” he called back. Ace could tell Furiosa was hesitant. She was scared, too, something he’d never seen on her face before. She didn’t trust them. He grimaced as the situation grew potential to end badly, and turned carefully to reach into the truck.

Her arm had been well-maintained, even oiled that morning. Just in case. Ace held it out to her, sunlight glinting off the polished metal. He smiled to himself as she reached out and took it. Ace decided to let the gesture do the talking for him. Hopefully she’d listen. If she didn’t stop, they’d need to force her to, and it wouldn’t end well for anyone.

After what felt like an eternity, she reached out of the window again to gesture to the War Boys. Stop. He mirrored the gesture, ordering the party to come to a halt. Furiosa’s car fell behind them as they broke earlier. Ace would allow them their safe distance.

The cars were off. The War Boys were perched on their vehicles, watching as he stopped before the lone vehicle. Out came Furiosa and the man. Ace spotted the gun he held easily, and kept it in mind. Furiosa moved closer to him, stopping a couple of meters away. “You wanted to talk, Ace. Let’s talk.”

“Things got bad quick when you took off.” Ace wasn’t sure where to start. “When Joe couldn’t find out anything from us, he worked us half to death. Joe hit Axel and, uh… he took Phil, Sprocket, and Jam. Disappeared them. Made sure we stayed together after that.” Ace ended up gathering many of his crew, especially the younger boys, together to sleep in a pile. Despite their weak half-life status, there was some strength in numbers.

“I, uh… heard the Wives screaming the night after you left. Joe broke a window, held one of them out of it. Didn’t drop her.” How could a man say he loves his wife when he threatens her with death? “Don’t know if anything’s happened to them.” He could tell Furiosa was not happy to hear any of the news.

“Got Imperator grease,” he said with a crooked smile. “It was more to insult you, say anyone could replace you. Even an old dog like me.” Ace’s tumors tugged against the skin on his neck. “Crew’s mine now. We’ve all talked about it. What I saw. What we know. You. Made some decisions.”

“And what did you decide?”

- - -

This is the part where they try to take me back, right? Furiosa wondered to herself. Nothing up to this moment had made her think that was their primary objective, but it quickly seemed like it was. They had talked about her, and had to have made some kind of decision about it. She hated the fact that she didn’t bring her pistol with her, but none of the magazines would have been full anyways.

“We decided that Joe… he’s not all he’s cracked up to be. He’s… he’s no husband to those Wives, no
father to the boys. We've been pretending we're still with him.”

“Well if you're not with him, who're you with?”

Ace paused at the question. Looking at the War Boys behind him, they all gave him the same look of uncertainty. With a shrug, he turned back to Furiosa. “Not sure. For now we're with ourselves. Find a way out if we can, figure things out. We thought maybe we're with you, but we didn't know why you tried to do what you did. Wanted to hear every side of it before we made a decision.”

The civility they were displaying was almost too good to be true. Every part of her wanted to take a step back, then another, then another, and finally enter the car and drive the absolute hell away. She knew what danger was, and this whole thing felt dangerous. Then again, everything has felt dangerous ever since she was ripped away from the Vuvalini those seven thousand days ago. Maybe a little more danger wouldn't hurt.

“When I was a pup, I was stolen from my people to be taken to Immortan Joe.” Furiosa spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear her. “On the third day after I was stolen, my mother died. I was too young to be a Wife so I became a War Boy. Ace watched over me as I grew, because the other boys knew I was different and so did Joe. I had no family at the Citadel.

“I fought hard to get my paint, and I fought hard to get my grease. I fought hard to become an Imperator, but I was still worth less because I am not a man. I fucked up a trade mission and Joe took my arm for it, and then I was worth nothing again. I had to fight my way back up, and it was not fun. I picked my battles, I won my battles, and I earned the right to drive the War Rig.

“At some point I met the women he calls Wives. Immortan Joe does not have Wives. Immortan Joe has women that he is holding captive only to exist as his prime breeding stock. Two of them are pregnant. One of them has cuts all over her face and arms, each one made to defy him and his standard of beauty. Another one is hardly six thousand days old. They were all stolen from their homes, just like I was. They had their freedom taken away from them, and nothing is theirs anymore. Not even their own bodies.

“I sympathized with them. They all hated Joe for what he had done, what he was doing, and what he would do. And I hated him, too. And I wanted to hurt him like he had hurt us, like he had hurt our people by stealing us away from them. I wanted to take the women away and try to find my homeland. Being able to drive the War Rig gave me the best opportunity to get as far away from the Citadel as I could. I was going to take them on our next run to Gastown, but Joe found out, and here we are.”

There was a pause as Furiosa allowed Ace and the crew to take it all in. She was quietly thankful to herself for not saying she would head east through Buzzard territory and the storm beyond it, heading towards the canyon and its Rock Riders, where she had to appear alone. She was also upset at herself now for deciding their deaths would have been worth it.

A lump formed in her throat as Ace turned to the War Boys, gathering them close. The deliberation begins. Furiosa looked back at Max, who had so far been ignored by both parties. He had been attentive, taking in what both of them had to say. Unsure how he could comfort her now of all times, Max nodded at her, wiggling the pistol. He had her back. She offered a meager smile and turned back to the mess of white in front of her.

Ace broke away from the group before Furiosa's head could implode from the tension. “We won't take you back.” She let out a sigh of relief, allowing her posture to slacken. “But you should know there's a bounty on your head. Not sure if word's spread around yet, but it will. Might be best to get out of the territory while you can.” She understood.
“Since we're trading advice, don't go to Bartertown. Joe shorted their water supply and I shot one of their guards. Keep it to yourselves.” Ace nodded, and again the two groups stood in silence. Neither were sure what to do, whether to keep talking (though there was nothing else to discuss) or simply leave. Furiosa was tempted to do just the latter, not good with goodbyes, when Ace spoke again.

“We're gonna go ahead and see what of all these Buzzards we can salvage. Feel free to come along if you want,” Ace made his way back to the fleet of Citadel vehicles, equally bad with addressing their departure, and the War Boys followed. Furiosa got back into the Interceptor with Max. With very little discussion, they decided to follow the party. It never hurt to get supplies, and the both of them trusted Ace and the boys enough to leave them alone.

The War Boys were quick and methodical, stripping out anything useful from the charred metal husks. Only one of the Buzzard jalopies was worth towing back whole. The junk would stay, but inevitably someone else would come along and take it up – probably more Buzzards.

Max preoccupied with getting as much guzz as he could, glad that their empty water containers could double as fuel storage. Furiosa actually found herself helping out the boys as they scavenged for parts. It felt weird to do so, but at the same time it was oddly therapeutic. It helped her feel like she wasn't all that alone. Sure, she had Max, but it was different when at the end of the day these boys would go back to the Citadel and feel the same that she did about Joe. Furiosa let herself get lost in the familiarity of it, only snapping out of it when Ace rushed over to her.

“Boss!” He stopped before her, panting from the stress on his lungs. “You're never gonna believe this.” Ace did nothing but beckon her to follow, so she did. Max trailed closely behind them, ignoring the others that decided to come along.

He took them to a Buzzard vehicle that hadn't been touched for salvage yet. Ace got there first, opening one of the doors before dragging out a body. “Look like anyone ya know?” he asked as they approached. It took a moment before she connected the dots. The body was female. Short hair. Missing left arm below the elbow.

It looked like Furiosa. “Body double.”
Final Goodbye

Chapter Summary

Furiosa enjoys her short last company with Ace.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Buzzard woman looked very much like Furiosa. Her height, her chest, her face, her arm, it all looked the same. Anyone would have thought they were one and the same, provided they overlooked the brand seared onto Furiosa's neck.

“We could take this'n back to Joe, make him think we caught ya. All she's missin' is the Brand.” The body had been turned over now to look at the blank patch of skin above its shoulders. “Can't make that without it lookin' fresh.”

“Make it all look fresh then,” piped up a War Boy. “Brand her and burn her, can't tell scar from skin when it's burnt.”

It certainly seemed like a good enough idea, since Ace called for some guzz and for someone to get a brand from the truck to get hot. Furiosa had to stop them before they got carried away. She was still wearing her Imperator's clothes.

“I need to switch clothes with her,” she sighed, clearly unhappy with the idea of wearing a corpse's clothes. Furiosa had no choice besides going nude, which was definitely not going to happen. She went through the motions of disrobing the corpse first, not wanting it to cook the stench of death into the leather any more than it already has. At least the Buzzard hadn't bled out or emptied itself into the clothes.

Next came her own. The War Boys treated it with the same non-chalance as if she were another lad in the dormitories changing their trousers. Max was the only one to turn away from her as she undressed, something that didn't go unnoticed. As she dressed in the Buzzard's gear, the crew made quick work of putting the body in her own. Max even tossed them the crotch pendant she had taken off on the second day. By the time it was fully clothed, it was hard to tell the difference between the two.

The brand came down fast on the Buzzard's neck, quickly followed by a scamt dousing of guzzoline. They supposed it would be best for it not to be charred to a crisp, and were ready to cover the body with a tarp once the fire had gone on long enough. A War Boy pulled hard against a magnesium bar with his knife and lit the guzz with its sparks. The body burned.

Max and Furiosa ended up inching away from the raging flame, uncomfortable with the smell of cooking flesh. Neither of them were unfamiliar with the concept of long pork, but it hungered them in an absolutely wrong way. Cannibalism was taboo for them in a world that almost made it normal. Still, the War Boys lingered around the fire with no ill effects, waiting for the perfect time to put it out. “Now, now, now!” Ace called, and it was quickly covered. Eventually, the tarp smothered the flames, and it was removed to see just how the corpse held up.
The hair was burnt to a crisp, withering to ash in the wind. Furiosa’s old clothes were charred and ridden with holes. The brand on the body’s neck blended in with the blackened flesh. It wasn’t the most perfect thing in the world, but it would do. If Immortan Joe was fooled, Furiosa would be able to travel more freely, and Ace could get more leeway with the higher command. Things looked good.

Max finally took the opportunity to treat the bolt he forgot was lodged in his arm. A gentle wiggle of the bolt told him that it wasn’t barbed or tipped, simply a thin rod of plastic pointed at the end. He swiftly pulled it out, wrapping some spare cloth around the wound. He’d probably glue it shut later, being nothing but a flesh would. It wasn’t bleeding as bad as it could have been, so he let it be for now.

“S’pose that’s that, then,” Ace spoke to Furiosa. Max quietly observed them from a distance, instantly picking up on their tense posture. If there was a tin can laying around, one of them would probably kick it just to make some noise and distract themselves. He could tell it wasn’t malicious; most likely something both of them couldn't get out.

“So this is it.” If everything went well, Furiosa would never see a War Boy again – Ace and her crew included. Something in her would miss them. She had grown up with many of them and bonded with them, even though she knew they were part of Joe's toxic world and she'd need to leave them behind some day. Ace even helped raise her behind Joe's back. She was grateful. “I never did say thanks for all you've done, Ace. Thought you'd call me soft for it.”

Ace barked out a laugh and patted Furiosa on her shoulder. “Oh, no need to thank me, Boss, you've done well enough by me. If anything, I was soft fer taking care of you. Don't regret it a bit.” That earned him a smile.

“Think we'll ever see each other again?” Furiosa asked after a pause, and again there was silence between the two.

“Ah, maybe in the course of time, if I can keep it together.” Ace's hand danced across the tumors in his neck. He remembered the first time he could feel the lumps start to grow, and it seemed like a lifetime ago. Eventually he accepted it and his mortality, doing his best to ignore and forget. “Going somewhere I might meet ya?”

“South,” she conceded. “Maybe east, past the mountains. Not ruling out any direction that takes me away from it all.” The Green Place was her target location, but Furiosa knew Max wasn't just going to cross through – or around – the mountains just to entertain her. It looked like the settlements to the South would be her best bet, and she could make her attempts to get home from there.

Ace nodded, cataloging the information somewhere that he'd be able to recall it. “Should I scare that man a’yours?” he motioned with his head back towards Max, on whom the gesture wasn't lost.

“No thanks, Ace. He's done more than he had to.” Why Max went so far to help her would be one of the biggest mysteries she doesn't get the answers to. The only thing she really wanted was for the both of them to keep it together. Furiosa had pushed him and he pushed back. Their two dominant stances clashed, each wanting to find some control over the situation. Neither of them might find any.

Silence fell between them again, and the War Boys lingered around the vehicles, ready to return to the Citadel. Time to go. “You do good once you get back there, Ace.”

“And you do good wherever you go, Boss.”

“Call me Furiosa,” she offered. It was better than Boss, better than being linked to her status as the
Citadel. Putting the toxic society of Immortan Joe behind her would be the best thing she could do.

“How about you two just trade paint already?” called an impatient voice from within the pack of War Boys, earning mixed response from his brothers.

“YOU! LOCK! You're a pedestrian today, get off that vehicle!” Ace shouted back to his crew. The War Boys jeered at Lock as he jumped down to the desert floor to make the trek back to the Citadel on foot. “I'll run him for a mile, let him sweat.”

With a final clasp of arms with Furiosa and a nod towards the man, Ace returned to the convoy to head back to the Citadel. She watched until the vehicles were all revved up and heading back east across the Powder Lakes, offering a wave with her metal arm. Furiosa turned back to the car, not surprised to see Max looking at her. She was surprised, however, to hear him speak up.

“Wanna drive?”

The words didn't take long to sink in. Only a few days ago, Furiosa tried to steal the car away from him and essentially grant him a death sentence. Every time he left the car, Max had taken the keys just in case she got a wild hair. The car was his livelihood, the only reason he had made it this far. And he wanted her to drive it. “Are you serious?”

“Trust you better with two hands. Wanna?”

“Yes,” Furiosa finally admitted. Max moved away from the driver's side, allowing her to get it before climbing in on the other side. He watched as she slowly started the car, nodding his approval as she finally shifted into gear. They took off, heading South to leave the Powder Lakes. Furiosa shifted higher and higher, getting the Interceptor as fast as she'd comfortably have it. It was no War Rig, but it was a smooth ride that felt natural to be behind the wheel of, and it gave her the sense of freedom that she hadn't felt for thousands of days. Furiosa couldn't help but smile.

And Max smiled with her.

Chapter End Notes

Writing is hard. Did not have a good time writing this and really want this chapter behind me. Hopefully I'll pick up in quality again soon. If I could re-write this without effecting any future chapters, I probably will and make a note of it.

Addendum: save me from this nightmare.
Freedom

Chapter Summary

Max and Furiosa leave the Powder Lakes and enter the Highlands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Freedom was what she dared to call this, the feeling that surged through her body like nitrous. Freedom was what she dared to call this, sitting behind the wheel of a supercharged V8 roaring across the wastes, heading fast and far away from the Citadel. It was what she dared to call this, unbound from the tight leather and wrapped linen that marked her Imperator. It was what she dared to call this, sitting next to a man marked neither by white paint nor black grease, neither half-life nor Wretched. A man, a comrade, a friend. The only reason she's made it this far.

In the back of her mind, Furiosa knew she'd remember soon enough why she was running. The guilt would come back to her like a gut-punch, knocking the wind out of her. She had earned her freedom only through the mistakes she made trying to earn the Wives their own, and she would mourn them again. There was hope, though, some vague foolish hope that it hadn't all been done in vain. Perhaps there was still a way. It was foolish to fixate on the idea that she could return and find a way to help them, only for it all to fall apart again in front of her. For now, she pushed all of that away.

Furiosa was free, and there was no way in Hell anything would keep her from enjoying it.

Max couldn't help but steal glances of her as he reloaded the magazines they had emptied just an hour ago. There was a radical difference between the Furiosa sitting next to him now and the Furiosa he stood before on the escarpment above the Powder Lakes. She sat higher, breathed easier, looked happier. Not many people were able to hold that posture in high confidence nowadays, and he had to admit to himself that he'd miss that look.

The tension between them had been expelled, or at the very least set aside. Furiosa had done nothing but reach out to thank Max, to accept him – for the time being – as a part of her life. Max had treated her as walking, talking cargo stamped fragile with a memo: keep her safe. He tried to treat any interaction with her like a gangrenous limb that needed amputation. Just the day before, Max had shut her niceties down and almost fought her to stay outside during the night. For now, that was also forgotten, and instead they allowed themselves this.

They didn't speak as they rode South, only communicating a slight change of course when it was due. With how their conversations had gone, it would be their luck to get into some fuss and sour the mood. Ideally they'd form some sort of amicable relationship and avoid the hostilities. Still, they only wanted what was best for themselves, and for Furiosa that meant some short-lived camaraderie, and for Max that meant the ability to separate without keeping her in his thoughts. Their goals clashed, and so far it seemed as though Furiosa was winning out. He'd let her have it for now.

The sun had started to fall from the sky, sinking closer and closer to the horizon. It was a good measure of time for them that showed how far they had gotten, and the crags that grew on the horizon were an even better sign. Soon, the Powder Lakes would be behind them, and darkness would cloak the wasteland once more. The moon had been waxing, and it already lit up the world in
a dim pale color that would allow anyone with good eyes to travel at night. As much as the idea seemed tantalizing, they were crashing from the adrenaline rush of the skirmish.

“Lemme take over?”

“Hm?” Furiosa had zoned out – something usually horrible to do behind the wheel of a car – but turned to give him a quick glance.

“Let me drive?” Max asked again. It wasn’t exactly urgent, but it was something he wanted to do. While he wasn’t familiar with the area, Max always felt confident in himself to find a neat spot to tuck away into for the night. “Find a place to hunker down.”

She couldn’t argue against that. Furiosa hadn’t had to hide in a cave or between dunes in a long time – the War Rig had been too big to hide. As far as Max had let on, he was experienced in hiding and blending in, a necessary skill to survive the wasteland alone. Silently, she yielded to him and brought the car to a stop. She idly wondered if that would be the last time she drove the beast of a vehicle.

Furiosa got out of the car, allowing for Max to simply shift over into the driver’s seat. She slid in next to him after circling around the back. It didn’t take long for that sweet feeling to wear off once Max started to drive. Everything she blotted out with it came back to her, all the reasons she was here in this car with him and not dead or even worse off. The absent smile disappeared from her face, replaced with the tight expression that she held that first day with him. Back to normal.

They were out of the Powder Lakes when the sky was more orange than blue. When they reached the southern lip of the bowl, Furiosa decided it was definitely better for Max to take over. The region turned into a maze of canyons cutting in and out of plateaus that shot out of the earth. It was worse than the valley of the Rock Riders; there were too many paths in and out, up and down that no one group could manage to control. She had heard someone talk about Highlander territory before, and she guessed that this was it.

Max spent little time actually trying to navigate the maze and more time looking for somewhere to hide during the coming night. He even reached out to touch the guns placed around the Interceptor, just to make sure they were there. It wasn’t a good idea to stick out in the pathways for long, and Furiosa was quick to catch on.

He found somewhere to hide soon enough, a cave that delved into one of the tall formations. The Interceptor was backed into the hole, poised for a quick escape. It was a tight squeeze to get out of the car, but a preliminary search of the cave showed Max that it was empty except for them. He used a couple of tarps to shroud them from the entrance, producing a false back for them to hide behind. A small amount of fumbling got him to the lantern which lit up the cave nicely.

Furiosa joined him soon after ferrying the weapons out to him per his request, and got out many of the blankets with them. Two makeshift mattresses were made, and food and water were doled out for a meal. Their interactions were silent, tense, and unremarkable. The day was past them and their goal was back in sight. If Max was correct, it would only take another night before they’d be able to reach the settlements.

Furiosa couldn’t help but finally ask once the lantern was dimmed and weapons deliberately split between the two. “What is it about this place that has you doing all this?” She spoke in a hushed tone facing towards Max.

“’s Highlander territory,” came from him after a pause.

“What is it about the Highlanders, though?”
It took another moment for her to get a response. “There's an old story from Before, a fake one. Told of the Highlanders, a group of immortal people. Destined to fight down to the last man. Same thing applies here. Too many places to get lost, trapped. Gotta kill before you're killed.”

“That doesn't make any sense.”

“It does,” Max countered. “All it took was one big fight, road war, to put a pretty prize in the middle of the Highlands and word to spread for scavs to come get it. Everyone that came started to fight for it, now everyone fights because everyone fights. Started a cycle that never ends. They all come out at night like maggots out of woodwork, looking to find the next pretty prize. Everyone's a prize down here. Everyone's a Highlander. Even us, 'til we leave.” He reached for the pistol he had placed near his mat and slowly cocked it, deciding it was better to make noise now than in the middle of the night. “No friends down here except the ones you came with. Everyone's an enemy because you can't take the chance.”

“Like a game of tag, where everyone's it and not-it at the same time.”

“Exactly.”

Furiosa understood. There was a reason scavengers were called what they were, and it wasn't because they ignored rumors of something valuable out there. Scavenging was their livelihood, even if it drove them to an early death. No doubt there were nuts out there that got off on the thrill of the chase, too, following someone through the maze of canyons until they hit a dead-end. Hopefully she and Max would do well enough to avoid it all and get through to the other side in one piece.

Chapter End Notes

Find me on tumblr here, if you're interested in nothing interesting at all.
The Highlands

Chapter Summary

We should have never come into the Highlands.

Ace played her for a damn fool.

As soon as Furiosa and Max stepped out of the car, something hit her in the neck. Dart. It was a weapon the natives used, tipped with a poison, a relaxant, a tranquilizer. She felt sluggishly for a gun, sidestepped clumsily back towards the car to get in. Max was already out on the desert floor. She followed suit.

She came to soon enough in a dark cavern, lit by the occasional window chiseled into the wall. Immediately she could tell she had been crammed into a cage – a blood bag cage. Her legs were chained together and her arms crammed behind her back and bound painfully at the elbows. A tight muzzle covered her face, chafed against her skin.

It hit her before she could register it – a cattle prod came through the cage to jab her in the ribs. The floor of the cage let out and she fell out, swinging upside down. A cannula was pierced into her shoulder, tube unravelling to end at Ace's arm. The War Boy turned to face her, smiling despite the constant droop in his lip. “Thought you'd get away, didja, Boss?” The title stabbed at her. She watched her blood move down into him.

Something felt wrong.

It wasn't the rush of blood to the head, and it wasn't the draining of her blood into Ace. Furiosa felt her life, her absolute essence slip out through the cannula. She couldn't help but notice as Ace's lumps disappeared from his neck, and a growth began to stretch under her skin. Her lungs felt like bags of rocks in her chest, breathing harder and harder to keep air moving through her. She shrank as Ace grew, surprised as her arms slid out of their bindings. Furiosa reached out with her good hand and he simply grabbed it and crushed it like wet clay. She withdrew from his grip painlessly and let the pulpy mass swing below her, focusing on gulping down air as the world disappeared around her.

Furiosa woke up with hands heavy on her shoulders. She very nearly lashed out at who they belonged to before realizing it was Max, quietly hushing her. With her heart beating out of her ribcage, she forced herself to calm down, and focused on what Max was signing to her. He was pointing out towards the car and the exit of the cave. Something was out there.

Max woke from the same non-descript dream he'd been having for the past few nights, the darkness catching up to him and a warm light swooping in to protect him. At least this time it wasn't Furiosa waking him up and giving him something to thank her for. What woke him was a quiet noise from out on the path that echoed into the cavern. Footsteps.

Another sound began a hushed competition with whatever was outside. Looking around to sense where it came from, it didn't take long to tell it was coming from Furiosa. He moved slowly across
the rocky floor over to her, listening as her breathing became more and more laboured. It filled him with remorse for wanting to shame her for waking him. Furiosa went through the same exact thing, and only wanted to give him relief from his nightmares. For now he acted out of necessity, but knew that the next time she acted like this, he’d try to get her out of it, too.

The crunch of gravel continued outside, neither shrinking nor growing in volume. Wanting to wake Furiosa up, but not let her physically stir, Max grabbed her shoulders and gently shook them. As soon as she woke, he shushed her with near-silent sounds. It might be dark in the cavern, but their eyesight was good enough to make out vague shapes. He did nothing but lean away from her and point towards the entrance. *Listen,* he cupped his ear with the other hand.

They sat in silence, listening to whatever was happening out there. Was it just one man? Why was he not leaving? Did he know they were there? What was he doing? The possibilities were, unfortunately, endless, and the two of them did not like not knowing.

Something else rumbled in from the Highlands. It was *definitely* not a person. It had to be some sort of vehicle, growing louder and louder as it came closer. Whatever else was outside heard it too. A muffled voice shouted out to another, “C'mon, let's go!” The approaching vehicle finally passed through the gully, and with it came a rattle of gunfire. Max reached for his own weapon, not sure what would come next. Nothing did, in the end, and they weren't sure whether to be comforted or suspicious.

After a moment, Max slowly crawled forward, heading underneath the car to peek below the tarps. It was probably a foolish thing to do, and he wasn't too unfamiliar with the saying that curiosity killed the cat, but he hadn't seen light since he shut them out from the world. It could be the middle of the day for all he knew – though he hadn't slept that long for a good bit of time.

He moved the tarp with the smallest of motions, knowing anything out there would definitely see. Max was able to tell that the sun was rising. The pale light grew warmer across the rock face of the tower across from theirs. A more daring look showed him that there was no one around except for a couple of corpses. There laid a man and an incredibly emaciated camel to the right of the cave entrance, swept off the road. It seemed clear, something he wouldn't be sure of until he was out of the Highlands.

Max wormed his way back out from under the car, chamber freshly black from his exposure to light. Making sure he was close enough to Furiosa for her to hear, he whispered: “Light outside. Get in the car. Get the tarp on your side as we drive through, I'll leave mine, can't take it and drive.” The bulky fabric would only serve as a flag and a distraction as he'd navigate through the Highlands. “Good?”

“Yeah.”

Together, they moved into the car at an agonizingly slow pace to avoid making noise, storing away the blankets and guns. They were both hyper-aware of the sounds they made, even their breathing. It was horribly intimate for Max. It reminded him of hiding with Jesse from her parents when they got caught together, and it was something he wanted to separate completely from the present. He bet that if he looked into the backseat that he'd see her there, giggling and shushing him. Max remembered nuzzling into her neck and nursing a hickey he had already planted there, trying to get a reaction out of her and test her limits, but he couldn't and wouldn't take chances like that anymore. He'd forego anything that dared to reveal them now – at least until he was ready to fang it out of there.

“I'll turn hard left when we get out. If you don't grab it, forget it and grab a gun.” It seemed odd to covet a tarp, especially in a place and situation like this. He could probably barter for more once he got down into the settlements. Still, it was good to save and salvage whatever he could, especially if there was no one to chase them through the Highlands. Or maybe it truly was foolish, and he wasn't
yet ready to admit it, not ready to lose something else..

“Three, two, one,” whispered Max before turning the key. The engine sputtered and teased, but didn’t turn over. Quickly losing his cool, he turned it again, and then again. It wouldn’t turn over. Thoughts raced through his head as it all happened. Did someone sneak in during the night and fiddle with the car? Was there something about the area that blocked it from properly starting?

*Someone’s gonna hear this racket.*

_We should have never come into the Highlands._ Of course he’d fucking go straight through the Powder Lakes and then try to navigate through the tight crags. Max was a fool in every sense of the word, and cursed himself for being this reckless – especially after everything that happened.

On the fourth time, the engine finally turned over and Max got them out of that cave _fast_. He didn’t even care about the tarp that Furiosa let flap past them. Max took a hard left just like he said he would, aiming to turn right again to go south. Furiosa took in hand the Glock from the console, steadying herself as the car leaned against the movement. Something above them shot across the gaps between the great rock towers. They knew. Max let loose a string of curses that hadn’t been heard since Before, and Furiosa sat so tense she thought she’d snap a tendon.

She had no idea how she could go from that blissful feeling of freedom yesterday back to the same sense of imminent doom she felt when she had fled from the Citadel so fast. Everything felt wrong, even the clothes on her back. Furiosa was no stranger to danger, but _God_, Max just had to set her up with that story like something you told a child to keep them from doing something. Mindless killing wasn’t an unfamiliar occurrence in this New World, but its outright necessity was new, especially when she had to participate.

“Eyes open, all directions,” Max told her as if she really needed to be told that. It seemed like every twenty meters there was a blind turn or a blind intersection, and at any point something could come barreling through and pin them to the rock. How in the world would she be able to stop something in these tight canyons? She almost lamented the absence of her War Boys and their thunder sticks, their thunderpoons, their spikers. Those would make it a lot easier to handle anything coming their way.

Something came suddenly from their left. A buggy came through a close passage, barreling straight towards the Interceptor. Furiosa couldn’t even get her gun pointed at it before Max left it behind to crash instead into the rock face. She let out a huge sigh and settled back into her seat after practically falling into Max’s lap. He didn’t seem to mind, only distressed by how close of a call it had been.

The Interceptor continued to twist and turn, heading ever more South through the Highlands. It was impossible to tell how far in he was; one could never go through the same path twice. They could emerge out through the other side within thirty seconds or not make it out for another hour. All part of the gamble he shouldn’t have made.

Another car came at them from a corridor to the right. Like the last one, they were able to skim past it before they collided, but this driver had a bit more skill. Instead of ramming into the wall, this Highlander turned hard right, fishtailing before falling in line behind them. Both Furiosa and Max aimed back at the car, but neither were able to get off a shot. The path never stayed straight enough for the car to appear for more than a split second. Max wouldn’t dare to slow down to try to get rid of their pursuer. Too much could go wrong, and too much already had. There was no room for error, not even by chance.

Their flight continued turn after turn, second after second, eyes split between their rear and in front of them. If Max had had any more faith left in a higher being hanging around out there, he would have shot up a prayer, but those he had sent in the past all went unanswered. He’d have to stick to what
worked in order to make it out alive, and that meant driving fast, shooting true, and guessing right. They just needed to manage all three at once.

Max knew he wasn't going as far South as he wanted. The roads were more claustrophobic towards the center but straightened and opened up as they grew outwards. It gave them more chance to shoot whoever was following him, but at the same time they wanted to shake them off – after all, someone could in turn be following him. They were only the second car to show themselves, maybe the third, but it was a definite sign that they shouldn't consider themselves alone in the Highlands.

The plains opened up to them suddenly after a turn, and the crags were soon behind them. Their pursuer emerged not long after them, still eager to chase them. Furiosa was poised to take them out, but another car came out from the Highlands to take out their pursuer. The car flipped once, twice from an explosion set off beneath it, and came to a rest. That was apparently enough of a prize for that third car, as Max and Furiosa quickly left it in the distance to claim its kill.

Silence enveloped them as much as the Highlands did. Max was half-way to saying sorry for being so stubborn, and Furiosa was even closer to punching him, and with her prosthesis, too. *Let's go through the one place where we're most likely to die. No sure way through, every one out to kill each other, we'll be fine. Ass.* She had fought him to skirt the Powder Lakes, but if they had they never would have met Ace and the boys, and she wouldn't have gotten her arm back. They weren't much worse for wear after getting of the Highlands, but *damn her* if something couldn't have gone wrong in there. It left a bad taste in her mouth that she wasn't sure what to do about.

Max knew he was wrong. He had decided to head straight through the Powder Lakes. His rationalization? They could see everything there was to see. The Buzzards were indestructable with their equipment, and the War Boys were too much of a threat to deal with should they have still been with Joe. It was only then that he decided to head through the Highlands for absolutely no reason. They were freshly topped with guzz and had more than enough supplies to make it to the southern hold, so why didn't he skirt around it?

Because it would save them a day, and Max could get rid of Furiosa that much faster.

*What a piece of shit.*
Truth and Consequences

Chapter Summary

Max remembered the first time he saw one of them. It was a flash of frizzy hair disappearing from the corner of his eye. Jessie? He turned, expecting to see her and their child in a momentary lapse of reason. There was nothing, of course. They had been long dead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Max remembered the first time he saw one of them. It was a flash of frizzy hair disappearing from the corner of his eye. Jessie? He turned, expecting to see her and their child in a momentary lapse of reason. There was nothing, of course. They had been long dead.

He had dreamed about them before, though. For days and months Max had dreams as if nothing ever happened. The two of them would make breakfast, they would play with their boy, and they would drive, drive, drive without a care in the world. And he would wake up, turning to hold his wife before realizing he was in the Interceptor, and his wife and son were long dead. And he would miss them.

Seeing them in his waking life was a different story.

They used to appear to him in quick glances, gone as soon as he looked at him. A tickling breath would fall on his ear, and there would be nothing behind him. He would be in the middle of a road skirmish and Sprog would laugh with glee from the backseat. Max would hobble his way to the top of a sand dune to get a look at the surrounding area, and he would swear that he heard Jessie's saxophone play out over the rolling landscape. And he would drive, drive, drive in a mad attempt to block it all out.

As time went on, they would appear unabashedly, clear as day. She would stay beside him, seat reclined so she could lay on it sideways. She would prop her head up in her hand and she would smile at him and call him Officer Rockatansky and he never understood anything else that came out of her mouth but Max knew she was having the time of her un-life. Jessie always hated to see Max go away on patrols, but she was with him now, and it seemed like she would be until the end of his own days.

Jessie and Sprog found new companions. As months and years went on, they were joined by others that Max was bound to protect but failed, or should have saved but didn't — or couldn't. They were even joined by their dopplegangers, Hope and Glory. The young mother and her child had embodied his chance of redemption, and Max had grown ever closer to giving them the best chance at life they could take, but it was stolen out from underneath them, and he was left with the consequences.

They all had something different to tell him. You left us to die! You said you would help us! Where were you?! I'm dead because of you! Why didn't you help us?! The cadence of condemnation wore him thin like heavy-grit sandpaper, itching down to the fabric of his being. Max's ghosts came together in a unanimous vote of no confidence in his reliability and role as guardian and aide, and
he couldn't help but agree.

Every cloud of the dust on the horizon became a possibility that someone was running, fleeing, and all they needed was his help to succeed. Every shantytown Max traded at became a field of ash and warped tin in his dreams because he had led the wrong sort of people behind him. Every lone wanderer became a starving, dehydrated soul that needed a pick-me-up but had a gun in their belt to steal themselves the full package. There were no more passing glances, no more curious fixations on the horizon. Everything held the possibility to fall to ruin because he chose not to act, but he knew in his head and heart that that was hardly ever the case. Still, it was hard to argue for the logic when his only company were people who had been dead for weeks, months, years. And all because of him.

When Max pushed Furiosa further into the Interceptor instead of pulling her out to meet her fate, he could feel history begin to repeat itself, and his ghosts quieted down to wait and see what would happen. The pit of fear settled into his gut as time went on, as the Citadel bike failed and Bartertown went South. It grew heavy when they woke from their nightmares and shared the same hesitance to fall back asleep, heavier when she managed to gently stir him and heavier still when they fled across the Powder Lakes. He feared her death, no matter how it may come while she was still with him, but another element of their relationship complicated the situation. Max didn't know when his attitude warped from detesting her company to enjoying it - desiring it - but he knew he couldn't tolerate that change, and with that, he led them into the Highlands.

Max hadn't done it maliciously – at least, not purposefully. He didn't do it with the idea of getting either Furiosa or himself killed. He didn't do it with pleasure, with excitement, or with enthusiasm. He didn't do it because he wanted to. He did it because he saw her smiling face, he saw her confident posture that screamed 'invincible' and her ability to back it up, and he felt her gentle touch when she woke him from his nightmares, and he couldn't help but think that he was damn close to missing it once they went their separate ways. From his mark, they would have been three out from the settlements had they drove around the Highlands, and he wasn't sure if he could afford that time. He could have taken the nights to shake it out and calm down, perhaps meditate if he could find the peace to do so. He should have. Being worked up about Furiosa was no excuse to venture into the Highlands just so Max could save time. It could have gotten them killed, it could have gotten HER killed, and how would that have been, seeing as it would have been 100 percent his fault? There would be no comfort to be found after that, no matter what he may do.

Max had wronged her, no doubt about it. Instead of handling his baggage by himself, he involved Furiosa when she didn't need to be a part of it at all. Even though Max had long abandoned finding a healthy way to manage it, now was not the time to entertain any sort of death wish just to save him the trouble of becoming entangled with the life of another human. It was something he shouldn't even have an issue with. People have friendships, relationships. People come and go, they live and die. And people keep moving despite the fact. Unfortunately for Max, his ghosts kept right up no matter how fast he went, and there was no other way for him to keep it together than to hurry up and get Furiosa gone.

“No other way,” Max repeated under his breath without thinking about it. No doubt the boys back in the MFP would have had something to say about it, whether it was a joke or some serious concern. Here he was, trying to stay sane – no, trying to keep his mind of a woman by fleeing into the most dangerous territory he knows. Just to save a day, just to get rid of her that much faster.

“What?” came from the other side of the car.

His mouth tightened, left uneasy by the fact Furiosa heard him mumble. Max rolled his shoulders against the tension in his back and offered some non-committal grunt that hopefully demonstrated that
he had nothing to say.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” Furiosa was fuming, and he didn't blame her. She had nearly died for some reason she clearly wasn't privy to and wanted answers. Deserved answers. At least an apology.

“I'm sorry.”

“You're sorry? You're god damn right you're sorry!” She turned away from Max with a heavy sigh, recognizing his apology but projecting that it wasn't enough to forgive him. “I know I'm along for a free ride, and I can't thank you enough for that, but that... shit back there in the Highlands? That you decided to go through damn well knowing the story of the place and nearly got us killed about? Did you even know how to get out of there?”

He didn't say a word. Max had absolutely no idea how to get out of there. There was no map, no time to take in landmarks and milestones to establish where someone was and where they were headed. He could count on one hand the number of times he had found himself in the Highlands, and each time was worse than the last. They only got out by sheer luck – most Highlanders only leave by accident.

Max's silence spoke for him. “Did you want to die in there?!” Furiosa's voice rose above the engine as she turned towards him. “Weren't we close? Didn't we have enough to spare for the trip around instead of going straight through with absolutely no guarantee of getting out? Are you insane or something?"

“Yes,” he replied before he could even think of stopping himself. It was a mistake to open his mouth and even dignify that question with a response. Max's answer probably justified every single standoff-ish action she took in those tense first days and gave her all the reason in the world to stop trusting him immediately.

“What?” The answer indeed gave Furiosa pause, and as it registered she slumped back into her seat. “What do you mean, yes?” The majority of the vitriol in her tone gave way to hesitant curiosity. She couldn't help but think back to the first time she got a good look at him, beard and hair grown long and knotted like a feral. You can always tame the feral body but you can't tame the feral mind. If Max had been playing a long con, he did so well, but she had no idea what it meant for her now that he pleaded his own insanity.

Come clean, came a familiar voice to Max. He shivered despite the warm sweater and leather he wore, having not heard Jessie since before Furiosa joined him. Come clean, she spoke again as a phantom of a hand fell gently on his shoulder, she deserves to know. When Max offered no response, the hand gave him a tender squeeze and let off. He rolled his shoulders against the pressure and paused to consider Jessie's words. It only took a short moment to make up his mind, knowing so much more silence would only serve to harm him.

Max let off the gas, braking gently to end the car's journey through the sand. Each movement was controlled and suppressed as he expected Furiosa to react and defend herself. It wasn't a secret to him that she was inching towards the knife in her boot, the same she wielded as a shield against him when they had first met. He wouldn't stop her. If it made her feel better, he'd spare her the comfort.

The Interceptor eventually came to a standstill, at which Max shifted back down to neutral and killed the engine. The silence was deafening, and Max's ears started to ring to fill the void. He rapped his fingers on the wheel, trying to conjure what words would make the most sense. Max didn't expect her to understand, and at the same time he didn't want her to. He didn't want to tell her anything at all that would let her in on what was really going on in his head. It was his burden and his alone, he told
himself, knowing that there was little to gain from sharing it.

But he shared it anyways.

“I, uh… I had… wife. Son.” If Max hadn't been such a damn fool, they would have lived. At the very least, he would have died with them, a far better fate than the one he’d managed so far. “Ran down by a biker gang. In the beginning, years ago. There were other people, as time went on. Many many others. Dead because I couldn't help them. Couldn't stop death, couldn't change fate. If it wasn't my fault, I convinced myself it was.

“There was… hmph.” He wiped his face with his hand, and it came away wet with his tears. Hope and Glory had taken a toll on him. They embodied his redemption and hope that, no, he wouldn't let another innocent soul die. Not on his watch. A retrospective look back at them sickened him as he recognized the parallels between them and his own family. Max made the mistake of leaving them alone to confront the danger himself, and both times he was easily ignored, and both times he came back to the dead and dying too late. “A woman and her child, dead from the same mistake I made with my wife and boy. They’re all with me. All up here,” Max pointed at his head and cleaned more tears from his cheeks. “Used to only be dreams, now they're… they're wherever they want to be. Whenever.

“And then you came along. Believe me, I wanted that bike to work more than anything. I wanted Bartertown to go as smoothly as it could have. I want you to be able to get on with your life so I can get on with mine. I don't…” Max paused. Get to the point. “I need to get you down there as fast as possible.”

“Why?” asked Furiosa, malice gone from her voice. While Max's response hadn't completely answered her questions, it settled deep in her as though it should. He had been tormented ever since his family were killed, met again and again by souls doomed to die in his presence. She couldn't help but feel sorry for him and his curse, and the meeting of the woman and child that reminded him so much of his own. Max had gone through too much for one person to handle, yet somehow he held himself together. The idea behind his desperation was coming clear, but she wanted to know from the man himself.

“I'm afraid of another death. I'm afraid of another ghost,” he offered after a pause, quick to cut off Furiosa. “I know what happened back in the Highlands, okay? Forget what happened back there. I know we cut it close, damn close, but I care too much already.” She had appeared quick to rebut whatever he had to say, but Max left her puzzled.

“I care about you, whether you believe it or not. I care too much. Caring is dangerous in this world. Believe me, I know the price of caring.” He leaned forward against the wheel, resting his head on his knuckles. “I thought if I could save just a day, it would be worth it. Less to remember, less to miss.” That's one thing you could have kept to yourself. Max kept silent, head still firmly tucked down. He poured himself out to her, and it wasn't right at all. Furiosa knew now, and she'd never not know, and he couldn't pretend like everything was alright anymore. If he wasn't fucked already, he was fucked now.

Furiosa was quiet as well. She knew Max cared, but hadn't known how much. Apparently it was enough to bottle it up and go through Hell just for the opportunity to care less. Get rid of her sooner so he wouldn't need to worry about getting attached. It was an absolutely alien feeling that left her uncomfortable. She was long unaccustomed to having someone care; the Imperators at the Citadel only cared if there was someone ready to fill an empty role. She had cared deeply for her mother, Mary, her initiate mother, Katie, and her dear friend Valkyrie, though she could never imagine caring too much about them.
Next to her sat a man at the end of his wits, cards revealed and game over. They had known each other for five days but he spoke as though they were companions for hundreds, thousands. She could admit she cared about Max, but his own experience with people was radically different from hers. He had never been able to mourn, never been able to grieve his losses, and it was possible he never may. Caring was something he did on accident, and at great risk, and it was obvious he wasn't willing to take chances. And she understood.

“Max.” He stirred from his slumped position to face the horizon, but not her. “Let's go.” Wordlessly, he complied, getting the Interceptor running to complete their journey to the south.

They went as far as they dared for as long as the sun stayed above the horizon. Despite the moon continuing to wax and brighten the landscape during the night, Max spoke softly about how arriving in the morning would be better. Not many people arrive anywhere under the cover of night with good intentions.

Without a hole to hide in for the night, the Interceptor was parked again within the sand dunes. Their dinner was larger than those they had had, having forgone the past few meals due to the circumstances they faced. Still, it was quiet and consumed faster than usual. Neither had anything to share to the other, and the intimacy of the vehicle wasn't something they'd like to entertain if they had to.

Furiosa called watch the first chance she could, stepping out into the cold night air with a pistol tucked into her jacket. The clothes that the Buzzard had to offer were more comfortable than her own, and gave her more insulation, but the temperature still sat low enough to chill. She grabbed a blanket from the back of the car before heading to the top of the nearest sand dune, where she let out the breath she had been holding for hours.

The car was suffocating, given what Max had revealed to her. She didn't know how to react, didn't know what to say. What is there to say to someone that wants to drop her like hot brass? Furiosa's best guess was nothing. The best thing she could do for him is make it to… wherever it was that he kept talking about alive and leave him alone.

It was upsetting, to say the least, to accompany someone who wanted no part of her. While it may only be because she had been surrounded by half-life kami-krazy War Boys who couldn't wait to die and was sick of it, she had grown to appreciate Max's presence. Despite his demons, he was more human than a lot of people she had met. Max had given her so much that she didn't ask for when many people would take. She couldn't pretend she knew what was going on in his head, but whatever was affecting him certainly wasn't deserved.

Furiosa decided to turn her mind away from Max and focus on their surroundings. The landscape was a pale blue underneath the moon, a pleasant change from the burnt orange that colored the world during the day. From the top of the dune, she could see for miles in all directions, and it was comforting to see nothing but rocks and sand. They had long abandoned roads and dirt paths, instead making their own way through the wastes on routes that went untravelled. It seemed to be paying off.

She wrapped the blanket tight around her body as she thought about tomorrow. Despite Max's reassurances, she was still skeptical. She couldn't place her feelings about re-settling, but she knew she was apprehensive. Would she find her way back home to the Green Place of the Many Mothers? Would she fit in with whatever sort of community there was? It didn't matter - it was Max’s choice to let her off, and he had done more than enough to help her. She just hoped their journey was worth it.
Chapter End Notes

This was killer to get through. Didn't like how i set myself up and was very close to retconning the last chapter and changing it up. I'm kind of glad I kept Ch. 15’s ending though - it gave me a challenge.

I wrote literally over 1000 words about how my writing has gone recently and it includes a lot of my thoughts about how to write this without the events of Fury Road happening. Check it out if you want, it contains a lot of self-criticism and stuff like that. It's how this chapter's made me feel. If you've gotten weird vibes, this might explain it.

Chapter 16 Commentary by BK
Thanks

Chapter Summary

“No. I will not be -” she waved with her arm to imitate him - “okay? You're gonna listen to what I have to say. It's obvious you're having a hard time. You don't want me here, you didn't ask for this, I get it. It's scary for you, I get it. You don't enjoy this, I get it. But thank you for everything anyway.”

Max's night was restless.

He tossed and turned, unable to sleep – more maybe he just didn't want to. He felt like a child waiting for Christmas morning to come, but for all the wrong reasons. Furiosa would be gone, and he would finally be free. Free felt like a bad word, and it left a sour taste in his mouth. Max resolved to say he would be without. The impression she left on him would stay with him, though, but he would find a way to overcome it.

*You've been through worse, Max told himself. This is nothing. Nothing. An insult to everything that came before.* As much as it made sense, he still felt as though he stood on the absolute edge of his sanity, wawering back and forth in the passage of time. He wouldn't hesitate to say he occupied that edge every day of his life, but everything with Furiosa only raised the cliff higher and made the fall that much worse. Perhaps Max had already fallen and refused to recognize it. He was losing his mind over a single person, a woman that he was afraid to feel for as he had for Hope, and for Jessie.

Wishful thinking was a sin. Hope was a mistake.

Max turned in the seat and felt pangs of guilt as he saw Furiosa standing on the crest of a dune. She didn't deserve the stress of knowing she was a burden. He knew she was capable of defending herself, and he knew she was hardset in body and mind, but he couldn't shake the idea that he was responsible for her. His ghosts stood tall over him, waiting for the wrong move that they could call out and punish him for. Despite Furiosa's own free will, Max would partake in the consequences of her doing and undoing whether he could help it or not.

Max turned away from the window, trying to settle into the carseat. It would all be over tomorrow. Split the food and water, split any trinkets he might have so she can trade, hand off her share of the weapons, put in a good word, and be off. A short stay at most, but otherwise Max would depart again from this small friendly territory and find other places to brood. Without a disguise, he was out of what good graces he had at Bartertown. Maybe he'd find somewhere else to trade. Maybe he'd disappear into the Salt as he thought of doing many times before. For now, Max gave his mind a rest. He would have the opportunity to mull it over once he was light one passenger.

A final fleeting thought reached him before he slept: should he return to the southern territory, he may see her again, for better or for worse.

- - -

“Max.”

That's all it took to make him jolt awake, and have his hand reach to the sheath on his hip for a knife. He quickly recognized Furiosa squatting by the opened passenger door, and slumped back down into
Everything from yesterday came back to him and sat deep in his mind again. Max let out a sigh and scrubbed at his face, working grit out of his eyes.

“Can you take watch until sunrise?”

Wordlessly, Max re-postioned the seat and left the Interceptor, holstering a pistol. She deserved the rest, and she would let her have it. With a short look back to ensure she was alright, he moved to the same dune she had kept watch on and began his own. His ghosts and thoughts were subdued despite the bad dreams, and he resolved to keep a blank mind until otherwise was necessary.

The sun came soon enough, rising over the Eastern horizon. The blue sky turned to orange, and the ochre tones spilled once more over the sand and dirt. Another morning had found them without much trouble, and he was grateful. After a final look around the surrounding area, Max hobbled back down to the Interceptor. A peek inside revealed to him Furiosa, sleeping peacefully enough. He shuffled uncomfortably in the sand. He shouldn't miss the sight.

Max entered the vehicle quietly enough after snagging some rations from the rear. After a moment, he decided to wake her. “Furiosa,” he rumbled quietly in a manner that was supposed to imitate her own, but it felt alien all the same. It took a second to realize that that was the first time he had said her name. He wondered if it would be the last.

Furiosa stirred more gracefully than he had, shivering away the want to go back to sleep. A look outside the car window revealed to her the brightening sky. The morning had come.

“All right?” Max asked as though they'd actually allot themselves more time before finishing their journey. He had been long ready to end it, too afraid to let it continue for any longer than it needed to. Furiosa knew she was with him only on good graces, and Max's revelation let her know just how hard it was for him to have her around. She answered Max's question in the affirmative, as they both expected. He allowed her to properly get up before passing over her share of the morning's rations.

“I know you told me to thank you once we got there,” Furiosa started, noticing Max tense as she spoke. “I think we're close enough, and I don't want you to run off without you letting me.”

If Max could be properly honest, he probably would have. The thanks were needless, unwanted. It only served to show yes, he did something and yes, she appreciated it and recognized him for it and he doesn't need that, doesn't want that. It would only serve to keep him in her thoughts and her in his, and he would find himself drawn back into these past few days. He wanted to forget her and whatever “good deeds” he had done for her, and he wanted to ignore the fact that if he had to save her all over again, he would.

Max moved to dismiss her, to shut her off. It could wait, he would say. You don't need to thank me, he'd explain. Leaving me alone would be all the thanks in the world, he could scowl across the console and finally put the point across, even though acting callous towards her felt very wrong.

It was Furiosa's turn to cut Max off, upset by his motion to disregard what she had to say. “No. I will not be -” she waved with her arm to imitate him - “okay? You're gonna listen to what I have to say. It's obvious you're having a hard time. You don't want me here, you didn't ask for this, I get it. It's scary for you, I get it. You don't enjoy this, I get it. But thank you for everything anyway.

“Thank you. For pushing me into your car when you could have pulled me out and shot me. It would have been fair. Thank you for doing your best at Bartertown. Thank you for trying to get me down here, even if it wasn't the best journey to take. And thank you for treating me like a human being. Like an equal. Too many people are quick to take advantage of women. Of...” She trails off, looking down at her prosthetic. What should be one less arm to wrap, to lace, to weave, to dress, to
drive with became one less arm to fight, to shoot, to defend with. Furiosa could hold her own, but there was no doubt it settled her at a disadvantage that the right person could lock onto.

“You saved my life. It means a lot to me. I don't think I can ever re-pay you for what you've done, even though me finally fucking off would probably be enough for you. But know that I am thankful, and I won't forget.” Furiosa settled back into her seat, moving from the tense position she had held when Max meant to stop her. It felt good to let all of that out, but she knew it had to have made him uncomfortable.

Maybe he needed it. Maybe Max needed to hear it. Furiosa wasn't about to begin saying that what he had done was any measurable redemption for his past, but she at least let him know that he had done good and all was well. There was no curse that he put upon those he met. A series of unfortunate events, at worst. Maybe he could get something out of all of this. Maybe things would start turning around for him. She didn't linger on the thought, lest she jinx him.

“Okay?” Furiosa turned to him, waiting for him to reply. She half-expected some awful diatribe or some other revelation that was somehow worse than what either of them had to offer so far, but…

“Okay.” Without another word, Max turned over the engine and got them moving. It was the last leg of their journey, and their destination was not too far away. Eighty miles, if the map had stayed true. He wondered how fast he'd get there.
Chapter Summary

Max hadn't expected any more problems. He should have known better than that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Max stood on a rocky spire that gave himself a better view of their surroundings. It was a landmark on his map, something that gave him a definite position and told him they were close. From up there, Max spotted a series of land formations that he had marked on his map. Double checking with his compass confirmed it: a ten mile journey south-east followed by a straight shot south-by-south-west would lead them there.

There being the first settlement he had found in his travels. It was a true shanty-town, made out of various odds and ends that the Wastelanders could get their hands on. Its people were sub-subsistent, living off of lizards and dew farms and what trade came through the area. Still, they were better off than the many who were doomed to wander instead of settle. It was not far off from another settlement that maintained much of the same lifestyle. Just enough of everything to get by. The Hold was the best place of the three of them to find yourself, whether it be for residency or for trade. It was a smaller, more pure counterpart of the Triumvirate that loomed to the North. Max had thought about taking her there first of all places, but knew that a small trade with a caravaneer – and perhaps a small wave with her gun - would let her travel with them from the first settlement to the Hold. He'd spare her the trinkets.

He climbed down from the small tower to return to the Interceptor and Furiosa, who would have followed him up had her prosthetic been less clunky. “There soon,” he told her over the roof of the car before they entered it and continued their journey.

Despite all they had said over the past day or so, they were relaxed. Max and Furiosa had revealed what they each needed to say, and as a result there was much less tension. There was nothing left to be spoken about or expected of one another. No more secrets. No one could pretend they weren't doing what they were, and they both found some solace in that.

Max had to admit that something was blossoming in his stomach. Maybe it was just his feelings about getting it all over with bubbling over into physical manifestation. Maybe it was some reservation about what would happen when they finally got there. He put it over as some sort of nervous anticipation and ignored it, putting it down with a swig of water.

They eventually made their way to the landmark – a series of flat flaky stones that stood out as black and gray against the ochre landscape. He had suspicions that it was oil shale, part of the same system that Gastown drew its supply from. The acrid smoke from the oil refinery was hardly a smudge on the horizon, but if he was right, then they wouldn't need to worry about running out any time soon.

Max aimed the Interceptor south-by-south-west. It was the absolute final stretch of their journey, each mile longer than it should be. He had counted it down to the final day, the final roads, and even this last leg felt like it took forever even though at an average of 80 miles an hour it would take literally minutes to get there. Max was never able to properly handle the passage of time under stress.
Days passed in minutes and even the smallest moment stretched beyond what he could comprehend. He could only strap in for the ride and hope everything would be at ease soon.

Something wasn't right, though. They were too close to see absolutely nothing. Max was damn sure that the boulder he just passed should have had a lean-to emerge from it's northern side. And here, along this band of bleached sand should be a shack that they had once called a checkpoint but had been long abandoned. As he drew in to a very familiar spot, he could tell something was very, very wrong. They should be surrounded.

Where were the shacks? The buildings, the homes, the people? Max left the Interceptor, wandering about the area for a spot he was sure had once laid underneath a tin floor. He kicked at the sand, scooping away because he knew there had to be something. Anything. But there was nothing. Standing from the dirt, Max took it all in. There was supposed to be a shanty-town here, but instead it was as if there never had been. Everything had been plucked up and taken away. It was almost too clean. Were they nomadic? Had they joined the other town? Or the Hold? Or had a worse fate befall them? Max didn't know, but there was only one way to find out.

Furiosa had stood behind the door of the Interceptor, watching him fumble through the sand. What was he looking for? There was nothing around to hint that there was any sort of secret. What could he be expected to find? It took a moment for it to finally register; were they supposed to be in the middle of one of the settlements? She meant to ask Max as he came back to the car, but he had an answer ready before she could open her mouth.

“Used to be a settlement here. Gone. No trace.” He got back into the driver's seat and she got in right beside him, hardly having time to close the door before he sped off to look for the second settlement.

There was a potential that there was nothing to worry about. Perhaps they had moved to the other town or the Hold. Who would go through the trouble of taking absolutely everything? Not many people would, but it was unwise to disregard the possibility. Max didn't want to think about it.

He wringed the leather and plastic of his steering wheel as they came across what was supposed to be the second settlement. Nothing. Max did the same thing in the middle of the plot of sand, scrounging around for a hint of wood or tin or steel or something that didn't belong. But there was nothing. Why was there nothing? Did they, too, move on from this place, either to the Hold or had they met some terrible fate? Max knew that one possibility was outgrowing the other, and things didn't look good.

He hushed Furiosa as she started to ask him something. Max didn't have any answers, didn't know anything. All certainty and patience was out the window. He drove again, and found another landmark on his map to stand from that told him yes, they were right where he thought they were, and yes, the settlement was now gone.

Max wasted no time getting back in the Interceptor. He needed to get to the Hold. It was the absolute last bastion of humanity left in the South if the settlements had truly disappeared. It was too strong to fall to any sort of raid. The Hold stood alone on a plateau with a drawbridge made of scrap metal being the only way on or off. Walls stood tall around the platform's perimeter, and it stood like a castle above the Wasteland. It was impenetrable. Right?

Furiosa knew something was wrong. This wasn't any sort of mind game to psyche her out. She could see it in his face, in his hands, in his posture that this wasn't something he expected at all. His worries were beyond being stuck with her at this point, and he was instead focused on the possibility that every place he knew of down South was razed, and that everyone that lived in those places were dead. Things didn't look good.
They saw it grow out of the horizon as they headed West. The landscape grew more dynamic but nothing stood out like the plateau of the Hold and the road that led up to it. Max was going as fast as the Interceptor would let him, and Furiosa couldn't do anything but let it happen. They flew up a shallow valley on the path to the structure, growing closer and closer until they reached the approach.

The bridge was down. The bridge was never down. There were no men watching from the wall. There were always men watching from the wall. The Hold was stagnant and silent from beyond the plateau, and Max didn't know what it meant. Hesitantly, he took a pistol and his shotgun from their holsters, stepping out of the car as slowly as he dared. Max stopped Furiosa before she, too, got out. “Stay in the car. If anything happens, drive. Drive far and fast.”

“Max-”

“Promise me.” Max meant it. He didn't know what waited for them inside those walls, didn't know what would happen to them. Maybe there was a good reason for them to have the guards dismissed and bridge down. There could be some kind of event that called for it, and everything was normal. Or there could be a dozen-odd raiders waiting for them to cross that threshold so they could kill them. Or there could be nothing. But if their death were to come in the Hold, Max would only allow his own.

Furiosa wanted to argue. She could take care of herself. She knew her way around a gun. She didn't need to be treated like a pup. But she knew that Max didn't want another death on his watch, another ghost to follow him because of some reason he'd make up in his head about how it's his fault. Furiosa knew it would truly be her fault alone if she were to accompany him, and she was ready to go, but she would stay. “I promise.”

With a final look back at Furiosa, Max made his way up the approach. His hand kept a death grip on the pistol that he held shakily in front of him. Max didn't know whether to run or to inch forward. Either way, he made progress towards the Hold looming before him. A careful step landed him on the drawbridge that began to clang softly with each footfall. Max slowed to a crawl as he moved, and noticed that the mechanism for drawing up the bridge had been completely disengaged. He could make out bullet holes and scorch marks on the walls. A battle had been fought here.

As he met the end of the bridge, Max finally stood at the entrance of the Hold. And without moving even a foot forward, he could see all of its residents laid out in a line in the middle of the keep. Dead.

Chapter End Notes

i am a sinner
The Hold

Chapter Summary

The Hold is lost.

Chapter Notes

TW: Dead bodies, gore, mentions of cannibalism, some serious suicidal ideation. If I'm missing something and it really gets to you, please let me know. Tags should be updated.

They were dead.

Dead. The men, the women, the children, the elders, dead. Dead.

He was too afraid to move, either to leave or to come any closer. Max felt as though he were in a mine-field, surrounded on all sides without a way out. If he were to approach them, he might fall apart right then and there, but if he were to retreat now, he might never know what happened.

Against his better judgment, he proceeded. Max could smell the ripe rotting flesh of the dead, hear the flies buzzing, see the maggots burrowing into the flesh. It wasn't until the winds shifted and pitted him downwind that the gases of decomposition hit him with its full brunt and finally overpowered him. Max doubled over against the foul odor and let out his stomach, wasting valuable water and energy to cleanse his system. His body lurched with each release until he was finally on all fours. Max convulsed painfully as his empty gut churned acid up his throat as a chaser.

A gentle hand laid on his back was enough to snap Max out of his convulsions, skittering away with his gun pointed back at whoever touched him. The pistol fell as soon as he recognized her. “Told you not to come,” he spoke weakly from his position on the ground. Max sat up and turned away from Furiosa, spitting out more bile and clearing his nostrils. “Not… don't know if...” The area wasn't clear. The maze of rooms surrounding the open center was untouched. They might not be alone.

They would have come out when you were puking. Furiosa would have said if the bodies hadn't caught her attention, too. “Oh...” she let out, covering her face as she approached the dead. It was unlike anything she had seen before. They were put this way on purpose by whoever killed them all. The bodies had been mutilated – no, harvested of their flesh. Thighs and calves were missing, shoulders and ribs, chest cavities emptied, and she could indeed spot a mass of organs further behind the corpses, tucked away in a corner.

Cannibals were the only people who came to mind. Such precise dissection of the human body wouldn't be found in more brutish folk such as raiders, especially of any War Boy type. It seemed foreign, even though she knew Buzzards partook in long pork. They couldn't be the culprits either. They took the body whole or left it too mangled to recognize. The true perpetrators had slaughtered these people and set them up for disassembly, and had the prime cuts taken from their flesh. It was
sickeningly intricate, and she wanted no part of it.

Max had disappeared from her side, limping down the metal and dirt ramp to the Interceptor. He passed the driver's side and something in him said *drive, drive, drive* but he ignored the urge. Instead, he rounded the back and grabbed one of the 5-liter containers full of guzz and made his way back up to the Hold. Furiosa hadn't noticed him leave, but caught sight of him as he returned. She saw the fuel canister in his hand and thought nothing of it until he began to pour it over the bodies. “Max—”

“'s the right thing to do.” He couldn't leave them to the flies, to whoever would consider their remains valuable. They had been defiled. Max wouldn't tolerate any more. He poured, poured, until he was shaking out loose drops as though they counted, too. After tossing the container back towards the bridge, Max pulled one of the few flares they had out from his waistband, and stood poised to strike it. Furiosa was quick to interfere.

“Once you light that, people are gonna see the smoke,” Furiosa told him with her hand curled around his wrist, the other on his shoulder. It didn't phase him; his eyes were still on the bodies. “Are we done here?” She sent a gentle shake through him, and he pulled away, stuffing the flare away. Max found his pistol and shuffled away from the dead, heading instead towards the series of shanties that were built against the wall. *Just in case,* he told himself. Furiosa followed with the rifle.

There was no one left alive in the Hold, friend or foe. The homes had been stripped clean of everything, even the most trivial items. Furiosa was surprised they didn't disassemble the sheet metal walls and take that, too. Max ignored it all, pushing on until every room was clear and no corner was left unchecked, and even when their task was complete it didn't feel enough. There wasn't anything else they could do here, though. The Hold was lost.

Some time ago, he had put down marks to represent the three settlements on his map, tight crosses that meant they were good places, safe havens. They were gone now. Max knew he would need to pull the cloth out one of these days and ink them all out with three scratches to eternally disregard them. *This is not a safe place,* the symbol meant, present over many places on his map, including the three hellish cities that dominated the area. To put the same over these southern bastions of humanity was not only sacrilege, but it meant that there was absolutely nothing left for him here.

Furiosa immediately came to mind, and he knew any more attempts to abandon her to the back of his head were useless. They were going to be in it together, for the long haul. The idea made his skin crawl and his brain raced to think of every single way that she could – would – perish beside him. Max knew it was inevitable for her to become another body in the sand, another set of bones for the wind to whittle down to dust, another ghost to chase him down the road. Everything he touched came to die, and with her by his side, her death would only come sooner.

His body stood before the great line of desecrated corpses, flare in hand. With Furiosa's blessing, he lit it and threw it into the pile. The guzz burst into flames with a great flash, and black smoke quickly wicked away from the Hold to set high in the air. That was their cue to leave, but something kept him rooted to his spot before the pyre.

*Throw yourself in,* a voice whispered into his ear. *Join them,* another agreed. It almost didn't seem like a bad idea. Why should Max get to live when so many others have gone before their time? *You should join them.* Maybe he should. Finally get his punishment as though these months and years of having his ghosts with him weren't enough. *Go home to your wife and child,* someone else spoke, and a cool sensation rolled over him. Pins and needles settled into his body, and he felt his bum knee shuffle and move to bring him closer to the fire.

An arm that wasn't his wrapped around his torso, and a face appeared in his line of sight. “Max,” she spoke, and it shook him to his core as if he had woken from one of *those* dreams. His leg twitched
again as one of his ghosts passed on some unintelligible message. He lost his footing on the metal and found himself deeper in Furiosa's hold than he cared to be. Max snapped out of it and focused his eyes elsewhere, settling on the ground beneath their feet. “Let's go.”

After a moment, she guided him gently away from the fire and he shortly followed by his own will. Furiosa kept close despite his cooperation, an arm kept securely around his shoulder. She had watched him as he stood over the burning bodies, and it was too easy to tell that there was something unhealthy going on in his head. Max's revelation yesterday stayed with her, and it only made her think that Max took the blame for everything that happened. His ghosts were already trouble, so what would the people before them bring him? Something beyond the hell that he already lived, she was sure, because the pyre was starting to look as though it would gain more fuel.

They walked out of the Hold, guzz canister held in a death grip by Max. He didn't shy away away Furiosa's presence, didn't shrug off her comfort. It was hard to admit it, but her pleasant warmth was better than the extreme heat of the blaze and the numbing coolness that had washed over him as his ghosts urged him closer to death. Max had to admit that she kept him grounded, as much as it pained him to find usefulness in someone he had wanted gone from his life. Still, he knew his attitude had to change. It was wrong to antagonize Furiosa and treat her as a burden, or anything less than human. There was a lot going on within his mind that he had to conquer first, including the fear of having a companion, and the fear of losing one.

The both of them made their way back to the Interceptor. Max strapped the guzz can back onto the car before slipping back into the driver's seat. The black smoke billowing from the Hold caught his attention, but he drove it from his mind, turning over the engine and quickly turning to leave the sight behind.

“Where do we go now?”

“There's nowhere else for us to go.” There was no place that he knew of that they could turn to. Bartertown had turned sour towards them, and the settlements that he had long sought out had fallen victim to some unknown enemy. He had tied the two areas together like loose ends, and now the knot was untied, and his map was useless, because every spot marked good bad bad. The only direction that made sense was the one that took them the farthest away from here.

*There's still the Green Place,* thought Furiosa. It was where she had every intention to go had the plan gone all right, but it hadn't, and she was here now. Still, she was no longer afraid of Max, no longer doubtful of his intentions. The Many Mothers had long been careful in their interactions with men, but he had proven herself to her beyond what she needed to accept him. The Green Place wasn't something she needed to keep secret anymore, and with nowhere else to go, she shouldn't.

“There's a place… that I know of.”

“Where?” Max acknowledged, looking at her from the corner of his eye. He wondered why she didn't speak about it earlier, though it was probably because it was too out-of-the-way, or she outright didn't want him to know about it.

“Before I was taken the Citadel, I lived beyond the mountains with my people, in the Green Place of Many Mothers. A day's ride east of the mountain pass and we would be there.”

“Green Place?” He hadn't heard the word green, let alone think the word green unless it was associated with a rotting limbs in a long time. Surely she couldn't actually mean-

“Plants. Trees, grass, roots and vegetables… it's the only place that can sustain a living environment. We've lived there for years, defended it for years. No-one to the north, no-one to the south, but if someone comes through, we know about it, and it's on our terms.”
It sounded too good to be true. “Any catch?”

“Rock riders controls the pass. Made a deal that I'm not able to hold up, so instead of blocking our passage, they're really gonna block our passage. And the mountains go on for ten days' riding to the north and south of the pass. If you want to give it a shot, I'm with you. If it's not worth the risk… I understand.” Even talking about it made the journey seem beyond their ability. They didn't have the supplies to round the mountain, nor did they have the charisma to negotiate their way out of this one. Even though they had learned that hope was very much a mistake, it beat the uncertainty of disappearing into the wastes and finding nothing.

Max remained silent, mulling it over in his head. The mountains were a day away, at best. The pass would have to be two days away once they reached the base of the range. Another day would – supposedly – put them in the Green Place. Between them and there would be the rock riders, raiders, war parties, and God knows what else is out there.

It was better than chasing himself into the Salt.

Wordlessly, he grabbed his compass, adjusting the Interceptor's direction to face east. Furiosa's worn smile didn't go un-noticed as they turned out of the sun. One shot was all they could promise themselves. If they made it, it would be smooth sailing from there. If they didn't, then things would get much, much worse.
Broken

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With another destination awaiting them, they drove. The mood was crushed by what they saw at the Hold and doubly by the realization that they might never find peace nor shelter from the wastes again. No trade to be had, no jobs to be worked, no food to be bartered for. They were on the edge of living by scavenging, plundering, barely scratching a living off lizards and distilled piss, but there was the potential that they wouldn't need to. But they still might.

Hours passed before Furiosa spoke. “Want to rest?” His sluggish response was its own answer. Max stopped the car, sliding into the passenger seat as Furiosa walked around to get into the driver's, pausing to get some rations on the way. Max took his share with a small thanks and they ate in silence as the sun continued to fall behind them.

At some point, Max grabbed a blanket from the rear, offering Furiosa her own that she turned down. “Bright enough moon to drive,” she explained, getting the Interceptor moving again. Max had no arguments. He settled into the worn leather under the blanket and accepted the inevitability of sleep. It would come sooner or later, and what it brought along was unknown. Max could only control when it took a hold of him, so he figured there would be no better time than right then.

He stood before the Hold again.

Max knew what was waiting, but he still took the approach to the fortress. He had the fuel canister and flare with him, as ready as he ever would be. In his head, he could already see them laying before him. He was prepared, he told himself. He could face them. As Max grew closer to the entrance, he was almost convinced of it, but as he finally reached the threshold, that all changed.

There were too many of the dead for it to make any sense. There had to be over two hundred of them piled high and wide, more than the three settlements' populations together. Max's body moved closer to the corpses against his will. He steeled himself for the stench of putrefaction, but no scent made itself present. It was almost desirable so he could give himself a reason to stay away from the dead. No such luck, he discovered as his body seemed to move on a rail towards the pile.

He recognized them. All of them. Max saw Jessie, Sprog, Goose, Hope, Glory, and the countless others that fell after them. They were supposed to be long gone from the world, but here they were, stacked like firewood before him. It wasn't right. His mind screamed run run run but his feet remained planted in the dirt floor of the Hold.

It's your mess. Clean it up, said a disembodied voice with great authority, and he obeyed.

Max's hands opened the guzz canister and poured it out over the pile of bodies. The container seemed to never empty as it spilled over the dead, and even when he threw it to the side it dribbled guzz onto the ground. It didn't matter. The bodies were soaked, and the ground beneath his feet had grown damp. All he had to do was light the pyre.

The flare went up easily enough, blanketing the bodies in a strikingly red light. Their eyes shined right back into his, one of the corpses blinking in the corner of his vision. Max wasted no more time standing before them, and tossed the flare into the pile. It lit up immediately, but despite the intensity of the fire he didn't feel the slightest change in temperature. He didn't care, wasn't phased as much as he should have been. His job here was done. It was time to go. Max turned to leave, but as soon
as his back was to the pyre, a multitude of hands grabbed hold of him and pulled him in with them.

The pain was unbearable. Every inch of his body was on fire, cooking to the bone, and he screamed. His clothes soon burned off of him and the flesh fell from his hands. He could feel his eyelids melt off and his blood begin to boil, and his agony intensified in every single nanosecond. The hands pulled him deeper, deeper into the dead mass until he began to disappear behind the bodies. From beyond the flame and corpses, he could see Furiosa run up and cast her arm in to grab him.

“MAX!” He woke up screaming, Furiosa inches away from his face. She held his jacket tightly in his hands, having tried to shake him out of whatever was afflicting him. Max stopped once he realized he was no longer dreaming and slumped down in his seat, burning underneath his leather. Furiosa let go to give him space, but still offered her full attention. She had stopped driving not long before Max had started to yell. “Max, are you okay?” Furiosa knew the answer.

She didn't get a response. Max had tucked back into himself, chin against his chest and head inside his jacket as he tried to control his breathing. Furiosa was tempted to start driving again, minimize his episode, let him handle it on his terms. She was intruding on this private episode, and she knew how much it hurt him to even have her bear witness to it even though all she wanted to do was help. Allowing Max to collect himself, Furiosa turned away and moved to turn the engine back over and get them back on the road.

“I was back there.” Max began suddenly, not sure if he even meant to speak. Inside the heated leather he shivered down to his bones and himself back into his nightmare. “In the Hold. And I saw everyone in that pile. I saw my wife, my boy, Hope, Glory, and when I set them alight, they pulled me in and I burned, and it was the realest thing I've ever felt.” He turned to her, looking for anything to focus on that wouldn't let the sight leech back into his mind. It didn't work, and instead Furiosa's expression only amplified his terror, showing him that it was that bad and there was no more pretending he was fine.

Max turned away from her, keeping his eyes wide open as he looked out upon the blue landscape. His gaze faltered when he saw a familiar shape form against the sand – he didn't care which ghost it was – and he drew back into himself, breath hitching again. Never before had a nightmare taken him so vividly. Never before had such a sight called him to the void. There was no retreating up the rabbit-hole he had started to fall down so many years ago, and he didn't know if it would get any better, even if he acknowledged how far down he was.

Max's effort to re-tempter himself faltered. He allowed his tears to fall freely, whispers dampened by his jacket. Another wave of heat like hellfire washed over his bones and encouraged his cries to outgrow their muffler. Hiding his emotions was no longer an objective. Max filled the cab of the Interceptor with sobs as loud as his body demanded they be. “I've gone mad!” he let out his declaration to the world at large. He had been mad for a long time, mad since the day his family had been taken from him, and only spiralled deeper into the darkness since then. It was time he accepted the fact whole-heartedly instead of acknowledging it backhandedly, and take on whatever consequences would come of it.

A metal hand gently found its way onto his shoulder. Max shivered against the sensation but desired the realness of its presence, pressing deeper and deeper into it until he had simply collapsed into Furiosa's lap. He sought comfort in how absolutely real she was, how flesh-and-blood warm she was, a welcome balance between the scalding inferno of the Hold and the icy grip of the dead that followed him. His arms wrapped around her legs and waist without protest and he found some comfort there, head nestled against her body as he continued his lament.

“I'm afraid!” he wailed again into her. Max was afraid of a lot of things, though rightly he should be.
He feared dying, feared the death of others that he tried to protect. He was afraid of his past, the present, and the future. He was afraid of going back to sleep because he knew they would be waiting for him and he didn't know if he could go back there again, but he would. He always would.

Another hand moved onto him, tenderly cupping his head, stroking his hair with its thumb. Max shivered at the gesture but willed it to continue. His arms squeezed Furiosa in kind as he came down from his outburst of emotion. While Max calmed down, he didn't stir away from the comforting hold. He wanted it, he decided, as greedy as it was. He wanted her hands on him, his arms around her, them to be like this for as long as it took for things to seem okay.

He dreaded the moment Furiosa would shuffle, clear her throat, say something meant to get him sat back up again and for the world to go on. It seemed to never come. Her prosthesis stayed on his back, and her hand kept petting his head, and if he didn't know any better he might have thought she was fine doing it. Max couldn't fathom what was going on in Furiosa's head and wouldn't pretend to. He was tempted to offer some meek form of thanks, but decided not to. While he certainly was thankful and she certainly deserved it, he wasn't ready to take the moment beyond their embrace. Max didn't doubt there would be a point in time in the near future where he'd pretend that this didn't happen or find some other way to minimize it, but he would let her know how much it meant to him.

“He fears dying, feared the death of others that he tried to protect. He was afraid of his past, the present, and the future. He was afraid of going back to sleep because he knew they would be waiting for him and he didn't know if he could go back there again, but he would. He always would.”

Furiosa said nothing as she got the Interceptor running again, propelling them again through the blue landscape.

It was a small hollow worn into the side of a rock formation, one very much like the place they had spent their first night together. Furiosa pulled up snugly against the rock wall, though she would have backed in if it wasn't Max's car that she would have scratched and scraped. She went first into the hollow with the lantern and her fair share of blankets as Max arranged a tarp to hide away from the world. They had gone so far so fast, and now with nothing in their crosshairs, there seemed to be no reason to keep up with that pace. At least, for a night.

“Stay,” he replied weakly, pulling his leather jacket and blanket tighter around him. The stagnant cold of the night was settling in, a welcome change from the guzzoline flames licking him from his dream world. Furiosa said nothing as she got the Interceptor running again, propelling them again through the blue landscape.

Something stirred in her when she had sat by and watched him break down. He had always made an effort to keep his emotions tightly bottled, especially around her. Questions were dismissed, any answers were sharp (too sharp), and it always felt like he tried to forget she was there. There had been a subtle change ever since he finally gave her the talk that didn't go unnoticed, but this...
breakdown was beyond what she expected.

“I've gone mad!” Max had said, and it tugged at Furiosa in a way even she was uncomfortable with. While she had no idea what to do, she still reached out for him, putting her hand on his shoulder to let him that she was there and he didn't need to be alone. It was all he needed to fall into her and wrap himself around her. She was startled by the sudden intimacy, but not enough to withdraw from him. It had to have taken a lot of him to engage her like this, and she wasn't ready to turn him away to deal with it alone.

“I'm afraid!” Max cried into her lap, and her heart broke for this man. Furiosa couldn't imagine his pain but knew that it was too much for him, and she desperately wanted to help. Her breath was caught on a word, but she had absolutely no idea what to say that could make anything better. Bringing her flesh hand to his head and petting his hair soon came to her as though it were second nature. She kept on with the motion, deciding she'd do it until… until things were better.

They sat like that for a long time. As he came down from his emotional peak, Furiosa could feel herself settling into the seat despite Max's weight on her. It had grown familiar, if not welcome, and if they fell asleep like this, she would have been alright with it. A look up from him at the world surrounding them told her that it would have been irresponsible to do so. The Interceptor was out in the open, exposed to the elements or worse. She knew they needed to move, either to hide or to drive, and so they did, and now they were in a worn-out hole in the side of a hill.

Furiosa sat against the wall, waiting for Max to move. She half-expected for him to make his own nest and settle there, or make the driver's seat his bed for the night. Her offer of a spot beside her was just that – not a suggestion, not a demand, only an option. Max had made himself vulnerable, and she knew that he'd want space, and she didn't want to deny him that. Still, he let out a small grunt and made his way over to her, laying out the roll before sitting down next to her.

After a pause, they both went through their own motions of gearing down for the night. Furiosa settled her arm on its own blanket, and Max took off his jacket as the baked rock radiated heat still stored from the day. Furiosa laid back and turned onto her side as her companion kneaded at the knot in his bad leg, occasionally pausing to focus on some imagined sound from outside their hollow. He finally followed her down to the floor, shuffling until he finally met her back and let her warmth come in through his blanket.

Furiosa, content with his non-movement, reached out to extinguish the lantern and settled back against Max. Despite the circumstances, she felt a smile creep across her face as his presence brought a warmth and comfort that with it came its own complexities but felt good and right then, that was all that mattered. If she had known on that first night that they would end up sleeping like this, she might have blown a gasket, but at this point, she didn't care what she had thought those many days ago. It felt right. Maybe she wanted it.

And maybe he wanted it, too.

Chapter End Notes

i had a hard time trying to find the place to write this from. hopefully it all made sense.

find more of me over at my tumblr page if you're interested in shitposts and reblogs
The first thing Max saw when he woke was tattered red Buzzard burlap, and his first instinct was to push, shove, attack, get the upper hand. He had woken up once underneath a Buzzard when he strayed too close to the Badlands and set camp. One of them had found Max out in the early morning hours, either to kill him or take his stuff without waking him. His light sleeping was his saving grace and the reason there's one less Buzzard out there, and it was about to be the reason there were two less.

It took a split-second for other memories to flood out those that were long-past, and they came fast enough to stop him before he put up a fight. Furiosa taking the clothes off the Buzzard corpse to wear, him burying his head into them to cry, her taking off the outer layers before they finally settled in to sleep, memories that were enough to make him tense up and cringe away anyways. The small distance he put between them let him figure out he had, at some point, curled up into Furiosa's chest and she had wrapped her arm around him, leaving her left arm cramped between them.

Something else poured into his mind. Memories and nightmares of fire and blood and corpses both real and imagined finally caught up to his forgetful awakening, and a phantom wave of heat rolled over him that reminded him too much of the short touch of hell he had felt. The cool alcove they had found to hide in made him shiver when his mind finally cleared, and he very nearly tucked himself back into Furiosa before she woke.

“Mmph?” she stirred, about as surprised as Max was to wake up like this. There was a vague idea of him turning to her at some point during the night, and her welcoming him into her space once more. Furiosa's arm had found its way around Max – naturally – and it almost dared to move its way back up to his scruffy hair before she pulled away entirely to stir from the bedding. Max did the same, making more space between the two so they could begin their morning rituals.

Sunlight had begun to spill in through the cracks and slips of the tarp that concealed them, something that told them it was time to get going. Jackets were donned, boots were laced, and equipment was packed back onto the Interceptor before they took away the tarp and exposed themselves to the world. They didn't dare waste their time, aware of the time they had lost last night. The hollow in the rock formation was soon left behind them as they continued their journey to the Green Place.

Their itinerary was taking them East towards the mountains, a journey that was due to take a day but now was guessed to take even longer due to their stopping last night. The intimate encounters had yet to be addressed between the two, but the after-effects lingered. A sense of comfort fell back into the Interceptor even though it was tainted by the knowledge of why they were headed east anyways. Max's southern settlements had been raided and picked clean, and their people had been harvested for their flesh. Even the thought of the pile of burning carcasses they left behind was enough to make Max pale, something he knew wasn't his fault but was unable to shake off.

Furiosa was alive, though. She was here with him and she was well. Still, Max struggled with the need to protect her while he knew that she was capable. He had driven himself mad because he took every death personally. It was something that he knew was wrong to do but seeing and hearing the dead in his dreams only served to push him further towards the brink of insanity. Max never had intentions to take Furiosa aboard as a long-term passenger. He was afraid of gaining another ghost, another reason to flee the living world, but now she was with him and he was beginning to feel things he shouldn't feel and now he was only afraid of losing--
“You okay over there?” Max snapped out of his stupor to look over at Furiosa. He sat stiff in the driver's seat, something that took a moment for him to catch on to before he forced himself to relax. She had a concerned look on her face that wasn't there without merit. Last night had truly opened her eyes to Max's demons, and she couldn't help but think back to everything he had said as he sat at the wheel with stress showing in every part of his form. His ability to come out of it and re-settle allowed her to brush it off. “Looked like you were about to shit yourself,” Furiosa dismissed the episode and tried to defuse what tension she could sense.

Max let out a small huff and shook his head. “Think too much.” While he had spent much time acting as an automaton, allowing his body to go through the motions of surviving on his own, his brain often got the most exercise of all. Hypothetical situations, routes in and out and around anywhere he was going, memories of the past that did him no good to remember, thoughts of what should have been done differently… “Gets me in more trouble, more often than not.”

“Sometimes it's just better not to think.” Furiosa shared the sentiment. She had long found herself occupied with the mental gymnastics that it took to convince herself that her actions as Imperator were only to help her get out of the Citadel, but supressing that inner dialogue was easier than trying to justify the evil she committed in the name of Immortan Joe. It hadn't left her completely, though; she had been found out, and the Wives had suffered - are suffering, will suffer – because of her, and the Green Place was even further out of her grasp. Still, she was with Max, and with him, it seemed like she'd never have a better chance.

“Yeah.”

The both of them were fine with no words being exchanged beyond that, either content with the situation or too afraid to say much more about yesterday. Breaking their fast gave them another reason to keep the silence between them. The meal bars were doing their job and the water was clean and pure, hardly any reason to complain. Still, the monotony of the meal was enough to make Max consider catching a lizard or two some time to shake things up. He wouldn't, of course, since lizards were also a great way of catching an illness, something neither of them needed.

Despite the expedition of going through the canyon pass, Max couldn't help but consider the risk of taking the long way around. Perhaps eight days south, another ten north and then one more due east would land them at the Green Place, if the math and geography matched up. Of course, that was only the best case. They had consumed 6 days worth of supplies which would force a ration of two-thirds or worse for them to get there, but still the question lingered in the back of Max's head: is the Green Place there? Furiosa hadn't been there for thousands of days, and Max had not been gone from the Hold for more than thirty days. It almost made sense for it to not be there, but where else was there to go?

It didn't seem like that bad of an idea, though. Max had long survived on near-starvation portions of food and water before. If all they were doing was driving, sleeping, and going out for a stretch and piss, they would be doing a good job of conserving their energy. It also didn't hurt that nearly 20 more days of travelling would be a great opportunity to learn about any other settlements. Then again, they could always run into the next Citadel. Or maybe they wouldn't.

All they knew was that there was a pass controlled by the Rock Riders and no other way through the mountains. The deal that Furiosa negotiated had been forfeited, and there was no guarantee they'd get through anyways. They might have the firepower, but the riders have the navigability, finesse, and complete knowledge of the terrain that they will use to their advantage. Hardly anyone in the wasteland is reasonable anymore, especially when you show up with a broken promise and no supplies to exchange free passage for.
Twenty days of unknown territory was starting to look pretty good. Even if the Green Place was no longer on the other side of the mountains, that was still twenty days worth of territory to be mapped—or at the very least, explored. Any direction was as good as the other to travel in. The world was a wasteland, and Max knew not of any other particular place he could return to that was still around. Bartertown was tempting to try for, but he was nearly a half-regular. And he had killed a guard. And Furiosa, so they thought, shorted their supplies. It wasn't worth the risk of being discovered, and the squalid conditions made life on the road seem much better. But that wasn't what they wanted either.

They continued their journey east, breaking around mid-day to eat and refuel the Interceptor. Furiosa offered to take over driving but Max turned her down. Being in the passenger seat meant that Max would have the opportunity (more like the misfortune) of sleep available for him to take advantage of. Sleep was needed, he couldn't deny that, but dancing with his demons wasn't something he was ready to do until he couldn't help it. Rest might not come easy even then. I miss coffee, a thought came to him and quickly disappeared.

“Hey, Max?” Furiosa captured his attention after a few minutes back on the road again and earned a grunt of acknowledgment. “Is your compass broken?” Her tone wasn't curious, nor was it chiding for his lack of working equipment. She had on an air of dead seriousness and leaned in towards him. In her right hand was his compass, spinning wildly. Once round clock-wise, another time counterclock-wise, and more spinning that completely obfuscated their direction. Compasses don't break like that.

“No,” Max replied, knowing for a fact that he used it yesterday with no issues. He took the compass into his own hand and rattled it gently, half-expecting for it to right itself. Nothing changed. It continued to spin lazily, pointing every which-way direction that it could. “Something's makin' it do this,” he decided, but couldn't place his finger on what…

“Sand storm,” Furiosa quickly settled on a cause. It was what they did, sand storms. They were so great and terrible that their spawning, even from miles away, interfered with the magnetism of the Earth that compasses used and rendered them useless. Furiosa was almost ashamed of not expecting it—after all, it had been forecasted by the reliable old bones at the Citadel to be a strong one that went on for miles and miles and had the potential to last days in the worst places. It was what she planned on using to separate her from the Citadel armada, and from shaking off whatever remained of her own escort, something she remembered guilty when it was paired with the encounter they had with Ace and the boys on the Powder Lakes.

Max figured as much. He quickly stopped the Interceptor again, having hardly made any progress since their first pause of the day. Furiosa followed him out but quickly caught on to what he was doing. Together, they used the tarps and blankets to secure the supplies in the rear compartment, nestling rocks into the fabric to use as buttons to tie rope around and anchor to hooks on the car. They could only hope that they had done a good enough job; the wind could whip right underneath and rip the cover away, or worse, make it a sail.

“Find shelter or drive through?” Max asked Furiosa as theyclambered back into the vehicle. They had already stopped for the night, something neither of them expected. The sand storm could last a matter of minutes or go on for hours, no matter whether they're driving through it or not. Wasting time by sitting around was something neither of them wanted to do. Then again, they'd be able to make it through the pass anyways with days of supplies left to consume. Circling around the mountains would remain a hurdle, manageable or not. Expediency still felt like the name of the game, though, and Max wasn't sure if another hitch in their journey was acceptable.

“Shelter,” Furiosa replied definitively. “If we can afford it, we should avoid it. It's a big one.” Max couldn't argue the point. The shimmering dust on the horizon was apparently enough to make the compass spin rapidly and try to discover its true north. He also wouldn't anyways. Taking them
through the Highlands had put them – her – in unjust danger, and to keep her out of any more decisions that would affect the both of them would be wrong, no matter how they make it out.

They were thankful for the rocky stretch of badlands they currently occupied, deserted as far as they knew by any antagonizing factions. (Traffic this far south was too scarce for Buzzards or Roadkill to care for it – scarcer still since much of its steady population had been slaughtered.) A shallow canyon delivered them to a neat recess in its wall that was just wide enough for the Interceptor to drive inside and park in to shelter them from the elements. *It'll have to do*, Max supposed, having been through worse. The driver's side was exposed, allowing Max the sight of the storm rolling in, something he needed if they needed to get out of there.

After ensuring his window was tightly sealed, Max reached past Furiosa to reach the glove compartment and pulled out two pairs of goggles, offering her the better pair to use. He closed the air vents on the dash as well, not willing to risk any intake of sand. Hundreds of days ago, sand had scratched his left eye and left it useless and fluttering for longer than he cared for it to be (which was any amount of time at all). The goggles had been found, of course, shortly after he recovered, and he was glad to use them when the situation called for it.

“It's coming,” he spoke loudly against the blowing wind as if he really needed to state the obvious. The blue sky was gone from his view, obscured by the brown swirling material that built the wall of the storm. Max took a look back at Furiosa through his scuffed lenses and saw that she had already pulled loose fabric over her mouth and nose. He took a moment to do the same, not caring about the redundancy of so many layers of protection. *Better safe than sorry* were words to live by in this world, words he didn't regret heeding as the dark wall washed over the canyon and brought them into the storm.

Chapter End Notes

Uni's back in session next week. Updates are about to slow down (as if they could come any slower).

I'm looking for a beta reader! If anyone's interested in beta reading for me or providing any sort of input, please let me know over at my tumblr. I'd appreciate it.
It was dark and loud – that was the only thing the both of them could focus on. The canyon, no matter how small it may be, acted as a wind funnel that made the air whistle and scream in their ears. Max couldn't see anything; the gales wove the sand into a thick dark blanket that could blind anyone, no matter their position. He supposed it didn't matter now. They wouldn't even see a tornado until it was right on top of them.

The static lightning illuminated the world in a brief stark-white flash and gave them only hints of what was going on. Max could just barely make out thick jetstreams carrying debris through the air, and the other side of the canyon was being polished by the fine grit. He could see inside the Interceptor with the milliseconds of light the storm brough them. He could see the dashboard, the compass, their hands growing closer on the console between them in one flash and shrinking away in the next. That small dance continued until Max finally pulled away into himself.

Furiosa tucked the jacket tighter around herself, having been completely aware of what they were doing. Whatever this car was, however long Max had survived in it, it was not the War Rig, nor was it any of the well-maintained machines from the Citadel. It was not the giant steel box she was used to weathering out a storm in, even tanking straight through some. She wasn't afforded any of that safety now, and the situation was made that much worse.

She saw his hand, and her first instinct was to inch closer and reach out for it - but her quick second was to recoil and chide herself for even seeking such a comfort. Furiosa was hardened like steel, and didn't break or bend to anything or anyone. She had learned self-sustainability and self-reliability, long abandoning creature comforts to her memories of the Green Place. This, she tried to convince herself, was absolutely needless and should be completely ignored.

But she wanted it, is what she found. She couldn't hear, she could hardly see, and her heart was pounding hard against her ribs. Just another storm, she tried to convince herself, but she's seen cars lifted up into the sky when it was as bad as this. Furiosa was at a loss. She had no control over the situation, and she had no idea when - or how - it would end.

Max's hand was a temptation. She couldn't help but think back to yesterday and last night when he turned into and sought out her touch, but it was immediately countered. This is nothing like what he was going through, her mind dismissed the desire, and her hand withdrew.

Well I'm not fucking collapsing into his lap and crying my eyes out, now am I? she countered while stretching her hand back towards his.

He's mad. A fine point, that. Even Max knew he was mad, and that was telling. He had laid it out for Furiosa to do with it what she would, and so far she really didn't know. It only gave her context for his standoffishness, and anything that might emerge in the future. She dared to look straight at him when lightning struck, and he looked almost as alien as he had that first day over the Powder Lakes. It was almost enough to make her second guess it.

But then: Who isn't?

He pulled his hand away. And so did she.
The storm fell on them like water on rock. They could withstand it as long as they stayed in the alcove, as long as neither of them did anything stupid. It would just be tedious to sit through, is all. Couldn't sleep through the harsh noise, couldn't piddle away the time. Their only hope would be that it ended soon.

- - -

The storm passed eventually, but not soon enough (of course, it would never be soon enough). The sun had been high in the sky when they first stopped, but had fallen towards the horizon in the time that passed. Max moved to leave, but the door didn't budge. He rolled down the window to discover that there was quite a large pile of sand gathered against the side of the car. The storm had blown sand into the hole in the wall they sought refuge in, and had no doubt filled the void underneath the floor as well. They wouldn't be getting moving any time soon.

Max eventually forced his door open, groaning as sand trickled into the cab. His goggles and scarf had been returned to their rightful places after having their purposes served, same with Furiosa's. After brushing out what sand he could, he left the Interceptor and got down onto the desert floor to begin clearing out space under the car. Furiosa followed him out, but instead stood watch over the gully with the rifle they had taken from the Bartertown guard. Getting down into the sand was a sure-fire way to fuck up the pneumatics, sockets, and joints of her arm, something that would make it useless until it could be properly cleaned - which might be never again.

The landscape wasn't perfect. Many bumps and ridges and dunes blocked a solid view of the horizon and made her job much harder. She still resigned herself to a small patrol around the area, always within eyesight and earshot. While Furiosa's main objective was to watch out for anyone and anything coming their way, she also used the time to clear her head and think about how to account for the storm in their travels.

Well, it shouldn't be that bad. Six hours, at worst, had been lost. Hardly anything in the grand scale of things. Their supplies could take an extra hit - several hits, in fact, until they were down to starvation rations. Hell, even if they didn't eat or drink, they could probably get to the Green Place without dropping dead - not that she'd like to find out if they could in the slightest. They'd been granted a great boon in terms of rations, and squandering it in any fashion could be deadly.

What would they do once they got to the canyon? It was what she had her mind set on despite the obvious knowledge of her lacking what it would take to trade for safe passage. The deal was forfeit, and so was their guarantee for free movement. Could she try to make a case? They had no obligation to hear her out, nor did they need to accommodate her otherwise. They probably wouldn't, in any case.

Could they try to outrun - and out-gun - the Rock Riders? Maybe. Furiosa and Max didn't have the numbers, nor did they have the navigability of the bikers. The car definitely was not the tank that the War Rig was, which meant they could hardly afford to take any damage. A run-through at night would hardly help them. His headlights were out, and the moon would only illuminate the corridor for as long as it was directly overhead. The ever-worsening odds left a sour taste in her mouth that she couldn't spit out.

The mountains weren't that far away at all, she had to assume. Another two days would put them at the pass. It was almost guaranteed that they would see action trying to make it through. She couldn't help but think about another way. Completely circumventing the mountains seemed wasteful. Ten days north and south, never mind what they might find along the way. Maybe somewhere to trade.

Maybe somewhere to die. There was never any certainty to be had. There was always some sort of pessimism to hold against anything that seemed positive, but for good reason. The optimistic mindset was not meant for the world. Realism was what rang most true, though pessimism was a great way to
ensure absolutely nothing happened - even if you were to skip over an opportunity because you had no idea if and how it would go south. Furiosa liked to think she was a realist, but with so much going wrong, it was hard to believe that things would improve.

Max called her back down into the shallow valley soon enough. The Interceptor was clear and they could get moving again. After rations were divided and eaten, they clambered back into the vehicle - Furiosa being the passenger and Max being the driver - and left their hiding spot with little fanfare.

Chapter End Notes

Would have been longer, but cut out something that didn't need to be in the story. It's always my goal to hit 2000 words per chapter, but this one's short. Disappointing, but I think next one should be longer - or even shorter. Writing's hard.
Fork in the Road

*That's bait*, Max thought to himself as they pulled up on the abandoned car. He apparently said it out loud, too, because Furiosa made a sound in agreement. Figuring as she was in on it, too, he asked, "Up for it?"

He stopped the Interceptor a ways away from the vehicle half-buried in the sand. It looked fairly smooth, having been covered most likely by the storm instead of another person. Still, there was reason to exercise caution. It could be a trap half-forgotten by whoever set it. It could be rigged to explode. There was hardly ever a good reason for a car to be laying out in the open, and if there ever was, then the odds were most likely that someone had already taken advantage of it.

"Yeah."

Their approach was careful, and even then, Max stopped the car thirty feet away from their target. Both of them were armed for the worst-case scenario, doors left ajar if the need for retreat arose. The horizon was kept under tight watch. Their travels had continued after the storm, leading them into the next day and closer still to the mountains that separated them from the Green Place. The distance travelled also brought them close to tracks that swept North and South along the mountains, which meant encounters with others were much more likely. They needed to be on top of themselves.

“Watch out for wires,” Max told Furiosa as if she really needed to be reminded. He huffed with every step, usually occupied with looking for tripwires on the ground. Any that were present were likely covered up by the storm. Any hair triggers would have been activated already, though, and any other strings were most likely cushioned by the sand. Despite his growing confidence that at least the ground was safe, he moved carefully towards the car, shotgun extended in front of him. Furiosa made a similar approach, pistol cradled in her hands.

The two of them reached the wreck at the same time, and the both of them paused. Any single part of it could be rigged to hurt them or worse. The door, the trunk, the car hood, the glovebox, anything. Lucky for them, the roof had been half torn-off and let light spill into the cab. Max peeked in through the open window and looked for what he knew to look for. Pipes, barrels, cans, wires, string. Anything that could shoot or explode.

There was something wedged between the front two seats. Inside a small tin can, there was set something shiny and round, big enough to fill the container like a mortar. *Mortar*. Max was half-tempted to pull away and run. It was big enough to take the two of them out. The other half of him wanted to collect it, either to trade or to use. His inactivity was enough to make Furiosa poke her own head in. “Mortar,” he grumbled.

“Flare,” she corrected him. “I've seen a hundred of these. Gas Town, Bullet Farm, Citadel, they all use them.” A closer look inside the car revealed wires running from both doors to the bottom of the can. “I don't think they'd have the shell itself rigged, only linked to a primer on the can. Roof’s open for it to deploy.” There were tool marks on the pried-back metal. “Seems like easy pickings to me, if we're smart.”

Max hummed in agreement. It wasn't enough of a junker for any rational person to willingly spare. The flare was a smart touch if they preferred their prey intact, but it meant that odds were that someone was waiting for it to be set off. He gave the world around them one last look before stepping onto the fender and bending down into the cab, hands kept far away from the triggers. With Furiosa's guidance, he plucked the flare from the mortar-muzzle and passed it on to her. A more scrutinious plain-sight search of the vehicle yielded nothing to be concerned about, so with that, they
got to work.

First and foremost, the mortar assembly was taken out. Following that were the wires in the dashboard, the lone mirror on the passenger's side door, and a search into the glovebox that revealed nothing. Furiosa tackled the area under the car hood, snagging out more wires and the fan belt, ignoring the oozing lead battery. Max's search of the trunk was unrewarding, which lead him to return to the Interceptor to fetch an empty five-liter container and his guzzolene siphoner. In the end, he didn't get much - only a few liters from the bottom of the tank, and thanks to the filter in the siphoner, he didn't need to worry about particulate contamination.

They returned to the Interceptor and stored away their haul before continuing their journey east. They could make a neat trade out of what they got, and the guzz was always welcome. Still, it wouldn't be enough to go around the mountains.

It was the ultimate idea to entertain, that of circumventing the full length instead of passing through its middle. It was foolish, too. He had calculated the days and distance of either path they could take, calculated the food consumption and how low they could ration themselves, but somehow the guzz was something he ignored even when he was pouring it into the Interceptor. Max was lucky to realize it before they made a decision. If there was nothing to the South for them to run into, they'd be pedestrians before they knew it. Hell, even the supposed mountain pass would leave them strained for guzz, and if they weren't careful, they'd reach the Green Place on fumes.

*If there is a Green Place.*

They were due to have the mountains rise over the edge of the world any minute now. Max still didn't know which way he wanted to go. Going through the pass made the most sense. They couldn't rely on finding any more supplies, and what they had made it very possible to make it through and to the Green Place. Even if they ran out of guzz, the food would sustain them until they could find more. If they were to find nothing and no-one else that could possibly help them, this was the way to go.

But it would be dangerous. For all intents and purposes, it was a death trap. There was no guarantee of passage - actually, there was a guarantee of *no* passage. Any group worth their weight in guzz wouldn't dare let strangers through without payment – especially if a deal had been broken. Furiosa's *run* would have happened a few days after she had been found out. The Rock Riders will be expecting that guzz. Needing that guzz.

Max sighed and looked to the south. Uncharted territory. Neither of them knew what could be just beyond the horizon. It could be a bustling post-apocalyptic metropolis, waiting to accept them with open arms. There could be something as villainous as the Triumvirate. Maybe there was something in-between. Maybe there was nothing. All he knew was that three or four days of guzz would not last them through a journey of eighteen days. They would never be able to salvage enough from wrecks, and would hardly be able to trade for enough. Working for it was a possibility, but for how long could they? How long *would* they need to work to get enough?

Oh, how he so desperately wanted things to have gone differently at Bartertown. If only they had shipped the full amount of product, if only Furiosa hadn't been found out, if only, if only... There was no lifeline now. There was no backup. Nowhere to go. No going back. Max's hand had been forced and he was losing the game. Furiosa came only with rumors of the Green Place, but how long had it been since she's been there? How many days, months, *years* had it been in which *so much* could change? The ever-growing odds were that it was gone, but there was a much better chance of the Green Place being there than anything existing to the south.
“There it is.” Furiosa nudged Max out of his thoughts and got him looking forward again. The mountains were a small band of color growing on the horizon. It settled a lump in his stomach as it called for a more expedient answer to the question of which way they'd go. Max wasn't truly sure, he decided as they grew closer to the range. Flipping a coin to make the decision would probably do just as well as them.

For all the thought he put into the possibilities, he hadn't talked to Furiosa about it. He could tell she was thinking about it, too, but how was she thinking about it? Max dared to speak of ignoring the pass and spending some indefinite amount of time going around the mountains, and hoping there were pick-me-ups along the way. She was the only reason they went east. She spoke of the Green Place, her home, the only other place they knew of that was within their grasp. Could he deny her the chance of going home? Would she deny it herself?

Max stopped the car. The mountains were already as tall as his fist held out against the horizon. It was time to make a choice.

“We have fourteen days of full rations, four days' worth of guzz. Three days to the Green Place if we go through the Rock Rider's pass, round-about twenty if we go south and around the mountains. If we go north, we meet the Rock Riders and we're at their mercy. If we go south, we know nothing about it. Could be nothing, could be something good, could be bad.” He looked over to Furiosa, and she was already thinking about it. Max almost expected an immediate response: *North*, he could hear her say. Her lack of an answer told him that she was as torn about it as him.

Living in the wasteland forced people to develop critical skills. Logistics, statistics, risk analysis, probability, gone from the world only in name, replaced with some more rudimentary label. His own experience as a lone road warrior forced him to double down on his methodology, but Furiosa's time as a Citadel Imperator and driver of the War Rig offered its own perks. However, they were both removed from their element. Max had one more person to account for, and Furiosa was no longer under the relative safety blanket that the War Rig and the War Boys offered, and it made the decision that much harder.

“What do the Rock Riders have as weapons?” Max asked on a whim. She had met them – perhaps multiple times – and would have the most knowledge of either of them.


*Incendiary bombs.* The thought of it was enough to knock the wind out of him. His tires were stuffed with animal furs, blankets, and plant fibers. The guzz tank in the rear of the car was big enough a target as it is, but a single well-aimed shot and a single well-aimed bomb would be enough to ignite the fumes and blow them up. It would be too easy to be taken out.

“I know,” she replied to his silent response. “It's no good.” Furiosa fiddled with the pneumatics in her arm, trying to work out the nervous pit in her own stomach. It was a perfect storm of bullshit, a combination of factors that made a run through the pass impossible, and any attempt to do so a deathwish. They couldn't go north.

"Could use the flare as a bluff. Dead man's switch, if they shoot us down, it goes off and they get unwanted attention."

"And let's say that unwanted attention comes, they'll want to figure out who in the world has one of their flares and they'll go straight through the pass with us, if we were to make it in the first place." Flares were only ever used by the Triumvirate, and were high contraband in Bartertown. It would never be expected for a rogue person to acquire and use one, so any sort of usage would be responded to with full reinforcements. "Don't think they'll take that shit-can for a flare anyways."
It's not worth it, she wanted to say, but God, how it almost was. The Green Place was her home. It was the only place left for them to go. It was their only true hope, but going through the pass almost certainly meant death or worse. She couldn't dare put the words in her own mouth, but -

"We can't go through the pass." Max spoke them for her. The words felt like a gut punch, and an outright denial of the possibility of a return. They were so close - so close she could almost smell and feel and touch. It was the closest she had ever gotten to go home, but now she was just pissing in the wind. The Citadel, as awful as it was, had been a safety net. There was always somewhere to turn back to, always an opportunity to try another time, but those luxuries were gone.

Here she was, then, stuck in the desert with nowhere to retreat to. Four days of guzz and a twenty days' ride to the Green Place that seemed nigh impossible to make. Max, the car, and everything inside would be all she had. A shiver rolled down her spine as she realized she had never been in this position before. There had always either been the Green Place or the Citadel. Furiosa, as hardened and experienced as she was, had never truly had to survive. She knew how to strip down a weapon, how to fix a car, how to navigate, how to kill, all done because Joe demanded it, but now that she needed to use this knowledge simply to have the next day come, it felt foreign. She was out of her element.

Max was right in the middle of his, though. Despite her lack of knowledge about him, it was obvious that he had been doing this for thousands of days. This had been his life, and he didn't get by so far just on luck - he had the skills to boot. At the same time, his own safety nets had been taken out. Bartertown was hostile, and the three settlements he had planned on leaving her at had been wiped out. They were both being pushed to their limits, futures uncertain, and she couldn't help but look over at him and ask, "What do we do now?"

"We keep moving." With that, the Interceptor started back up and Max turned them south, away from the pass and to wherever the road would take them.
Chapter Notes

Fifty thousand words. Insane.

Anyways, HERE is a nice map I made that shows where all Runaway has gone, hopefully properly labelled. Hopefully it makes sense! It's only up to Chapter 23 in terms of what it shows, but I hope to elaborate on this in the future.

Thanks for reading!

At some point, they drifted away from the mountain until they could no longer see it. Max's compass would have to be a good enough determinant of their position. They didn't trust the range enough to stay near it. It could provide a high ground for anyone that desired it, and cracks and holes to worm into for opportunists to strike out from. When they were back out in the plains, they were back on the same playing field as everyone else.

Furiosa watched them disappear over the horizon as if it were the last time she'd see them again. It seemed possible – probable, even. The Wasteland was fickle; they could find nothing for four days or they could find everything. There was no telling what they could find when or where, but it was incredibly easy to look around at their already-barren surroundings and to imagine it continuing for hundreds of miles in any direction. It felt hopeless.

It felt easy to give up. It felt really easy to call it quits. Looking around them and seeing absolutely nothing for miles did nothing to instill hope in either of them, and it didn't help when they could easily see the barren sands roll out like this for days. It was a very real reality of the wasteland. You could go for twenty days and find nothing, encounter no-one, go nowhere. On the other hand, you could go for a day and see everything and everyone. Sometimes, something unignorable crowned the horizon, and that was how people found the Triumvirate.

Gas Town spewed pollution from its oil refineries, the Citadel's three pillars stood tall with highlights of green, and the Bullet Farm's own smoke and distinct smell of molten lead all brought people in, whether or not they were truly seeking refuge. These places meant hope, if hope was maybe getting some kind of water or food, and maybe increasing the chances of seeing tomorrow from none to slim. No one sang praises of the three cities, and no one wanted to be there, but if being there meant a greater chance of survival, people would continue to stay and flock towards the area.

Everywhere else, so it seemed, did their best to remain hidden. Any sort of structure or settlement risked subjugation either by the Triumvirate itself or by some other group of marauders looking for a score. It was a dog-eat-dog world (hell, it was a man-eat-man world, too) and everyone was looking out for themselves if they couldn't afford discovery or growth. People had grown cynical, and rightly so. This world was no longer one for the do-gooders and the samaritans. Self-preservation was the name of the game.

Furiosa's overwhelming pessimism was almost enough to make her vomit. If they were going to find nothing in four days and be unable to sustain themselves after the rations ran out, they might as well be dead. They might as well be dead right now. No use in sticking around past due. She shivered inside the Buzzard's warm leathers and pulled the jacket closed, hoping to at least get some sleep.
before the day was out.

Max carried himself only a little bit better. *You've been here before,* he tried to tell himself, and it was true. He could probably count on his hands the number of times he hadn't been sure where he'd end up or when. However, that was some time ago. Months, if not years, by his own reckoning. Things had been different. People were still alive. He wasn't completely whole, but he had been better.

He'd never been in this position alone, though. Furiosa added a new component to the ordeal that made him want to tear out his hair and say *Oh shit, how am I going to keep us both alive? How am I going to keep her alive?* He could imagine it now, approaching the end of their rations. Someone would eat the last crumb, lick the last drop, and from there it was a waiting game to see who would drop dead first. Max did his best to shake the scenario out of his mind and focus on the present.

There was, of course, nothing for them in the present, either. The only thing to do was keep vigilant and have eyes out on the horizon at all times for something that might show itself. Max would even take a rock pillar, simply for its vantage point. Unfortunately, they left the bedrock crags some time ago, and it was empty sandscapes for the foreseeable future.

It wasn't long before the sun came down from the sky. Max finally conceded the driver's seat to Furiosa and settled back into the passenger seat with their meager rations. They both tucked in with a sigh, eating less and drinking less. The meal was almost savored. If they hardly thought about it, they could eat their new share in the blink of an eye.

Max might as well have, he figured. Making a show of the small meal did no favors and only kept the rations on his mind for longer than he needed. While he hadn't been a stranger to death rations, the boon of supplies from Bartertown spoiled him and made it that much worse to eat less. Eating less meant less energy, less nutrients, and an angrier stomach that did no favors, but the sooner he could accept the consequences, the better.

They continued their journey into the night. The full moon, at the very least, illuminated the world for them to go on safely. The flipside was that they could very well pass by a point of interest that they would have seen during the day. Anyone with half a brain would try to conceal themselves at night, and showing up *anywhere* past dark was a good way to get shot. It was another factor that he had yet again forgotten to consider. What should they value, distance made or visibility? They'd run out of gas before food, either way, and neither option looked particularly hopeful. With a sigh, he spoke up.

"Stop the car." Furiosa obliged, letting the Interceptor come to a halt before turning to him. Max let the words simmer in the back of his throat before speaking. "If we never stop driving, we see for four days and four nights. If we only drive during the day, we see for eight days. Can't hardly see or find anyone or anything at night. Especially if they don't want to be found."

The question was damn obvious, and it wasn't hard for Furiosa to pick up on. She let out her own sigh before dipping her head onto the steering wheel. It made easy sense, but *dammit dammit dammit* it was frustrating. They had already turned away from the mountain pass, but now they were going to forgo an expedient journey on the off-chance they'd actually find something. She knew what it would mean to only travel during the day, and she understood how dire the situation was, but it felt so much like shrinking away from the Green Place. It was her - *their* - ultimate goal. The only thing was, the only way they'd get there is to find some place else.

What would they find? *Who* would they find? Could they afford to trade? Would they even trade in the first place? And what would they want in exchange for some sixteen days of guzzolene? Max and Furiosa had traded their best away at Bartertown. They'd need to work for their share, or worse. She shivered and pushed the thought into the back of her mind. All that mattered right then was
making the decision of camping at night or going all out. Everything else could be figured out later.

"We'll stop," she conceded. Before allowing themselves to hunker down for the night, she crested a near-by dune for a final look-around for a better hiding spot. There were none to be found, of course. Furiosa came back down into the flat and shut off the engine. The SKS and a blanket came with her when she left to guard the area. Max watched her as she went back to the top of the dune, came back down to pace around the car, and eventually settled on its hood.

Max wouldn't bother her. Hell, he should probably just get her back inside. He had gotten along just fine without a guard when he had been alone, and with no-one and nowhere around them for many miles, setting up a patrol was useless and a waste of energy. They didn't need it, and neither of them needed the echo chamber of silence that came with it. He leaned forward and tapped on the windshield, beckoning her in once she turned around. “Don't need to if you don't want to. You can...” he shrugged towards the seat.

She knew she didn't need to accept his offer. Furiosa could very well take guard and in so many hours shake him awake to do his share, if he should so desire. It was less about the need for protection and more about the need to get out of the car. So many days of just sitting in the car, whether as the driver or passenger, had made the car somewhat claustrophobic. Sometimes, it was hard to think of the world beyond the Interceptor, and having the time to step out – which would only ever be at night, she had to assume – felt like a breath of fresh air.

Deciding that she hadn't quite had her break, she declined his offer and stayed outside. She knew very well that her thoughts could consume her, but for now it was better than staying inside the Interceptor. The War Rig, she fondly remembered, was rather open. Full bench seat in the back, spacious bucket seats, and a pleasant amount of organization. Max's car was near the opposite. The rear was almost buried in blankets and tools and containers and scrap, and the only things he had designated spots for were his guns. It didn't help at all that the cabin was almost criminally small, and she hardly had to move at all to touch him.

Furiosa stayed on the hood of the car until the engine's residual heat had left the metal. Her patrol continued from then, deciding to avoid what biting cold the metal could carry at night. She decided to pace along the crest of the near-by dune, back and forth until her legs took it over like clockwork. Body occupied, she let her mind find something to focus on. The present circumstances had taken enough attention, so she turned instead back to the Citadel. What's happened since that day in the Powder Lakes? How's Ace, how are the Wives? Did Joe buy the body double or did he see right through it? Is Furiosa dead to Joe, or is she still at the top of his hit list?

She hoped Ace and the Wives were okay. The boys, too, she remembered guiltily. They had fallen in line behind Ace, and she was thankful that they had. It showed that Joe's brainwashing was fallible. He wasn't the be-all, end-all that he was supposed to be. While only her crew had been punished, and it was no doubt a consequence of the punishments, it told her that it was possible to sway some War Boys – certainly not all, but some away from Joe's influence. Furiosa hoped with all her heart that Ace had the same thing in mind.

What she had heard of the Wives gave Furiosa no reason to believe they were doing any better. There was no doubt they were being punished, and there were only two ways Joe would punish them: rape, or being tossed down to the Wretched. It was hard to hope that neither had been happening, because either one would happen to them eventually. Ace spoke of one of the Wives being held out of the Biodome, Joe threatening to let her drop to the desert floor below. The idea enraged her, and was something she didn't want to see or hear about again.

It couldn't - wouldn't have been Angharad or Dag. They were both pregnant with his child. Cheedo
was his newest acquisition. He wouldn't toss her away so readily. Capable and Toast were the likely rebels against Joe, Capable with her words and resolve, and Toast with her will to fight. Furiosa smiled a bit, imagining Toast take down and kill Joe, who seemed nearly twice her height.

Miss Giddy entered her mind as well. What of Miss Giddy? Furiosa had been ready to leave her in the Vault with a shotgun once the Wives had been stowed away in the War Rig. She was another vocal opponent of Joe, knowing too much of history and politics and social theory to allow Joe to throw it all away. Miss Giddy was frail, but at times she shouted loudest among the Wives against the evil man who called himself their husband. It could have been her being held outside of the Biodome, and it was just as bad. There wasn't anything she could do now but hope and pray.

She remembered the concept of prayer. It was something many of the Vuvalini did, something she partook in herself until she was stolen away to the Citadel and her mother had died. The world, Furiosa thought, was long gone and their many prayers had gone unanswered by whoever was listening. Things had only gotten worse, and evil seemed to thrive in this world more than good.

Still, with thoughts of her allies on her mind, she figured it wouldn't hurt to offer one up to whoever might be listening. There was no... format. There was no ritual, no song and dance, no symbolism, just putting all her power into her words when she said, “Keep them safe,” and hoping that would be enough.

Furiosa's patrol continued until her legs were ready to give out from underneath her. Her attempt to return to the car quietly was futile; Max was quick to wake, though he quickly subdued himself and fell back into the seat. He moved to leave, but Furiosa offered him his own words. “You don't need to,” she assured him. “I did it because it was good for me.” Max was skeptical, but a sterner look set him at ease and he shuffled again to find some rest. Furiosa did the same, keeping the blanket tight around herself. With any luck, they really didn't need to patrol and they could sleep soundly. She frowned as she countered the idea with her next thought; they had been out of luck since the Hold. With a sigh, she resigned herself to sleep. At least any roadkill that would come across them would shoot her when she was out.
"You have a look again."

Chapter Summary

In which Max does, indeed, have a look again.

Sleeping came hard for the both of them. The reality of their situation only settled deeper into their minds, manifesting itself in the forms of dreams and nightmares of The Hold and The Green Place, re-surfacing the ghosts and memories of people they used to know and those they might never see again. Both Max and Furiosa had their turns of jolting awake, and the other was always there to set them at ease. It went on through the night, and they slowly closed the gap between them until the sun came up and they woke with their backs firmly pressed together. The intimacy didn't shake either of them; the night had left them more fatigued than rested, but they pressed on anyways into the southern lands.

It was easy to tell that getting through these days would be hard. Eight days of nothing but driving and looking at the horizon for a sign of something or someone or somewhere, all three of which seemed unlikely to find. They could very well drive themselves to death. There was nothing they could do about it, though. They were doing the very best they could. They were maximizing their possible exposure to settlements and people, and were going as far as they could until the guzz finally went dry, and were stretching the food out for as long as they could. Max and Furiosa needed more guzz, because without it, they certainly wouldn't make it to the Green Place alive.

He'd take a car. Oh, how he'd take on any wreckage that had even a drop of fuel, even if it had a most dastardly trap ready to set off from a hair-trigger. Max almost welcomed roadkill to come along and chase them. They'd have guzz and more, surely something to trade or fight with somewhere in their vehicle. The possibility of only running into peaceful parties passed through his mind, and he still wasn't sure if he'd leave them alone or not. His ghosts jeered at him for even considering running them down for their guzz, but damn it they needed it.

If Max and Furiosa were two and there was only one other, it would be okay, right? The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, right? It was justified, right? Right?

Mid-day came soon enough. Positions were switched and rations were doled out (and promptly inhaled). Max felt more at ease behind the wheel; it gave him something to occupy himself with. Shift up, shift down, careful on the accelerator, mind the path, watch the horizon. It was a goody-bag of ways to keep his mind out of the moral gutter he had allowed himself to delve into. He had always made an effort to defend the defenseless, and there he had been, considering doing the very thing he had tried to stop to the very people he had tried to protect. His ghosts were right to berate him for it. It was shameful.

His punishment, so it seemed, was to see and find nothing. They went on for hours until the sun set and the moon basked the wasteland in a shade of blue. The world was uniform in a worrying way that made them think they were going in circles. Max could tell they weren't thanks to his compass, but the lack of any sort of landmarks or defining feature was demoralizing. It projected the illusion of no progression, even though the last functioning odometer counter still managed to roll over. Limbo was the word that came to mind, and it stuck. Purgatory found itself a suiting label as well. It would
be here that they'd stay until the world made its decision of helping them or abandoning them to the sands to die. They had seven days now.

As per their decision last night, they stopped again. A final ring-around their area revealed nothing. They settled the car into a low point beneath the hills, and both moved to leave the vehicle. Furiosa had the same intentions from last night in mind, and Max had been tempted to do the same as her. As much as he loved the Interceptor, he needed a break from it. The world had shrunk, and the Interceptor had quickly become everything he had. Max needed to pretend he had more than that.

It made sense that, since they were both willing to stay up and mill about, they should rotate on guard. They had done it before, so why stop now? Well, last night, they had gotten along well for hours without the need for one. The only hints of human life they saw were those they left behind him. There was also the uncomfortable belief that if anything would happen to them, then it was only about time.

The Interceptor was left behind in favor of the outside world. Max and Furiosa both took blankets, weapons, and their rations with them, planning only on returning once there was nothing they wanted to do but sleep. He broke off from her as soon as the canteen was empty and made his way onto the top of the car. Looking up at the stars was always a fantastic escape. It was a great way to remind himself that there was *a lot more* to the world than miles of sand. The millions of stars soothed him and instilled him with the belief that maybe somewhere out there, everything was okay.

Furiosa walked her own walk, wearing a circular path into the dirt that winded around the car. It was tiring, yes, but that was half the point. The other half was that she was outside and stretching her legs. Their present situation only filled Max's car with dreadful monotony that even driving couldn't break. It was always in the same direction at the same speed with the same scenery. What fun the Interceptor had been, with its speed and size and handling, had been over-ridden, and she needed out.

The two took the few hours of night they had willingly spared and did their best to decompress. If they didn't need it, they certainly wanted it. At worst, the Interceptor felt like a cage. At best, it was an uncertain vessel that in seven days' time would deliver them to their fate. The longer they could keep their minds off it, the better. Fixating on it didn't do either of them any favors.

Furiosa returned to the car when her legs once again felt like rubber, removing her prosthesis along the way. Max promptly rolled off the roof and followed her in, knowing very well he could be outside for as long as he wanted. Truthfully, he was just fine with heading back in and settling in next to her. The proximity and the intimacy it brought frightened him, but it was welcome all the same. It was a comfort that reminded him that he wasn't alone, and that she was there, and it sure as hell was better than facing the night alone.

The two of them settled in for the night, backs to each other. They spared themselves the effort of inching closer in the deep night and instead closed the already small distance between them until their bodies were pressed together. The shared warmth was a plus, considering the dropping temperature. Max was thankful that it was only Spring, though with a harsh post-nuclear Summer ahead of them, they'd need a lot more than *this* to keep warm - if they were to last that long.

He sighed and settled into the seat to get what sleep would come to him, feeling Furiosa do the same. It was getting easier for Max to admit to himself that he enjoyed the company. She brought with her a warmth that warded off his ghosts, and good company that memories couldn't rival. She brought the reliability of an ally, despite his initial reluctance to accept her as one. The harsh words he served her those few days ago outside of the Highlands came back to mind, and became another weight on his chest. Furiosa didn't deserve to hear that, even if it *was* his measly excuse for exposing the both
of them to unnecessary risk. Max almost let out an apology right then and there, but the words dried up in his mouth and he kept silent. It could wait. Tomorrow.

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Tomorrow came soon enough. Their dreams were dark and murky, but still infused with themes of guilt and hopelessness. Neither of them had woke, only settling deeper into the seat and closer against the other. Through some miracle, they only rose at the crack of dawn. They only allotted themselves a small break for rations and a quick stretch before getting back on the road.

The silence between them was growing louder. While the both of them had been comfortable with what few words were shared, and neither of them could think of anything to say, it felt weird to stay quiet. Maybe it was because they didn't know much each other - no, it was definitely because they didn't know much each other. It didn't help that the deadline of six days to find fuel loomed over their heads. They could starve to death together as near-absolute strangers. Even though sharing stories hardly mattered if they both perished, it still seemed better just to know.

Max's mouth ran dry again. He hadn't made an effort at honest conversation in years. What should he ask? What could he ask? What she told the War Boys and what she spoke of the Green Place was all he knew of her. On the flip-side of the coin, what he told her in that day past the Highlands was all she knew of him. The shared information was critical to the situation's context, but it was hardly anything for either person to use as a proper gauge of the other. What was out of bounds? What would make her shrink away instead of - well, not necessarily warm up, but keep things alright, at the very least? Start simple, he told himself, but there was hardly anything simple about the world for them to meaningfully discuss.

“You have a look again.” Furiosa had been observing him, being only marginally more interesting than the flat horizon. Max's usually relaxed posture and face (well, as much as they could be given the circumstances) had turned rigid and concerned, not unlike how she had seen him the day after The Hold was discovered and promptly abandoned. He turned his head to look at her, but focused his attention away from her again, having apparently nothing to say. “What're you thinking?” she decided to ask him, unsure if it was alright to ask at all. Think too much, she remembered him replying to her. Maybe she didn't want to know.

Apologize, was what came to mind. Max's final fleeting thoughts before falling asleep returned in full force, flinging themselves ahead of the need for small talk. She deserved an apology for what he had told her, no matter what she thought of it. For all he knew, that's what she could be thinking. The words almost didn't come out of his mouth.

“You... I called you a burden. Before The Hold.” Physically, mentally, and emotionally, she introduced something to his world that he did not need or want. She complicated damn near everything, from supplies to travel to relations with Bartertown (damn, damn, damn that guard, he couldn't help but think) and forced him to scrutinize everything he usually did to consider how she'd fit into the equation. Furiosa came into his world too much like Hope had, reminded him of relationships and people destroyed due to his own foolishness. And he told her that. “Didn't deserve to hear that. Can't pretend to... know if you think that of yourself, but it wasn't right to tell you. 'm sorry.” Max's nervous thumbs wore into the leather of the steering wheel.

Furiosa listened to him speak, words very nearly incomprehensible as his volume shrank to nothing but a rumbling bass. She had thought of herself as a burden from day one, especially before they had their confrontation with the Buzzards and Ace on the Powder Lakes. Hearing him say it for himself after they had conquered the Highlands didn't do any favors; Max did it all to save himself. She had been thankful, yes, but he was ready to clean his hands of anything to do with her once they got to
The Hold.

The Hold, of course, was an ordeal of its own. The closest thing to what Max could call home was destroyed, and in turn, the chance to even find one for herself was gone. Focusing on the need to find somewhere – anywhere – that they could find for rest, trade, shelter quickly overcame the idea of fretting over whether or not she was a burden. They were suddenly cast into the same position of knowing of and having nowhere else to go, barring the Green Place. Still, they continued down the path of hopelessness. The Rock Riders’ pass would be closed to them, and the only option they had was to ride around the mountains with less supplies than it would take. Dying was, once again, a very real possibility.

Was Furiosa over the burden thing? She was certainly more understanding of it, no matter how callous it had been in the moment. He had a very real affliction that she only accentuated, something that was either always on the brink of being brought to the surface, or being absolutely overcome. It was brought on by no fault of his own; the human mind was complex and in many ways was separated from the walking talking consciousness. Max didn't want to have that state of mind, and she couldn't blame him for wanting to keep out of it.

It was better to be over it. Neither of them could afford to hang on to the concept of being a burden when the circumstances were too dire to focus on much of anything else. It would only complicate their interactions. Max at least reached out with an apology, if not to sincerely repent for what he had done, then to simply put it behind them. She was more inclined to believe the former. "It's okay," she replied. "I can't pretend any of this has been easy, especially now. I..." Furiosa let out a sigh. "I understand, and it's okay." She decided to say nothing else of it; it wasn't something they needed to keep on their minds.

If her response set Max at ease, she couldn't tell. There was still a look on his face. "Is that all you want to talk about?" She took the risk of pushing him further, even though she had no right to. Curiosity was the only excuse she had, besides caring - no, worrying about what he was thinking. There was predence set to worry about what was going on in his mind, but engaging him about it wasn't something she was sure she should do.

"Ah, it's... hrm." Max still wore dimples into the steering wheel's leather. She had called him out on it before he could think about it himself. He was on the spot. It was too easy to dismiss as thinking too much, and there was a good possibility of it going somewhere that neither of them wanted to go. "It's stupid," he decided to warn, but Furiosa waved it off.

"I've been surrounded by War Boys for seven thousand days and I've heard some really stupid stuff. It can't be that bad.”

It was a small relief for Max to hear that, though he was still conflicted. He always expected and planned for the worst, but what could go wrong with such a simple, well-meaning conversation? With no certain thought of how she would react, and deciding that waiting wouldn't any favors, he sighed. "It's... odd to have been through what we have and to not – to know nothing. About each other. And with... the days in front of us. Being strangers, seems weird.”

That was your build-up? Furiosa almost asked, but didn't want to belittle him. Max had always been uneasy about opening up. The second day they were together, he disregarded the need for her name, and when they left the Highlands, he struggled to reveal his reasoning for his actions and urgency. He had wanted nothing to do with her, but he was here now and wanted to know, and there wasn't any harm to be had in knowing more about each other. "So what do you want to know?"

"Don't, uh... don't know where to start, 's been years," Max admitted with a nervous chuckle. "Don't know what not to ask."
"Well, you know where all great stories begin, right?"

"Hm?"

"In the beginning."
They took the better part of the day to relay what stories about themselves that they would. Furiosa was first to recall her history. Memories of the Green Place came fondly and as if they were still fresh in her mind - not necessarily what. She spoke of her family, her clan, her people. She spoke of the land and its lush flora, the fruits and flowers that seemed to go on forever. There was, of course, a day when she was stolen away from it all, and the times that followed were shortly spoken of.

Furiosa made sure there was no mistaking that, at any point, she enjoyed her time at the Citadel. The investigation of her person, the initiation into the War Boy caste, and the non-stop fight to prove herself and even keep alive were only the start. Her rise into power became an issue of its own. There were perks to being an Imperator, but they came at a cost. Do this, do that, run down these guys, shred the others - everything that Joe wanted done was done, and there was no arguing.

She told him how many times she tried to escape. There was always an obstacle, whether it be Buzzards, the Rock Riders, or the War Boys themselves. Furiosa had never been able to get her hands on a pursuit vehicle, one that was built to go hard and fast with a canister of nitrous hooked into the engine. It was always a war machine, built to be stocky and armored and weaponized. It was heavy and slow, the absolute anti-thesis of the vehicles that ran her down.

But then there was the War Rig. After so many hundreds of days, Furiosa had kept subservient and untrusting of the might of the Citadel. She had put a great effort into winning over Joe in order to build trust and make him complacent and unexpecting of any true attempt to escape again. The effort was so successful, in fact, that Joe decided to gift her the position of driver of the War Rig. It was a coveted role among many of his followers. The driver had prestige, status, extra rations, and best of all, the War Rig's steering wheel.

"It had to be all or nothing," she spoke about her decidedly last escape attempt. "Everything had to be planned right, timed right, done right, because if I failed, there would be no other time. Stealing away the War Rig meant I was stealing their only way to trade, and the second I turn away from the road between the towns is the second I lose all of his trust." Furiosa had planned a handful of attempts, but each one fell through, whether it be because of a freak engine accident or a cancelled trade. The absolute last attempt was due some hundreds of days after the last plan went bust - Why? asked Max - because the Wives had convinced her to let them come with her.

She spoke of the Wives for some time. The five women had come to hold a special place in her heart, and it wasn't hard at all for her to conjure descriptions and details and stories of them that mesmerized her. "Beautiful," she offered the word to describe them, though it went deeper than their looks. They all shined as individuals, all clearly so much more than what Joe would have them as. They reminded her of home, of the Vuvalini, of her own family out east, so when they asked to come with her, she could never say no.

The plan was to keep them in the rig's hold, take them down when neither Joe nor Organic were expected to make a visit any time soon. She'd run the rig as usual, taking them halfway down the Last Road. Lose the crew in the sandstorm. Block the mountain pass. Make it home. That was the plan.

Furiosa didn't know what happened, didn't know how he found out. There had only been the sound of Immortan Joe over the loudspeaker system that was embedded into the tower - *BRING FURIOUSA*
TO ME! - and she ran. The Rig was of no use in the high garage. She had her wheel, though - thank the Many Mothers, I had my wheel - with which she got into the nearest car and drove like a bat out of hell.

The car launched out of a hole close to the desert floor and she drove as fast as she could. She’d go west to the Powder Lakes, worming her way around until she could get to Bartertown - I didn't even have a disguise - and then maybe hugging the mountains until she could reach the pass, but even that plan was not good enough for the powers that be. She could see a trail of oil behind her, could hear a belt sputter in the engine compartment. The temperature was rising to a critical level. Furiosa got as far as she would dare, and ditched the vehicle. "Then I saw you. And the rest is history."

It was quite a bit for Max to take in, though it did put many things into perspective. He appreciated it, as it left little to the imagination. It allowed a greater understanding of her and a better insight into everything that she had done and said. There was no doubt she would want the same from him.

"What about you?"

He hummed as if she asked on cue. "Can you drive?"

- - -

"Grew up when the world was starting to go to shit. Your people got out while the getting was good. The cities, the towns... nothing was quite right. Everyone pretending everything was okay when there was a war going on half the world away that was only getting worse. Didn't even finish secondary school." That wasn't to say, of course, that his learning stopped there; he intensified his learning of vehicle mechanics and found himself reading up on rudimentary survival techniques. Just in case.

The government hadn't put a moratorium on education, but many parents were pulling their kids out of schools and just... going. It was something that the kids would ask about and the adults would kind of look down at them and smile with an odd twinkle in their eye and brush it off. They didn't need to know what was happening.

The world collapsed. Infrastructure crumbled, militaries came and went, and governments fell apart. Canada and the USSR were big ones, splitting leadership between states and regions (he heard stories of genocide happening throughout the latter). The United States was another; Texas seceded and nuthead militias across the country took the circumstances as a sign for the end times, and used the opportunity to raise hell wherever they operated. Australia fell apart as well, but Max was recruited to help keep it together.

"I became a cop. Worked for what was left of the government that wanted to protect what was left of the country. Main Force Patrol. Highwaymen meant to protect and serve, look out for gangs, troublemakers." He swallowed hard and continued. "Had a wife, Jessie. Had a boy, Solomon. Called 'im Sprog most the time, nick-name. He was..." He was one.

"There was a man named Toecutter. Led a biker gang, gone all up and down the highway, doing... just about everything. MFP got involved. Had a good friend, Goose, we arrested Toecutter's lieutenant, but he was let free. They remembered Goose. Ambushed him. Set him on fire." Shivers ran down his spine as his mind set him back in the sterile hospital room. Max could see his shadow against the sheets, could hear the machines pumping air and blood and painkillers. He could see himself lift away the veil and see - that's not Goose. "They found Jessie and my boy. Ran them down."

"I killed them all." The words stopped coming. Despite one, two, three drinks from the canteen, his
mouth felt like cotton. He could see the others in the mirrors, floating and keeping up with the car, if not getting closer. What about us, Max? He shivered again and looked down into the floor of the car, pulling into himself. Maybe it hadn't been a wise idea to trade stories - at least his own.

Furiosa didn't push it. If that was all she learned, then that was all she learned. Max had made the effort and that was all that mattered. It was common knowledge between them that he had very dark days behind him, and exorcising his demons seemed impossible. She had no idea where they'd even start, had no idea what she'd say. Repressing his past wasn't healthy, but if that was what kept him going, then that might be all he could do.

The last few hours left in the day went by without a word. As they continued their journey south, they left behind the sand plains and came into a more uneven landscape. The land rose and fell, pockmarked with what Max was sure were craters from long ago and highlighted by steep crags that stuck out of the earth like thorns. While he appreciate the break of monotony, the landscape made him fall into an unease. It was still open, far more open than the Highlands, but there were many more places for others to hide and creep up on them from than in the open sands. Max was tempted to climb to the top of one of the peaks, but he knew that anything or anyone he saw would surely see him.

“We go back on guard,” Max spoke, “unless we find somewhere to hide for the night.” Furiosa agreed. If it were any earlier in the day, she would have happily tried to make as much progress into the area as possible, but it was too late for that. She used what light was left in the sky and did her best to find a hole to park in, or at least find some defendable position. It couldn't be anywhere too high or too low. There needed to be two, three, four ways out of any encampment they settled into. There needed to be natural cover, anything to give them advantage over anyone else. There needed to be -

Perfect.

There was a deep overhang tucked away from the beaten path. The geometry of the world camouflaged it well enough to hide in plain sight from a car going fifty, sixty-some miles an hour. After sweeping and clearing the location, they backed the Interceptor in - and it fit perfectly - and settled in for the night.

The evening's puny rations were distributed and promptly consumed to put the idea of food behind them; the water went down the same. Tarps were produced from the rear to obscure the entrance. “Not too far out,” Max warned. While the cloth and canvas sheets were dyed the same dusty red-brown of the earth, they were flat and stood out against the texture of the world. They tucked the tarps into cracks that were a manner of yards inside the cave. At the very least, it would prevent passersby from seeing the black vehicle and provide a security blanket for the pair.

They still sat in the car, quiet as though they were back in the Highlands. Their guns were positioned much the same, loaded and tucked close within reach. Furiosa and Max grew close together again as the need for rest - or at least the opportunity for some - made itself evident. They shuffled in their seats until their backs met, and that was all they offered each other before trying to get some sleep.

As always, it came with a price. Muddy stormy dreams clouded their minds and plagued them with an itch to move that made them press against and pull away from the other. One would wake when the other would disturb the peace enough to be a cause for concern, getting them to stop or come here and tuck back in again. Whenever they finally broke the threshold of deep sleep, something was there to make them come out of it, and it never got any better.

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It was early when Max woke. There was a blinding light at the entrance of the overhang that drowned out finer details and forced him to squint. Beside him, Furiosa woke and tensed up. He could hear her go for the gun, and then a muffled voice:

"Don't move."

Max looked behind him to the passenger window and saw another smaller light attached to the end of a rifle barrel. *Oh shit.* Furiosa's head turned, eyes passing over Max to his own window. He followed her gaze to find a matching light pointing right at him, gun trained between his eyes.

*This is it.*

Chapter End Notes

cliffhangers all around!

I'll go ahead and say this - if it wasn't already clear, this chapter was where I got held up. I had absolutely no idea where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do. I have the *absolute end* in mind and several things leading up to that end, but I was caught trying to figure out what to do to get there. I wrote four paragraphs and put it down for a while, but the rest is me knowing where this story is going, and the next few chapters is the story getting there.
Two more men came into the tunnel, one to either side of the car. Max could see they were armed as well. Together, they opened the doors to the vehicle, offering a single command: “Out.”

The two of them were hesitant to leave, though they knew there wasn't anything else that they could do. Car? Dead before the engine turned over. Guns? Dead before they could get them in their hands. Run? Dead before they were out of the cave. Their pupils finally contracted in the light, and in turn it grew softer and let more details come through. It was a mobile spotlight, built onto the back of a car, and next to it was a towing truck. Two drivers for sure, plus three more goons waiting for them outside. Nine in all – or more. It was an organized outfit.

Max moved first, and Furiosa followed. As soon as he was out of the car, the door was slammed shut and he was pushed ahead. The same was done to Furiosa, and the both of them were herded out into the open. Behind them, the truck backed into the cave to hook onto the Interceptor, and the spotlight was killed. Kicks to the back of their knees brought them down, earning a groan out of Max as the knob in his knee bent more than it should.

“Arms out,” was the next command. Max could see six men surrounding them, all armed and ready to fire – and beyond them was a third vehicle. The risk just wasn't something he was willing to play with; if they were without weapons, it would be a different story. For now, he'd play along. His arms went out, and Furiosa's went as well. Shackles came down swiftly on Max, but the man paused in Furiosa. "What's this?" he grabbed her left arm and pushed up the sleeve, and his suspicions were confirmed: prosthetic. "Very nice. Jacket off."

"You don't need to-" she began and was promptly cut off.

"Hush, cunt, jacket off."

"Who the fuck-" She was silenced by a blast from the man's gun.

"Fuckin' hell, who taught you to speak up against a man with a gun?"

The shot to her sternum knocked her back and away from Max. Time slowed to a halt. When she fell, he almost went right down with her. Dead dead dead. He could see her become everyone that was gone before their time, gone because it was his fault, could see her watching him already. His head felt light; he could feel something inside of him pulling up and out as he watched them handle Furiosa, something that told him that if he didn't act now, she'd be with him for as long as he lived.

He launched up from his position on his knees, aiming to tackle the man over Furiosa, but another shot took him right down with her.

It sucked the breath right out of him, rolling through his chest like a shockwave. His hands came up
to his aching ribs, expecting to feel hot blood running out of him. Instead, there was nothing but a tender welt on his stomach. Not dead.

The same man that shackled Max stood over him with a smile. “Don't worry, your girlfriend's not dead. Less-than-lethal!” He held out a rubber bullet as big as his thumb. “Rubber rounds! Hurt, don't it? Well, could be worse. We don't plan on using many more of them, so you might not be so lucky next time. Might just use this...” The rubber bullet disappeared in favor of a shotgun shell – a solid slug. “Leave a gaping hole in ya. Hey Johnboy!”

“Yeah?” replied another man that Max couldn't move to see.

“She disarmed?” His shit-eating grin grew at his own joke.

“Yeah, shit's in the car.”

“Good. Your turn,” the man spoke before lifting Max onto his feet. The action pulled again at his gnarled joint, and he let out an even more pitiful sound as his leg righted itself. With rifles at the edge of his vision, he complied with the man's warning to stay still as he was searched. Max was relieved of his knives and various effects, all of them gathered to and dumped in the spotlight car. He could see Furiosa standing in wait, jacketless, armless - sight for sore eyes - held tightly by the wrist by who had to be Johnboy. He was almost afraid to meet her gaze and betray what either of them were feeling. Guilt, shock, blame – hell, even grief at any and all seven stages.

The truck came out of the overhang and pulled onto the dirt path. Max could hear the men whistle and woo over the car - my car - and he didn't dare speak a word. They plied through the salvage in the rear compartment but removed nothing. “We can sort it out once we're back,” one of the suggested. Back? Where is Back? He could see the same question appear in Furiosa's eyes.

The both of them were led to the truck, pushed onto the bed that was half occupied by the towing winch. Twin raised poles of metal tubes had been welded onto the truck's frame, running from the cab to the tailgate, and it was what they were attached to. Max's shackles were simply chained onto the tube, while Furiosa's sole arm was tethered directly to it. “It's not like she can do anything with that,” they poked fun at her incomplete limb, and she was tempted to show them the exact opposite. Instead, she let them bind her to the truck and remained complacent with their orders.

Their captors broke away and returned to their vehicles, all but one who was ensuring the connection between the Interceptor and the truck. It was a silly question to ask, but Max figured he didn't have much to lose. “Why keep us alive?”

The man paused and looked up at Max with false disbelief as if he ought to know. “Well, for the show, of course!” That was all he revealed before disappearing into the truck and left Max and Furiosa to simmer in the rear.

“The show,” she echoed as she tucked her free arm against her chest, rubbing at the spot she had been shot. "What fucking show?"

"Only show worth showing - a killing," Max answered as he shuffled around along the bar, settling behind Furiosa. There wasn't anything he could think of saying that would comfort her; hell, he couldn't even settle his own self down. He had been in this position before, yes, but it was different now. These guys were ready for them. They had not only the manpower, but the weaponry and the vehicles to back it all up. He had no doubt there'd be more where this came from wherever they were headed, and he wasn’t sure if he’d manage to get away this time.

The convoy got underway with a signal from the spotlight car; the second car followed with the tow
truck in the rear. Whatever path they were taking was different from the one Max and Furiosa had taken in the late afternoon, and he had no idea where it would lead them to. It had been some time since Max last looked at his compass, which meant that his only bearing would be the rising of the sun - if he were to see it again.

Their captors moved through the area with some urgency as if they were the ones being pursued. The cars ahead of them moved faster than the towing truck could keep up; it didn’t want to lose its cargo in any of the hard turns where falls awaited those who couldn’t stay the path. Still, they never lost sight of those ahead of them, and eventually fell back into line as the trail steadied itself.

Each curve and bump in the road only did more to swell the lump in Max’s throat. No amount of swallowing would bed it down, no amount of breathing would steady himself. Hell, it only made it worse. There was an innate, unshakeable horror that came with the possibility of his death coming to pass, and there was no alleviating it until the moment of truth. When it would come, he didn’t know, but judging by what he could see, it was getting closer.

There was a thin rock spire a thousand feet out, pointing out from above the steep earthen wall that the convoy was travelling alongside. He could tell there was something - someone - up at its peak. The familiar glint of light off of glass was enough to betray the position of a sniper, though it was likely that he didn’t care to be hidden. From that small pocket in the tower, he could make out a line, whether it be rope or wire, trail out and down into - well, whatever it was, he’d find out soon. Max could see that the path ahead rose out from behind the berm.

When they finally crested the hill, Max wished that he was a million miles away.

It was impossible to miss. The walls had to be ten, twelve feet tall, made of sheet metal and tires, stretching out for what had to be near 200 feet across. It was a fortress for sure, and he could see the corpses and burnt out cars of those who had failed in their attempts to attack it. Panels had been shorn off the vehicles and plastered onto the wall to buff their defense. He could make out silhouettes of guards patrolling above the barrier, and they were starting to notice the returning party.

The cars were quick to slow to a near-halt. Ahead of them, the spotlight flashed a message to the compound in what had to be morse code. You’re not the only people who can see it, idiots. Max had no idea why in the world they’d risk using a fucking spotlight of all things as a signal - it was visible for miles, especially at night. But why do you care? he asked himself. If all goes right, you’ll be dead before anyone else can come calling. There was no more swallowing against the lump in his throat. Max spat out of the truck-bed as they got back under way and approached the fortress.

The gate opened for them, even as they were some hundreds of feet out. Their captors quickly closed the distance, though, passing by the remnants of the last failed siege until they were through the threshold. Max and Furiosa could see the guards in finer detail on the approach. Gun, gun... thunderpoon, he took stock of their weaponry and huffed as his prediction was confirmed - armed to the teeth.

Once the lot were in, the gate was closed to avoid giving anyone or anything the opportunity to sneak in. As if to confirm that nothing had, the lights in the compound turned on and rolled out across the confined space. It was a mix of harsh white and warm yellow bulbs that lit a path down the middle, with countless others placed out and around -

I know that building. There was a large shack sloped against the wall to the truck’s right - yes, it had to be. Max could see the same emblem painted in clay on the front panel, could make out the patch plastered on after a shotgun’s misfire through the sheet metal. He shook at the sight, hardly having to look elsewhere for smaller homes that he knew were from those precious settlements that not five days ago they left in ruin.
They took them. They took their flesh and they took their homes to use as their own and now they’re going to take - his mind blanked as his stomach finally lurched and tried to empty itself. The retching was enough to catch the attention of someone in the truck -

“Puke in the back and you’ll clean it with your mouth.”

“He can clean it anyway!” came a response with a laugh

- and he ignored it. Even Furiosa’s words fell on deaf ears. His head rumbled with each heartbeat and each convulsion until he thought his brain would follow the vomit out. It was the only response his body could offer up to the revelation that this was it.

This was what he had been trying to run from. This was what he was trying to find peace from, what he wanted to relegate to the past and to those lone mourning thoughts he had that night after the Hold was found. Instead of leaving it behind, Max found himself thrust right into the center of it with no chance of escape. If they had managed to kill a hundred people some hundreds of miles away, what could they do to two people in the middle of their home? Anything.

The convoy stopped in the middle of the compound. Max and Furiosa were unshackled, him held tightly by the collar of his jacket and her having her arm twisted around her back in a chicken-wing hold. Together, they were guided forward by five of the men; the others left or returned their vehicles to the lot. The two of them couldn’t do anything but walk and look. He felt like a lamb being sent to the slaughterhouse, and this time it was hardly a metaphor.

People began to come out of the woodwork. Shacks and shanties and lean-tos were emptied as the populace came to investigate the late-night arrival. He could see them in the light, men, women, and children - oh God, kids, they feed the kids... - and each one did their best to burn holes through them. Max didn’t think much of it, probably some desensitizing thing they did to separate the human from the livestock. Still, the more he looked at him, and the more they stared back, he couldn’t help but think I recognize those faces. It sent his mind into a panic to see and recognize more and more of them. Where else would he know them from but the Hold and the settlements that laid within its territory?

Every second, every third person, he could recognize. Max knew that man with the eyepatch - a stern but fair trader. He knew that woman and her children - only mother I haven’t let down yet - he had helped her trade for a blanket to warm her younglings. He knew that boy with too few fingers - despite his disability, he was a master of sleight-of-hand, opting to use it for show instead of theft. There were many more familiar faces without stories, only learned by repeated exposure - but why were any of them here?

They corralled them here, nothing better than fresh meat, one train of thought declared, but there another theory emerged that made much more sense. No, they wouldn’t bring their homes, wouldn’t bother to do anything but fence them in. These people are living here, they’re refugees, they’re alive and they’re safe. They’re SAFE.

No, they’re not. Did you not see the cars, the bodies outside the walls? They’ve been under siege. They made it here, but they were followed - Max thought back to the car that he and Furiosa encountered on their way to the mountains - was it their handiwork? - and their attackers still threaten them. And they think you’re two of them.

That’s what you get for not giving them a reason to remember. Blood drained from his face. His feet stumbled and his hands shook as everything finally set into place. It was the ultimate irony that his mechanism of protection and self-containment would be his downfall. Hers, too! a voice reminded him of Furiosa trudging along right beside him. He had to do something. There had to be someone -
“Hey… hey, wait-” Max turned away from the path, but one of the escorts shut him down with a stiff gut-shot with the stock of his rifle. The shock of it all was enough to keep him on the ground, but arms came underneath his shoulders to start dragging him along.

“Why don’t we just get it over with now?” asked one man at his side.

“Because he wants it done in the morning. See if anyone comes around, we can make an example,” the other answered, shifting his hold on Max.

He was facing backwards now, though he knew he was being led into a building. Furiosa was ahead of Max; he could hear the quiet struggle in the scuffle of their boots as they stopped before the entrance. There was nothing for him to do but look out at the people that were looking back at them and try to instill some nonverbal thought in their mind - remember me! The words that came out of his mouth were barely breaths, unregistered by even his own ears. He stopped trying.

A peculiar sound came from somewhere to his right - somewhere out and above. Max hardly had to move to see a shadow of a man descend on a rope from the rock spire he had spotted earlier. Zipline. The sniper came to a clumsy halt at the other end of the compound as he collided with the stopper, disengaging well enough from his harness. His gaze was focused on the lot of cars where the convoy had ended up, though it eventually shifted to stare down at Max. Max could hear the door open behind him, feel the men tug at him again to bring him in, but before he disappeared inside the building, he stared right back at the man, and if his gut was right, that man was the only one that knew him.

His mouth opened, whether to whisper or to scream he didn’t know, but before anything could come out, the men pressed him down onto the ground. One man to each shoulder, another man at his feet, and fourth to unbind his hands. As soon as the cuffs were off, a final heave launched him into the back of the room. Max fell with a groan, twitching away when another hand - Furiosa’s - reached out to touch him. He made an effort to steady himself with an arm, but he was barely able to sit up before something slammed shut in front of him. Bars, bars, prison cell, he was able to make sense of it before one of the men spoke up - the same that tied them up in the first place. “Try not to have too much fun! Or do. It’s the last you’ll have, that’s for sure,” he chuckled before killing the lights and leaving, closing the outer door. “Lights low, lights low!” Max could hear him call outside, no doubt to urge the community back into the blackout it had observed before they arrived.

With that, they were left alone in the dark with nothing to do but wait.

Actually, there were many things they could do. They could sleep. Cry. Think about how they’d die. Would they be shot? Hanged? Crucified for the world to see and for the crows to peck clean? In any circumstance, there was little to help them. If the compound’s attackers appeared, they’d no doubt say that Max and Furiosa were not their people. Their captors would no doubt treat it like a bluff and kill them anyways.

They could always do their damndest to hang themselves with what they had, slit their wrists on the rusty sheet metal before the men outside determined their fate. He could pretend to go out on his own terms, though his death would come soon either way. If escape was an option, he would be on his way out as fast as his body would let him, but once again, Furiosa was the complicating factor. He could account for himself, but what about her? She was down an arm. She was another human to immediately, spatially consider in terms of how to hide and remove. Max had always escaped by the skin of his teeth, but with Furiosa either hot on his heels or urged on in front of them, the chances of getting caught (and punished) were too great.
The word liability was hot on his lips but he swallowed it. Was she a liability? Yes. Are there things that he would have tried if she wasn’t there? Hell yes. Grab a gun, take a shot, try to peel out of that God-damn cave as fast as his car would go. Elbow a man, take his rifle and hold him at gunpoint, get himself ahead of the game. Find a loose panel in their prison cell and press it loose, climb over the wall when no one was looking. Then again, if Furiosa wasn’t there, he probably wouldn’t be here.

It was enough to make him want to pound his fists into the dirt and scream because this was something else that wouldn’t have happened if they hadn’t met. Max could count on his hands the number of times that he absorbed himself in that fact and had bile rise in his throat, ready to launch it Furiosa’s way. Each time, he calmed himself down because he knew that it wasn’t her fault. He shared blame, to be fair. He pushed her into the car instead of pulling her out or shooting her. Helped her at Bartertown. Chose - multiple times - to do his damndest to take her to where she’d be safer, whether it was to the near Hold or the far-away Green Place.

It didn’t help that he did his own part in putting them in dangerous situations. He drove them through the middle of the Powder Lakes, took them through the Highlands, convinced her to drive only during the day instead of constantly. The two former were done in the face of potential (and fully realized) danger for the sake of expediency, and held much more weight for it. It was Max, by far, who was constantly putting them at risk, and on purpose.

Furiosa hadn’t been the one behind the wheel, had hardly been the person in power. She had explained her situation and the risks that came with going forward, but it was Max, Max, Max who gave the okay and made everything happen. If anything, it was his fault. Furiosa, for the most part, was just there - to target her for her sheer existence was wrong. There was no excuse; perhaps he had just been glad that he found someone else to blame besides himself.

Blame was nothing that would help them now. Blame wouldn’t open the doors and set them free. Blame wouldn’t keep them alive. Nothing would, barring some divine intervention - but if his past was anything to go off of, then he had no reason to expect it. There was - was - that one man that Max could only admit had looked at him funny, but where was he now? What was he doing? By all means, he could have easily misread his face; it wasn’t as though he had much experience with humans to go off of, anyways.

For all intents and purposes, they were alone. They would be alone until morning came and they were fetched to be killed. It could be minutes or it could be hours, and he didn’t know which option was worse. His mind turned again to ending his life before they could. Why not deprive them of what they wanted? He doubted that they’d listen to their case. The only court in the wasteland was a kangaroo court that had already made up their minds, and was only held for show. It didn’t matter that there were people out there that he knew had seen him before; what did matter was that the people running the show hadn’t, and they were the ones with guns.

The thought of suicide disappeared from his mind when Furiosa moved and reminded him that she was there, too. Leaving her to face it alone felt wrong. It was... hell, he didn’t know, but to leave her alone in the dark and to face her fate outside just wasn’t right. Still, it wasn’t as though he could protect her. It wasn’t as though she needed him. It wasn’t as though it mattered in the long run, but if it made things a little bit better, then he’d stick around for a little while.

When Furiosa reached out and touched his hand, he nearly jumped out of his skin. The move hadn’t been telegraphed at all (then again, a pitch-black room would be hard pressed to make much of anything predictable). Max was almost inclined to pull away and take it all back - he couldn’t handle this, wouldn’t stand to suffer for as long as they’d keep them in the room - but he didn’t pull away. Instead, he reached out for her in response. He could hear her move closer, felt her hand come up to his shoulder, and his hands went out in kind to find her until they had pulled each other close enough
to feel the other’s heart beat out of their chests and hear each breath chase the last out of their body.

“Max?” He shivered hard enough that he knew she felt it. Into his name, she put everything - all of her questions, all of her hope, all of what she felt and thought and knew of what would happen. What could he say? What was there to say? Max had no idea but pulled her tighter against him anyways, and felt her do the same. “Furiosa,” was his only response, and he could feel her shake in much the same way.

He could feel the seconds form into minutes and could tell they were racking up faster than he’d like them to. The passing of time meant that the moment of their demise was growing closer, and it was almost enough to make Max want to squeeze her tighter. A sigh escaped him when he realized he couldn’t deny it anymore. This felt good. This, holding her and her holding him, even closer than that night beyond the Hold. He knew the circumstances had driven them to this point, but he didn’t care, and it wasn’t worth pretending other. It was warm, it was comforting, and it was a hell of a lot better to chase a human than to run away from ghosts.

In her arms, he felt at home, and he had never been so afraid.
At some point, they pulled away from each other - if not for the unbearable heat of two close bodies, then for the need for room to breathe. It was comforting, and it had been cathartic, but it was exhausting, enough so that he feared drifting off and being jolted awake by the slamming open of the door. Then again, was maintaining the suspense worth it? Well, it was if Furiosa wanted something else - anything else. It wasn’t as though dying tired would make any difference.

They ended up leaning against what he guessed was the back wall, shoulders pressed tight together, his hand in hers, their knees tapping against each other. He was half-tempted to return to her lap again and take in as much of her warmth as he could but it was... the moment had passed. Their minds turned to other things. There was no escaping the fact that they were waiting for the men outside to make their move. Max had found himself absorbed in the anxiety that they could come at any moment and they wouldn’t know when. He knew there’d be no steeling himself.

“What happens now?” Furiosa asked him. What was he supposed to say, ”We wait”? “We go out there and let them kill us”? Of course not, but Max felt like that was exactly what he was doing. What else was there to do?

“There’s people from the Hold out there. Good people. I remember them but they don’t remember me. They think we’re part of whoever’s attacking them.”

“Well, you know we aren’t.”

“I know, but they don’t.”

“Why not try to explain to them?”

“Because they’re out for blood.” He’d seen it before, even in the Old World. When people were being harassed and attacked, they wanted justice, and if they couldn’t get justice, then they were either provided a scapegoat or took what they could get. Max had seen the aftermath of lynchings and mob justice coming out of towns that had once been peaceful. People suddenly had guns, suddenly became well-versed in the deconstruction of a human being. Churchgoers became executioners. There were some guilty people, yes, but the vast majority of the victims of this so-called justice were very much innocent. “They want to feel like they finally got one up on them.”

“Well, do you want to let them? Do you want to let it happen or do you want to try to run?”

“And risk getting someone hurt that doesn’t deserve it?”

“You don’t deserve it.”

Max could argue against that. Max knew many people who could argue against that. If he decided to listen to him, they’d be telling him right now. It was still easy enough to think of all the reasons why. He could tell Furiosa, but he didn’t need to burden her with all of that knowledge in these brief few hours they had left. Hell, it might take even longer than that to tell the full story. With a sigh, he conceded, and decided not to fight.

“So what happens when we get out? And they have all the guns, and we can’t get the car? Hop out the wall? They found us the first time, they’ll find us again. If not, their attackers could pick us up instead.” Max huffed, only thinking of more reasons why escaping would hardly mean they were free. “No weapons, no supplies, no way to get anywhere…”
He could tell Furiosa was fuming beside him; she was feeling with her elbow right where to jam him in the ribs. There was no blaming her. Max had come to terms with the fact that he’d die, and he knew that there’d be no way out. Stating the facts out loud only made it seem like he was trying to convince her of the same. Should she be? Should she fall in line and let whatever happen, or should she try to escape? There’d be no stopping her, he decided, but should he help? Furiosa was without her prosthetic and at a serious disadvantage…

He hoped that they killed him first.

Max wasn’t sure what he could tell her. The words would be meaningless and worthless. There would be no boosting their morale. Gallows humor had always failed him, and that wouldn’t change now. How else were they supposed to comfort themselves, with each other? He had disgusted her with his resignation, and she’d be the source of all of his worries until he was finally dead. Back to square one.

Furiosa shifted against him, and her fingers went limp in his hand. After a moment, she pulled her hand away and tucked into herself. He could hear her breathing pick up and break down. A sniffle was all he needed as confirmation of what she was doing. “So what am I supposed to do? Huh? This is it, is this all there is?” Her voice was unsteady, and it made him very, very uncomfortable because he had no idea what to do.

What was he supposed to say? “Yes, this is it”? “It’ll be alright”? Offer up some worthless platitude that was supposed to make her feel better? And what should he do? Delivering physical comfort was a foreign concept after so many years of lacking and avoiding human interaction. Did she even want it? - that was an even better question that made Max keep his hands to himself. He was terrified to try anything that wouldn’t help at all, but if there was something she wanted, he would do his best to give it to her.

He felt for her. Furiosa had told him all about her many escape attempts, knew how catastrophically her last attempt failed, knew that things were getting worse for the women she had tried to help. For all the good she had tried to do, this was her reward. For all that could have been, this is what is and what will be. Death, for her, had been a “what if” for a long time, but never before had she had to consider it as imminent. She didn’t deserve it at all.

When she fell against his shoulder, his arm found its way around her. With no response, he assumed it was welcome - at least tolerated. A few awkward circles were rubbed into her back, and that was all he gave her. Nothing else came naturally. There was nothing else he was prepared to say or do but wait, and waiting was hell. It was torture. A watched pot never boils, the old saying went. If the saying held any weight for the situation, then that door might never open - and it was very nearly preferable to get it over with.

He could hear the voices outside. There were three of them, real and tangible, words indecipherable but tones clear - stern, prying, curious, unsure. The volumes varied as he listened to them go along the perimeter of their cell. It was the only thing of the outside that he had heard all night, and as much as it shouldn’t, it scared him. If hearing nothing was normal, hearing something was never a good sign. The observation proved right as the three stopped at the entrance and worked to open the door.

“No, no, no,” Max whispered, pleaded to whoever was listening - he’d take it back, he’d take back wanting to get it over with. He’d wait - oh, how he’d wait for years if it meant he got to live. The feeling of resignation completely dissolved as he realized how absolutely unready he was.

Max could feel Furiosa tense up beside him and hook her arm around his leg as if to anchor herself. It wasn’t hard to imagine what was going through her head; fight-or-flight was the response to nearly everything in the Wasteland, and this was certainly no exception. What were they to do? There were
bars between them and the doors, which meant they couldn’t storm out. There were lights, which meant they couldn’t hide. There were *gunmen*, who certainly would not have made it so far without being crack shots. It was almost quicker to say what wasn’t between them and their freedom.

The bar was lifted off the door, the lock was keyed open, and when the door finally swung in, three men stepped into the small space outside of the cell and closed the door behind them. Somewhere, a switch turned on the harsh fluorescent light; it was blinding enough for Max to shut his eyes and rub his palms over the sockets, all while ignoring the continued conversation that the men were having. When he had enough sense to see, the men stopped talking and looked at him. One of them, he was half-surprised to see, was the same man that had come down from the sniper’s nest.

“So he’s him?” asked the oldest one, gruff and white-haired and covered in sunspots. He was wrapped more in cloth than proper clothes, but the two others who were more well-dressed didn’t seem to mind.

“That’s what I’m thinking,” replied the familiar man, youngest of the three who still had to be as old as Max. The voice was distinctly American, about as plain in tone as Furiosa’s. The hard black boots and tattered BDU trousers that he wore were enough to pique his curiosity, though there wouldn’t be any reason to know his story any time soon.

“There’s no *thinking*, you either know or you don’t know,” The white-haired man was keen on making sure that the younger was sure of himself. It wasn’t hard for Max to figure out what he was to be sure of.

“Oh, so do you *know*?” The third man - another American - spoke up to ask the elder in an accusatory tone, which earned him pause. His bald head and wrinkled skin reminded Max of the Wretched he had seen wandering the wastes, though he knew the man wasn’t of the same breed. The garb he wore was plain, same as he’d see on any other scav, though it seemed much less worse for wear.

“Doesn’t matter if I’m wrong - if you’re wrong, the consequences could be grave.”

“*Could be*,” the youngest repeated the words as if to make them heard again. “Could be nothing, if our defence is what it’s supposed to be and if our guns are locked up tight like they should be. If you’re wrong, that’s two innocents dead, and however many others there are that we find with no one to vouch for them. Hell, let’s take their meat while we’re at it and call it a day.”

The elder had grown irate, and was very prepared to verbally berate the pepper-haired man until his companion stepped in and blocked the interaction. “Gunner, you’re here for them, you can talk about everyone else, later, now make your god damn…”

Gunner, if that was his name, nodded and shook off the man, and righted himself to properly address Max. “You, man. Get up and come here, keep your distance from the bars.” Max stared at him blankly, wondering if he should even comply. None of the men before them had been a part of the group that brought them in, which meant that word of their capture had spread through the compound. The people in front of them were either the ones faced with the duty of being executioners, or had an urgent interest in who they - no, who he was.

“Who do you think I’m talking to, her?” Gunner pointed to Furiosa, whose demeanor was apprehensive, angry, but otherwise unreadable. “You, man, come here, what’s the *fucking* trouble if you don’t?” There was no reason not to comply, no harm in seeing where this would go if he were to die anyways. Max stood from the cramped pile he had formed with Furiosa and slowly made his way towards the bars. He could hear Furiosa stand behind him, but Gunner was quick to interrupt. “Woman, stay against the wall. Nothing for you to do, it’s all on him.”
It’s all on him. The words were enough to refresh the taste of bile in his throat and put the shiver back in his spine that told him that she was his responsibility, no matter how well-off they may be or wherever they may go. It would naturally be the world’s decision to remind him of that dependency, and it wouldn’t be his place to question it, especially now.

“Alright. In case you haven’t already guessed, you’re here to be killed. We have reason to suspect that you are part of the group that has besieged us and attacked us multiple times in multiple areas, though there’s no knowing for sure,” he paused and gave the white-haired man a sideways glance before continuing. “This process, of course, is all being done to err on the side of caution, because if the wrong people were to go free, then the enemy wins its soldier’s back or worse. That being said, this is what’s being done to everyone we encounter or see within our territory because we’re unable to take any more risks. As much as we’d like to preserve human life, we can’t risk what we have over people we don’t know.

“However - I do believe I know you. At the very least I remember you, and I don’t think you’re of the same stock of men that’s besieging us. If you had remembered me, you would have spoken up before, but since you haven’t then that’s enough for me to know you don’t. Of course, to ensure that you are who and what I think you are, I’ll have to ask you about things only a familiar would know, and it would be particularly cruel if you have forgotten or not cared, and would have been able to answer otherwise - though if you never knew, then I guess this would work out exactly as it meant to. Do you understand?”

Max nodded, if not to demonstrate his understanding, then to hurry up and get the process over with. While it was entirely possible that the two met - whether it be at the Hold or on the road - he had completely forgotten if he had. It had been made his goal to make human life so unremarkable and forgettable; faces seen one day turn into blurs the next and erode into nothing but vague impressions in a matter of weeks. He had no doubt that any meeting he had with Gunner would have met the same fate, but if there had been any such meeting, he’d have to dig as deep as he could to remember.
Many thanks to TinyMammoth for helping me out!

And ALSO while we're here and I have your attention, redcandle17 is holding a Mad Max Kink Meme revival event/contest in order to rejuvenate the madmaxkink community. I support this event whole-heartedly, because that community is where I got the idea for Runaway, and this, in turn, is the only reason I'm still writing. Please check it out. Please write, draw, paint, create, and please submit any and all ideas you have.

Gunner appreciated the apparent enthusiasm that Max demonstrated. Complete cooperation all around was necessary to get the process going, and the quicker they had it done, the better. With a nod from his friend, and nothing but a waiting glare from the older man, he began. “So. Where’ve you been?”

“Up North.”


Max very nearly snorted; the man’s assumption was spot on, but a year off. It wasn’t lost on him what Gunner was trying to do, no matter how little or how far he’d go with it. He wanted Max to let his guard down, feel some sort of comfort in the off-chance that a word would slip out that shouldn’t have. However, he did nothing wrong - there was nothing to be let loose in the midst of a conversation, and he was nowhere near as stupid as the man hoped he was.

“The Hold,” he decided to put on the table immediately. Whether it was wise or not, it definitely resettled the tone of the interrogation. The three faces in front of him reacted as he expected. Their mouths tightened, eyes shifted to register what one another was thinking. No words were exchanged, though he could tell they were approaching the same mindset.

“What’d you find?”

Bodies, Max could have sworn he said, but instead, the words stayed in the back of his throat and let through a squeak instead. A hand covered his mouth as his tongue tried to swirl the sour taste out of his mouth. It was still hard to think about, both the scene itself and the implications that it carried about the people who created it. The least he could be thankful for was that it was fresh, and that the refugees surely would not have been there to see it all happen.

“They’re dead, aren’t they?” Gunner asked, making it easy for Max to nod and answer.

“Chunks of meat missing.” The words were enough to make the trio huddle together and exchange words that were too quiet for him to pick up on. The pieces of information had to be something that they had feared, because they pulled out of it and had more questions for him to answer.

“Were there tracks? How many, how deep?”

Max was ashamed to admit it; it wasn’t something he had paid attention to, though he was sure that
he would have noticed them if they were out of the ordinary. “Don’t remember.”

“Was there anything else? Did you see anything else?” He could tell that Gunner didn’t like the answer he had given.

“The… the settlements are gone. No buildings, nothing. Nothing left in the Hold but the walls. I burned the bodies,” he ended after a pause. His callused fingers worked at his knuckles, popping them to release some amount of nervous energy.

The answer wasn’t something that Gunner was expected. It left him turning gears until he finally nodded and pulled away from the bars. Another non-verbal conversation took place between the three men. It was all eyes, all posture, languages that were hard for him to understand and decipher, though the look of resignation that the white-haired man gave was enough for Max to believe that the interrogation would continue.

“Anything else that you’ve seen between here and there?”

It was a harmless question enough. Max says what he’s seen - though any amount of it could be a lie to them - and they adjust their defense and patrols accordingly. *Err on the side of caution,* Gunner said himself. Still, there was not much for Max to relay. The sandstorm had to have buried any tracks that the cannibals had left, as well as bodies and anything smaller than -

“There was a wrecked car, further East towards the mountains. Half-buried. Rigged to send out a flare if the doors opened. Flare’s, um…” Max stopped - was revealing their position of the flare something they should reveal? He sighed as he realized that they’d find it anyways as they sifted through everything they had. “It’s in the car.” Another nod as Gunner mentally jotted a note to himself.

Max could tell that he didn’t look good. He knew of nothing about the marauders that took out the settlements, but told them that he had been there himself. It implicated him and no one else, especially if there were no tracks or signs of others. The only plus was that it wasn’t as though they’d be making their way there and back again any time soon, so there was only his honesty to judge against. Hopefully, his case was convincing.

Gunner wanted to know everything he could; Max was sure of it. There was a fire in his eyes that wasn’t unfamiliar, and he knew that anyone and anything that was its target would not fare well. Max wished it wasn’t meant for him, but knowing how things looked, his hopes were better aimed elsewhere. Still, the fire died down and Gunner let out a sigh - he put the Hold behind them and moved on. “Bet you’re wondering how I recognized you, yeah?”

“Mhm.” Max had to admit that he was. After so long of making himself unremarkable and forgettable, and making sure that other people appeared much the same to him, it had to be some sure miracle that Gunner remembered him. It couldn’t have exactly been inconspicuous - such a fascination with him couldn’t have gone unnoticed unless there was something to spark the need to mark Max down as someone to look out for.

“It’s that car of yours. Hard to forget something as black, as sleek, as put-together as that. Everyone else is in buggies and deathtraps. Almost never see something like *that* outside of a War Party.” It was easy to tell that Gunner counted their attackers as a War Party, though it surely wasn’t on the scale of what the Triumvirate had to offer. Still, they came with many of the same unfortunate perks: organization, numbers, and the intimidation factor. It didn’t help that the best of the vehicles that they ran down were often absorbed right back into their fleet.

If you had the time, then your day was spent looking for food and water. If the sun was still in the
sky, then you looked for the next day’s supplies. Any time left before the deep chill of the night was spent on your car. War Parties sure as hell had the luxury, especially the Citadel, who made a cult out of the V8 engine and encouraged the modification of their vehicles. Max didn’t have much time, but he certainly had the knowledge to make the maintenance and upkeep worthwhile. It also became his home, and at many points was all he had - of course he’d do his best to keep it safe and sound. Of course, none of that helped when everything else in the compound was junk and the Interceptor looked too much like it belonged outside with whoever was out there.

Max could think of nothing to explain himself. Anything he said could be easily dismissed as untrue, and perhaps that was the point. What did they want to hear? "I find the time to maintain it"? “Only luck has brought it this far”? Maybe it was something he just couldn’t be able to dispute.

“And it’s hard to forget it when that car’s the one to pull up to us when we’re broken down in the middle of the flats. Ah, there’s the look I’ve been looking for,” Gunner smiled as he shook his finger at Max, who knew exactly what the man was talking about. Deer in the headlights. It was something that he couldn’t disguise, but why would he want to? Max knew exactly why he had that expression - he remembered. Whether it was ultimately a good thing or not, he would decide that later.

“So tell me, road warrior, when you saw us out on the flats, what did our vehicle look like?”

Max took a moment to make sure he was absolutely right. “Truck,” was his first simple answer.

“Mhm.”

“Armored truck.”

“Mmmhm.”

“Had some thundersticks on it.”

“Yep.”

“Bit rusty.”

“What isn’t nowadays?” Gunner asked while his bald friend sighed and narrowed his eyes, taking the comment as a jab. It didn’t go unnoticed; it took only a moment for the action to click in Max’s mind, and for more information to come trickling back in response.

“Driver,” Max pointed at the bald man, and it earned him another deep hum of confirmation. The rusty gears in his mind continued to turn. “And there was a third man.”

“Oooh, boys, I do believe we have him - he remembers.”

That couldn’t be it. That couldn’t be enough - was that all it took to vindicate him? It couldn’t be enough for him to have simply stopped and offered a tool they didn’t have, that they would consider him to be an alright bloke. Could have caught him on a good day. For them to assume the best of him from a lone encounter - but who was he to argue otherwise? He and Furiosa were about to be killed for something they didn’t do.

“Are you sure it’s him?” A tight knot formed below his bruised stomach as the white-haired man spoke up to the visible discomfort of Gunner. He was being second-guessed, and clearly the man had to be important for Gunner to care. Max found himself shuffling much like the man across the room from him when he realized that the elder was the leader of the compound. Judge and jury for sure, though the executioner, he’d have to wait and see.
“Well how else would he know if he weren’t there? Hell, if that’s all he remembers, I’ll still bet my life on it. I can’t count on my hands how many times we’ve been stopped in that truck and some nut’s tried to ram us head-on or otherwise try to kill us. Had it happen outside Bartertown, had it happen in the Powder Lakes, had it happen all the way West in the Deadwoods. Scariest when it happens in the old cities. Maybe we had been the fools for not trying to take him out from the first approach, but if he’s the only guy who stops his car, steps out, asks what’s wrong and offers a helping hand when no help could mean certain death, and all without a problem, you can damn bet I’m gonna remember that and owe him one. And he’s here to collect.”

It was the leader’s turn to fumble and furrow his brow. What Gunner had to say meant too much sense and carried to much weight to argue against. Hypotheticals held nothing against testimony. There was nothing for him to do but concede that Max was innocent. “Well, what about the woman?” Or he could do that.

“She’s with me,” Max was quick to speak up and make it known. There was no way he was walking out of the cell without Furiosa. He’d spoil his own freedom if it meant levelling their fates against one another. She had no one but him to vouch for her, and he had no idea if that was good enough.

“Where’s she from?” the old man continued to ask.

“Refugee from up North. From the Big Three. Trying to find somewhere better.” Well, it was the truth wasn’t it?

“Bartertown’s a lot closer than a four day drive south, innit?”

“Yeah, so’s the Hold.” The answer didn’t sit kindly with the three men as the fallen stronghold was thrown back in their faces, though they didn’t vocalize their complaints. “Not down here for a lack of trying.” They were understanding enough of that, at least, though his wording about Bartertown left them uneased.

“How’s Bartertown?” Gunner probed again. It wasn’t as though he’d be able to make it up there anytime soon, but knowing whether or not a mostly neutral trading depot had fallen was important to consider in the long run.

“S fine, for you lot,” Max offered a short few words of comfort. They’ll want to know what went wrong. “Man took her for someone else, someone he wanted dead or worse. Tried to draw his gun, but I drew faster. Of course, you kill a man, people don’t quite like that and will want to pursue you, well-meaning or not. Bartertown’s not big enough to lose yourself in.”

He let out an o-oh, a sound of understanding; it was likely that he had had the same thing happen to him before. “Well if she’s innocent, why didn’t you try to explain yourselves?” Max could see something glimmer in Gunner’s eyes. A smile twitched at his lips as he realized the man already knew the answer.

“Maybe they don’t care whether she’d done it or not, just want to kill someone to think they got them.”

“Now, that’s not right,” Gunner continued with mock indignation.

“It’s un-human.”

“Dastardly.”

“Alright, you jerk-offs, I get it,” the leader spoke up and quieted the pair. From inside of his robes, he
produced something - a ring of keys. Max’s heart fluttered as he moved towards the lock, but the man pulled away at the last second. “I want to make something very clear before you’re let go. When these bars open, you do not storm out, run around, try to get in your car and drive off. People don’t know what’s gone on here yet and they won’t take it well until they do know. I gotta tell the guards and every man I can find of the convoy that got you two, that you two are clean.

“The gate will not open for you at any time you want. The gate will only open for incoming and outgoing parties that belong to us, and you can leave when the last man is out or the last man is in. No one will stop you from jumping over the wall and making your own way, but vehicle movement is restricted.

“All of the gear that has been taken out of your car - most of your gear, because we’re not going to piss our pants over the little things - will be returned, because we keep note of what we take in. All of the gear still on your car should be good to go - anyone who touches it from now on will be treated same as any other thief.

“Do not take any of this kindness as me being a sucker. If I hear some bad shit about you two, you’re out or you’re back in here and dead the next day. Behave, and we will have no problems. Got it?”

Max and Furiosa could only conjure tight nods as their response, but it was satisfactory enough for the old man. “Good. You can stay as long as we can afford it. I don’t think any man of sound mind would want to leave until… until when, I don’t know, but it’s not a good world out there. Gunner?”

He turned to place the key ring in the younger man’s hands. “Let them out when I send your boy around, but don’t let them out, yeah?”

“Alright, careful out there,” Gunner cautioned the man as he left the building. It was easy to tell that the sun had not yet risen; he disappeared into darkness as the curfew demanded lights out. His companion prepared to leave as well, but Furiosa spoke up in an attempt to stop him.

“Wait,” was what she got out before freezing - Furiosa had no stock among the men before her. Nothing was owed between them, except her owing Gunner her life. Only his testimony and pushing against the settlement’s elder guaranteed she’d walk with Max. The other man, on the other hand, was simply there with little to say. She guessed his association with Gunner but couldn’t gauge at all how helpful he felt like being. Still, he paused and waited, turning to offer an annoyed but expectant face. “The guys who brought us in - “

“Yeah.”

“They have my arm.”

“Your arm?”

Frustrated with the man, she shook her empty sleeve at him and pulled it up to her elbow.

“Oh. Huh.” A pause. “So? Get it later with your other stuff.”

“Yeah, but what if they find something better to use it for before I get out, before they know we’re good?” She was half-convinced that what she was saying was only being marginally processed by someone who had something better to do. It was annoying to be so readily dismissed by someone who had to be there by their own volition. The best bet would be to just let him leave, though if she and Max couldn’t be let out until morning, she’d like to have Gunner stick around until their cell was finally opened.

Instead of dismissing him, she provoked him into acting. “What if someone took your car and you
couldn’t get it until it was too late, huh? And it’d be missing something important or it would never run right again because you didn’t have the tools…” Furiosa hardly had to start before she got a response out of him. The man’s lips tightened into a grimace as he made some vague gesture with his hand and found his way out of the building, hopefully to get her arm. She was sure that if they were sticking around for a while, she’d thank him for it. There was no apologies for her words if they stung. It would be the position that Furiosa would find herself in if she was unlucky, and it had been exactly the same position that the men had found themselves in until Max came along.

With only Gunner left beyond the bars, their attention turned to him. He had the keys. It would be through him that they’d be granted their freedom, but they knew that it would have to wait. The leader would only accept their release once his boy was sent around to inform him that it was okay to do so, and even then, they couldn’t be let out - whatever that entailed.

“So you heard the man, yeah?” he asked of them. They answered in the affirmative. “No arguments?”

They knew better than to say that they had any. There was no compromise to be made, especially with their presence maintained by an already delicate balancing act. Safety was a top priority for the settlement, and Max and Furiosa would only be able to stay if that safety - or at least the illusion of it - went uncompromised and untested. What they would love to do was leave as soon as possible, but they knew that couldn’t happen. They were running low on food, water, and fuel. They wouldn’t even make it to the eastern side of the mountains with what they had.

There were still the marauders to factor in. Max had no idea how many there were or where they were, but he knew there were a great many with a mighty far reach, and whatever vehicles were left outside of this stronghold were deemed acceptable losses for the siege to continue. Having the Interceptor sputter out of gas out there would have been a death sentence. The silver lining to being taken in by these people was that that wouldn’t happen. Whether they would ultimately survive or only stave off their deaths by a matter of days was yet to be determined.

“None,” Max spoke for the both of them, and Gunner hummed.

“Alright. So. When Chuck gets here, I’ll let you out, but if there’s anywhere you go, it is to the latrine or it is straight to your car. And I’m taking your keys.”

“Why.” Gunner had his word, why did he need Max’s keys? “Why?” What did Gunner think? - that they would run at the first opportunity? Was he not privy to how they were taken in with such efficiency and precision? Was he not there when they were marched through the compound to the holding cell? Max and Furiosa knew what the guards were packing; why would they take the risk?

“It’s a precaution,” Gunner looked away from the two, taking a step backwards as he became aware of his proximity to the bars.

“We gave our word, we traded our kindness. You trust me enough to vouch for me and believe I’m not part of that rabble but you want my keys? What’s the precaution?”

“If I had been treated the same damn way as you were and thought I’d die in the morning, and all of a sudden it’s a complete 180 and I’m supposed to appreciate the hospitality, then I’d sure as hell want out. Words are words, but I don’t know how you’re going to feel once you’re behind the wheel. Look,” Gunner sighed and reached into his windbreaker, pulling out a folded slip of paper. Hesitantly, he put his hand out towards the bars, motioning for Max to take it. “You don’t want to lose your keys, don’t want to lose your car. I get it. I don’t want to lose this. Consider it a fair trade.”

A look at Furiosa earned him no advice; she didn’t know what was at play. For all Max knew, he
could open the piece of material and the only thing it would say is nuts. If it was anything but a joke, then Gunner was certainly more deserving of being behind bars than they were.

Max took it slowly, doing his best to avoid startling the man with their literal key to freedom. Paper in hand, he pulled away from the bars and got close to Furiosa so they could inspect it together. It was small and oxidized, worn soft with many visible creases. Opening it was enough of a test of its age; the fold was primed to break from even the most careful efforts, but it came open easily enough and -

It was a picture of Gunner’s family. There he was, and right beside him his partner - wife, girlfriend, someone he loved enough to bear a child with. All three of them were smiling, happy as could be. The sight twisted his stomach into knots, doing everything it could to remind him of his own family, and of his own picture of them that he had lost many years ago. This was the man’s holy relic, one that had been with him for many years, opened many times, conjured memories that he sure as hell would not want to leave behind. It was worth far more than the car - almost an overcompensation for the trade. Max could tell that there was a very good reason that this was what Gunner offered up as barter, and it was for that reason that he closed the photo and moved to hand it back.

Gunner was confused, they could tell. His first thought was that it was a rejection of the deal, and his face contorted into a combination of disgust and relief in response. It was taken as an insult, and as a sign that their cooperation would not be easily gained, but Max still waved it at him. “No, you can…” He offered it again to the man, trailing off as the man reached out to take it.

“Yeah?” He was quiet.

“Yeah. Okay.”

With a quiet, stiff nod from Gunner, he tucked the picture away into his jacket, and they waited for the leader’s message.
Free, to an extent.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a breathless moment, needless to say, when the door opened again. They rested easy when it was only Gunner’s partner that came through with Furiosa’s prosthetic arm, though a younger man trailed in behind him - Chuck, Gunner addressed him as he came in with word of their ‘freedom.’ There was very little show made of it; Max and Furiosa wanted out, and couldn’t fool themselves into thinking they couldn’t end up back in the cage again.

She was hasty to put on her arm, comforted by the familiar hug of the belts and weight of her shoulder pad. There was a frown as she felt her way around it - something wasn’t right - but discovering the root of the problem would have to wait. Gunner had opened the cell door. They were getting out.

Both doors were closed behind them as they made their way out into the dark night, led only by Gunner and a small lantern. Furiosa shivered as they made way to the car lot. Her jacket had been taken with her arm, and there was no telling when or if she’d see it again. Max saw her and hesitated to hold her close to warm her - it was just a natural inhibition. There wasn't much need to anyways; they were just about there.

It was the Interceptor alright. Sleek and black and home, though he whined at the thought of climbing into it as an icebox. (The engine had been dead for some matter of hours. There'd be no heat but what the two of them decide to share.) The car had been parked next to an armored truck, and it took him a shameful moment in the dark to remember it as the same one he had seen that day in the wastes. “I hope it looks better than the last time you’ve seen it,” Gunner remarked, watching Max’s reaction to the truck.

The three of them stopped between the two vehicles, knowing what needed to happen. “I'm gonna need your keys, no matter what you get from me,” he reminded them silently of the picture that he offered as barter. Max frowned and nodded. It wasn't as though he wouldn't hand them off. There were many more keys on the ring than that for the ignition. House keys. The sedan. Their lockbox. Sentiments.

He relinquished them with a hitch in his breath, but Gunner was quick to comfort him. “Wouldn't dare lose my own,” he said as he attached Max’s keys to his own ring. “I'll give you these back when the sun is up, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

There was a pause before Gunner held out his hand to Max, and a longer one before he finally took it with a firm grip and a tight shake. The same was offered to Furiosa with a gulp, thankful he didn't have to present his hand to the metal claw on her left. She took it all the same, and that was all he needed before handing them the lantern - he didn’t need it - and heading off to another building, presumably a bunkhouse.

The two were quick to enter the Interceptor, but they could immediately see that it had already been run through. Everything in the car was out of place, either begrudgingly put back in the seats or tucked away in places they didn’t belong. The weapons, they found, were the only things not returned. There was no arguing that, but they were left with a lingering thought of when - if - they’d get them back.
Max set himself to work with a neurosis, working to re-organize everything in the car. It felt dirty to leave his possessions as they were; he was tempted to scour every single thing with his hands as if he were cleansing them of what dirt their previous handlers contaminated them with. The urge passed under Furiosa’s curious watch, and he quickened his pace in setting his effects straight.

Furiosa busied herself with her arm. There was something odd in its sway and in its lift, something unfamiliar compared to the hundreds of days of precision operation. Her flesh hand felt for the switches and knobs on her shoulder pad and set them straight, but that wasn’t the remedy. Did they shorten it? Yes, they did - the upper arm and the forearm, but setting them back to their original settings was still not enough to make it right. A more worried, pervasive search around the prosthetic began and continued until she found out what was wrong - she was missing a bolt.

“I’m missing a bolt,” she groaned aloud, earning her a concerned sound from Max who was still putting his world back together. “They took a bolt from the elbow joint. It’s supposed to work as a catch to restrict the motion and prevent hyper-extension. Now that it’s gone....” To let the problem speak for itself, she moved her arm until the back of the hand was touching her shoulder, and quickly righted it so that the pneumatic tubes wouldn’t crease. “There’s not a lot I can do without it. I’ll have to try to find who had it, hope I don’t make a scene.”

“Why can’t you replace it?”

“It’s not standard. Came from somewhere weird. Might not find anything like it again.”

Max paused his work and hummed before reaching underneath her seat. Out from underneath came a container that he promptly put in her lap. It was a plastic box whose hinged lid only stayed on by favor of fitting, filled with screws and nuts and bolts - hardware that she could surely find some use of. “Might be another like it in there.”

She couldn’t help but let out a quiet gasp as he provided her the supply of hardware with no second thought. A cursory look through the container told her that almost every single piece was different from the next. The thought of finding a matching bolt inside the box excited her, but the lamplight was getting darker by the second. “Maybe in the morning,” she spoke as she placed it back down in the floor behind them. “Too late for this.”

With nothing left to do until the sun came up, they both prepared for what was left of the night. Furiosa’s arm was taken off and put away in favor of the Buzzard jacket. Max pulled some blankets out of the back for the both of them, and after blowing out the light, they ran the drill - seats down, face the door, move until their backs were touching and do their best to lay like rocks.

There was a breath of relief to be had after what they had gone through so far. For some reason, after being kidnapped, after being paraded through the compound as prisoners ripe for execution, and after a trial in front of their leader where their only out was Max’s long-ago meeting with someone whose words mattered to the old man, they were safe, and without binds. By no means were they here because they so desired it, but they were safe - safer inside of the walls than outside of them. There was almost an unsung thankfulness for it, in the end; it was better to be found by these people instead of the cannibals.

Max forced himself to stop thinking about it. Too much of his night was already gone, and there was no telling what the day would bring them. For now, they could sleep, and should - and there would be very little that got in his way about it.

“Max?”

He made an exception for her.
Turning to face Furiosa, he found that she was already facing him. Her gaze faltered, though, and she found somewhere else to look before she asked. “Can we get into the back?”

“Of the car?”

“Yeah.”

“Mmm… don’t see why not.” Max was the first to move; he disentangled himself from the blanket before scooting back in his seat until he could swing his legs into the gap between him. As he backed himself into the corner of the bench seat and the wall of the car, Furiosa did much of the same. Instead of making her own corner, though, she shuffled into the room between Max’s legs and laid her back against his chest.

There was an o-oh from him, equal parts teasing and realization, blind to her end goal until it had been achieved. “Shut up,” Furiosa mumbled as she took one of the blankets and did her best to cover the both of them. The move was not at all unwelcome; she brought a pleasant warmth that couldn’t be found by lying with their backs to each other. This was much more intimate, but that didn’t bother him much.

“Bet you used to have all the pretty girls back here.” It was her turn to poke fun at him, but it struck a chord inside of him that he wouldn’t let onto. Instead of acknowledging the comment, Max wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. His chin rested on her head, rubbing against the short hair that was Furiosa’s and definitely not Jessie’s.

With the initial shock of touch and weight wearing off, the two relaxed and settled into each other. There was no nervousness as they sat together, no difficulty or hesitation in saying that it felt good. Their struggle to even reach the other’s hand during the sandstorm felt like it was in the distant past as they prepared to sleep entangled with each other. Max only had a single passing thought about what they were doing - what made her want it? “Were you cold?”

“Mmmph,” Furiosa sighed into the blanket as his stubble scratched against her head. “Good excuse.”

“Yeah?” Max decided not to pursue an answer beyond that. One would come if she had one, and one she wanted to share, at that. Any attempt to dig deeper had the potential to ruin it and to drive the both of them back into the bucket seats until it was forgotten or forgiven. Given the pace of events, neither may happen before they’re split up or worse.

Whether or not his silence was meant to coax the truth out of her, Furiosa spoke up. “Wanted to see how it felt without thinking we were about to die.”

Max swallowed hard, pulling her closer to him as he recalled the abject horror of the prison cell. They were their only source of comfort in the dark, and they took as much of the other as they could get. Enjoying the contact was by far a secondary objective to simply trying to forget where they were, and what would be waiting for them the next time the door opened. Now that they were free, and their fate was at least delayed, they had the chance to experience the embrace on their own terms.

“So how does it feel?”

“Better than I thought.”

Chapter End Notes
ssssshh it totally did not take almost two months to write this
still many thanks to Jen for helping me out!
In stark contrast to what rest they may have gotten in the cell - and perhaps even what sleep there had been had before they were captured - what they were managing to get now was pleasant and warm. They even escaped their dreams, the places where the dark thoughts in the backs of their minds managed to manifest. It was a great comfort to them to get what they were getting, and there was no doubt they’d want to seek out more of the same in the future.

Their bodies fit together like pieces of a puzzle, no matter how they tossed and turned during the night. Each contortion of one was conformed to by the other, and eventually the two of them were simply entangled in their embrace. Neither truly stirred in the early morning hours to see just how close the pair were. However, neither of them would really think much of it. It was certainly better to do it now in their own time, on their own terms.

A hesitant knock at the window was what woke them up. It was all they needed to be taken back to their abduction, though neither of them moved. Don’t move had been the command, and they were afraid still to not comply. Max’s arms simply tightened around Furiosa which earned him a squeeze in response as he looked for the source. It was too quick to find - Gunner stood outside the passenger side door with a sheepish grin on his face.

With no small amount of grumbling, the two righted themselves and got the window rolled down. “Morning,” was Gunner’s simple introduction, but could tell from the silent reaction that neither of them thought it was much good. The humor fell out of him and he spoke quickly. “Nathaniel’s about to speak to the compound about you two, since last night wasn’t the best way to let everyone get to know you. He’s basically gonna tell everyone not to worry, but it’s best if they know who to not worry about, yeah?” The pair of them could only nod in agreement. “Go to the latrine if you have to -” he pointed off in a direction, and hoped it was obvious - “and meet me back here, though it’ll probably be obvious where the party is.”

The pair shuffled out of the Interceptor and made their way through the compound, thankful for the proper light that the morning was providing them. As they moved, they could spot people going door-to-door - well, shack-to-shack, some knocking on empty thresholds to wake the residents. Those who made eye contact with Max and Furiosa stiffened and paused as one or the other recognized who they were facing. Some of them had been their captors. Others had stood watch as they were paraded towards their holding cell. The rest had been there at the end of the night - Chuck, and Gunner’s other companion. Max and Furiosa still went on unharassed, and certainly noticed the flow of people as they made their way back to the cars.

Gunner was quick to collect them when they came back and held them for a few minutes before leading them towards the assembly. They headed towards the entrance of the compound - it made sense, since it was the only large clearing within the walls. The crowd was facing away from them with their full attention to the leader, who they guessed was the Nathaniel - after all, he was the one speaking from the platform.

“...and it is important in these times to remain vigilant, as we now face a threat that endangers our way of living, and indeed our very lives. However, it is vital that we do not lose ourselves in our effort to combat it. As we are peaceful folk, we must remember that there are others much like us outside of these walls: others who have not yet bared witness to what atrocities await them, and who have not committed them. These events are painfully fresh in history and in our minds, and it is important to realize that. It is many days’ travel to come here, and any news will not have gone so far to teach all of what is happening.”
Gunner raised his hand from behind the crowd to signal Nathaniel, who acknowledged the gesture with a nod and a motion to come hither. “Last night, a guard on duty spotted a vehicle travelling to the Northeast. The belief was that this was a scouting vehicle for our harassers, and I called for a group to detain the vehicle and whoever was with it.” The three of them made their way around the crowd in an effort to reach the platform, and people were already turning to focus on them instead. It was hard to let them go unnoticed; they urged themselves onto the platform and quickly found themselves the center of attention.

“Whether or not it was intended to be a parade, it certainly looked like one when they were taken into the compound. I want you all now to look at these two as much as you did last night - ensure yourselves that you can recognize them, for they are believed to have no relation to our harassers.” There was some rumble in the crowd as discussion broke out between people, though Nathaniel snuffed it out. “They have been vouched for by Gunner, who I put a lot of my trust in, and who many of you surely know as part of the convoy that fled the Hold. He spoke of a time when the fates of him and his men were uncertain, until these two came along to grant them aid, and to ensure that they could travel once more.” That’s not how it went, Max thought - she had no part of it, and only he could ever vouch for her. He didn’t speak of it, but could only assume the goal was to simplify the situation.

“Treat these two as you would treat any other who lives here. Talk with them, trade with them, do favors if any are to be exchanged. They are one of us now, though if they decide to leave, then it is their choice. Unfortunately, what I will say next can not be generalized so as to keep from targeting these newcomers: if you see someone acting suspicious or catch them in the act of any wrongdoing, report it. See something, say something.” He let the words settle into the audience for a moment, only serving to make Max and Furiosa more uncomfortable. Despite Nathaniel’s efforts, they felt as though they had just returned to the hot seat.

“I wish I had something more positive to end this meeting with, but there is nothing else to discuss. I will remind you all, however, of the expedition today before mid-day; you may assemble at will. Good day.” With his closing words, the crowd slowly dispersed. Some remained to ogle at the pair of them, though they were quick enough to disappear before either of them had something to say about it.

Nathaniel had nothing to say to Max and Furiosa besides “do be careful” as he left the platform. Gunner had even less to say - he only raised his eyebrows at them before making his way onto the catwalk that laid behind the walls. It left them standing on the platform with hardly any clue of what to do; it wasn’t exactly as though they had gotten a tour. Max figured that the only places they should know of are the traders’ shacks, the car lot, the latrine, and the way out. He had three of them down, and it was only a matter of finding out where to trade - that is, if he had anything left to trade.

A sense of urgency rolled through him as he remembered - “Gonna see about my keys,” he shortly informed Furiosa before tracking behind Gunner and leaving her alone. Max figured there was no need to make a show of it since it would be a quick exchange, having adhered to their obligations. He could get the keys and they could leave when they were ready - hell, they could leave with the expedition.

They? Max halted and looked back for Furiosa, but she was already gone, disappearing around the corner to return to the Interceptor. We? He was getting good at scaring himself. Whenever he implied a collective, it wasn’t hard to tell what he meant - it was him and Furiosa, doing and acting together, going wherever. It wasn’t long ago that he was more than eager to be rid of her. There was a great amount of ugliness between them once they had escaped the Highlands, and once their feelings had been revealed, that should have been all there was.
Instead an angry but simple ending, all three settlements had been razed. Their feelings towards each other changed in response, literally overnight, and evolved despite what they told each other. They had no reason to believe they would find somewhere else, and eventually had no reason to believe they would even make it to the Green Place. Of course, their fate had changed again, and they were here. This was somewhere else - it wasn’t at all what he had in mind, but it was something. Max could leave her here, and that would have been his promise fulfilled.

Is that what he really wanted, though?

Max could only shiver as an answer - the question probed too deep and became too complex to even stand thinking about until later. He got back on the move, following Gunner to ask about his keys. There was a thought of getting onto the walkway, but convinced himself against it - the only people up there were people with guns. It wouldn’t look good, and it definitely would not end well. He pursued Gunner from below instead, walking along the inside of the wall until he was close enough.

“Oi!” was his simple signal up to the man, who acknowledged it with a grunt of his own. “Keys.” It was perhaps too short of a demand for Max to offer. Gunner didn’t appear to take much offense to it, instead perking up with surprise as though he had forgotten. He crouched down on the walkway and hopped down to Max’s level before reaching into his pocket for the keys. It was easy enough to pry the ring open to slide Max’s collection off, but after a moment he paused and let it slide back on. Max was quick to open his mouth, but Gunner was quicker.

“You’re not going to try to ram the gate down trying to get out?”

“No.”

“You’re not going to cause a terror?”

“No.”

“Alright.” Gunner looked back down at the keys, hands ready to separate them once more, and sighed. “Listen, I want to tell you something else -”

“My fucking keys,” Max growled at the man, not caring where it would take them. He had made his promises - twice, they had been affirmed. “You’ve had my word, had her word. Don’t need anything more than that. My keys, and maybe I’ll listen.” His palm was outstretched in anticipation of receiving them, and it didn’t disappear between them until Gunner relented and returned them. With what grace he had left, Max stayed put and allowed the man to continue.

“I am going to advise you not to jump and run at the first opportunity you get. It’s going to look bad to a lot of people, and if you were to come back again looking for help, people are going to wonder why you left in the first place. Besides, not to be a dick about it, but you don’t exactly have enough supplies to get anywhere good any time soon. Stick around, do some trade or work for your fair share. You’ll get enough.”

As much as Max would like to walk away from the words, they carried some weight and made him think. They truthfully had very few supplies to call their own - a few days of water and food, and hardly a day’s worth of guzz. It was hardly enough to escape this stretch of land, and if their luck held as it was, they’d still be within grasp of the marauders. “Awful wise advice.”

Gunner offered Max a quick smile. “Figured I’d save you in here instead of out there, save us both the trouble.”

Max nodded, regretting how quick to anger he was with the man. It was almost enough to make him
feel ashamed to act this way to the only reason he was free. An apology climbed up his throat, but he swallowed it with a rumble and spoke of something else. “Don’t suppose working in the maggot farm’s the highest paid job.”

“Afraid not,” Gunner spoke as he began to walk. Max followed alongside him, thankful for the casual pace. “Gotta do the big jobs for the big money. Help us recover those wrecks outside and reinforce the walls? You’ll do fine. Work on the cars, even better. Be a guard, go out on runs? It’s damn near the lion’s share.”

Max could only hum in response. Hauling and welding was easy enough, if his knee was up for it. Both he and Furiosa were damn good black thumbs. She had been a War Boy - it was nearly a prerequisite. Being a guard and going out with those missions? That’s where the threat was, but that was the big earner. They had both seen their fair share of combat, and guessed they would do just fine, but God forbid the crew act anything like they did last night. “What does everyone else do?”

Gunner hesitated. “They’re warm bodies. Either full of knowledge no one needs any more or empty of any. Too few limbs or eyes. Unskilled. Beggars,” he added the last word with guilt in his voice. “There’s the illusion of an economy that keeps it all going. People pay the foodies for the food, the foodies pay for access to the food, the maggot farmers and patrols bring in the food to the higher-ups, and the higher ups re-distribute the pay for the next day. Any trade beyond that is incidental. They’re not exactly living the high life, and in times like this, it’s only worse.

“Listen, if you stick around, it’ll be made worth your while.” Gunner paused, waiting for anything from Max that he could take as an answer. When nothing came, he half-expected to turn and find that he had already left, but instead found that Max was still contemplating it. There was something in that stone-faced expression that gave him hope that he’d accept the offer, but those words didn’t come just yet.

“And if I don’t?” Max didn’t see much need to stay except to get enough supplies to - to make it to the Green Place - to get the hell out of there. There were no debts left to settle. He was straight with everyone, even Furiosa. Freedom was something he was itching for, but he needed to know why Gunner was trying to convince him of holding off on seeking it.

“These people need as much protection as they can get, man, and I don’t know the scales are tipped.”

It was Max’s turn to look over, and Gunner’s expression was much more clear. There was desperation - or at least the need to convince Max that there was desperation. He’d seen that look before. He’d ran from it. He knew where this was going. “Oh, fuck off.” For some reason, he didn’t leave the man before he could say anything else. Maybe he was half-expecting for him to drop it, but maybe he was just a glutton for punishment.

“You think they want to be here? They’d run off, same as you, if they could, but they can’t get out of here like they could get out of the Hold. Too many places to get lost in, to get cut off at. You’ve seen the Hold, you want to see that here?”

He didn’t want to, but it was easy enough to imagine it. There had been so much of it in the Hold that he could see the bodies, if he were to look out into the clearing. He damned Gunner for implying he’d be complicit with their demise, damned himself for reminding himself he was involved anyway - there were many people here from the Hold who had sought refuge. Max knew he’d have to stay. He’d have to stay until the absolute end of it.

The dirt on the ground became his main focus after he shuddered and tried to steel himself against the entirety of the idea. Max wanted so badly to disregard it all, but knew he couldn’t. He’d found
himself somewhere like this before. It was an oil refinery. They never asked for help, but at the same time, they really didn’t need it. It wasn’t their own flesh that had been the commodity the marauders had been gunning for. Max could only sigh, knowing that there was no tangible comparison to be gained, and no way he could walk away from the place with a clear conscience. “You’re a bastard.” He turned sharply away from the winding path that they were talking around the settlement, hoping to find the car.

“A bastard for the right people,” Gunner ended their conversation and decided not to pursue him. His work had been done. He could only hope it would pay dividends.
Furiosa decided not to wait up for Max, and instead made her way back to the Interceptor. She was still keen on trying to find a replacement part for her prosthetic. If Max had it somewhere inside that container of loose bolts and screws, then she was in luck. There was a brief consideration of attempting to seek out whoever took it in the first place and try to get it back, but figured it wasn’t worth the effort until she had exhausted her options. Still, the opportunity presented itself, but it was hardly on her terms.

“Ope,” came from the man that Furiosa bumped into as she turned a corner. She was quick enough to back up and utter her own *sorry* and move on, but the man spoke again - “oh, *miss*” - and she felt compelled to turn to face him.

There was no small amount of shock as she recognized him as one of the men who took them during the night. More than that, he was their ringleader - the man so eager to take their shit, *her arm*, and play their execution up as a show. The shock quickly soured into anger that she knew nothing good would come of, and she moved again to leave again, but the man started to apologize.

“Miss, I gotta say sorry for all what happened last night,” he began with a worried expression on his face. Furiosa could only conjure more shock in response as his tone shifted into something she hadn’t heard from him. For what big game he talked last night, most of his words were being lost before they could come out, but he tried to continue. “I was horribly mean and awful to you and the man, but I didn’t know -”

“You’re damn right you didn’t know,” she interrupted him, quick to antagonize him despite what he was trying to get across. “Do you talk that way to everyone else?”

“No, miss, I-”

“Do you act that way every time you go out?”

“Well, not *every*-”

“Then what’s the big fuckin’ deal?”

“Miss, we were angry!”

“Angry about what?”

“We’ve been-” The man caught himself as they were both getting louder. With a quick look around to ensure that no audience had been gathered for the argument, he went on. “We’ve been losin’ people, losin’ cars and other things, been chased back inside too many times to remember. Half of those cars wrecked outside are ours, and we had to burn ‘em so they wouldn’t try to take the bodies. When we heard you all were out there, we thought it’d be revenge-”

“But it wasn’t.”

“No, miss, it wasn’t, and I’m sorry it was you and the man who had to suffer because.”

Furiosa had to admit that it made sense. It wasn’t right, but it made sense. Gunner and Max’s
exchange from last night held up to what it portrayed - no doubt he’d hold less of a grudge. She wanted to accept the apology, but still couldn’t help but fume. “You know, that shit you did out there, I’d expect something like that out of my boys.” Uh-oh. Her hand clasped over her mouth, shocked that she would even say something like that. No one here needed to know of her history, especially as an Imperator.

Thankfully, the intended meaning went over the man’s head, and he instead took her reaction for a renewed sense of grief. “Oh no, miss, I didn’t mean to make you-” He reached out to comfort her but recoiled out of fear that she’d react horribly, and rightly so. “I am so sorry, ma’am, about your sons...”

Furiosa still looked away from the man and waved him off. She didn’t play up to his assumptions and didn’t really care to. Instead, she redirected his well-meaning into action - if he could help, he should. “Listen, last night someone took my arm,” she spoke as she articulated the claws, “and between the time I lost it and got it back, someone took - you took it, didn’t you.”

His facial expressions betrayed him before he could say a word in his defense. The man seemed to realize it, and instead tried to explain. “Miss, I know it’s not my right to have it, but I’m about to ask you if I can.”

“You do understand you’re asking for something from my arm.”

“Yes.”

“Why should I let you have it?”

“Um… uh…” The man floundered for a moment, looking around them as he did so. Before Furiosa could lose her patience, he found his words again. “It’s best if I just show you. You can stay around here, it’s in the open.” Furiosa was somewhat pleased that he realized she was more comfortable out in a more visible area; she wouldn’t have followed him anyways. The man left her alone as he went off to find whatever it is he needed to show her. He took long enough for her to consider walking off but returned before she could act on it.

Furiosa could see it in his arms - a child half-shrouded in a blanket clinging desperately to the man. The bundle was visibly small; it had to be young, no older than 3600 days. When the child met her eyes, she immediately turned away and buried her face into his chest. “She’s not gonna hurt you, Millie, don’t worry.” He stroked the girl’s hair - Millie’s - when she moved in response, only offering a sideways glance. “Can you show her your toy arm?”

It was true that she’d have to see it to believe it. If he had told Furiosa that his daughter had a prosthetic just like hers, she would have blown it off, but it was undeniable when she was seeing it right in front of her. “I was going to keep your arm, try to figure out how to make it right handed. Keep it for when she grows up. I couldn’t finish hers, weren’t anyone or anywhere I could find what I needed, done too much to remake it. Then I found that bolt on your arm, and it was good enough.”

There was an instinct inside of Furiosa - something she had only acquired through osmosis at the Citadel - that wanted her to tell him that by no means was his daughter’s arm more important. Returning the part to Furiosa was practical. She was the one who would be working. Millie had survived for long enough without it. There was another thought she was particularly ashamed of - so cynical, so pessimistic, so utilitarian - she wouldn’t survive long enough to make use of it. Instead of responding in a manner that she knew would get her nowhere and probably set her back in terms of relations, she determined it was her turn to leave. “I’ll be right back.”

In much the same way as him, she departed from the meeting with the intention of returning with her
own bargaining chip - Max’s box of bolts. If there was something in there that was just as good for Millie’s arm, if not better, then she could get her part back. If there wasn’t…

The sound of an engine turning over and revving broke her train of thought; it was unmistakable in the relative quiet of the compound, even more so since she recognized it as the Interceptor. Panic seized Furiosa and compelled her to run. Why on earth is the car running? Only two reasons came to mind. Someone’s stealing it, or Max is making a break for it. And she isn’t with him.

He’s going to leave her here.

Max fulfilled his promise. Furiosa’s finally somewhere - anywhere - where her demise wasn’t imminent. It had been what he offered, and what she accepted. He could leave without a sour thought about it; there were people with guns on par with what the Bullet Farmer would tote around, cars that were as suitable as the Citadel’s for going out on raids and expeditions into the canyons. There was work to be done and food to be earned. Could she hack it? Probably. Were the marauders still a danger? Absolutely. Still, the idea of catching up and seeing how far she could make it with him only made her run faster.

When she rounded the corner into the car lot only to see Max bent over the engine bay, examining the machinations of the idling car for anything out of place, she had to try her hardest not to act like she had sprinted all the way back to him. He saw right through it, of course - her chest heaved as she panted for fresh air. Furiosa closed the distance between them, getting near enough to Max to hear him speak: “Making sure everything’s still there.” She didn’t blame him, having done the same thing herself last night. There was a pause as she waited for him to continue, but he offered nothing more and instead dipped his head back into the car.

Furiosa was thankful that no explanation was needed. She decided it would be best not to discuss her worry, lest it give him any ideas. Remaining silent, she entered the Interceptor and dug around for the box of parts, taking a moment before she could finally get a hold of it. Max watched as she searched for it but did nothing to stop her. When she got out of the car, she simply spoke over the roar of the engine. “Going to do some trade.” It earned her a positive grunt and a nod from Max, and she went back on her way.

The man was in the same spot. It was a good sign, she supposed, and wasted no time in holding the box of bolts out in front of her. “There might be something in here that’s a better fit,” she spoke shortly, and waited for a response.

He took it gingerly in one hand and quietly shook it to listen to the hardware inside. The top was easily opened to reveal its contents, the mere sight of which put a smile on his face. “There’s a lot of stuff in here.”

“It does, don’t it?” The man stood still, gaping into the container as he gently rocked his daughter back and forth. It took a moment for him to realize that he was wasting Furiosa’s time; that was enough to startle him out of it and start walking. “Um… follow me? Got a place to do this, don’t mean to freak you out.”

It was hard to distrust him after all that he said, especially with a child bouncing on his hip. Plus, with an actual perspective of the population inside of the compound, she felt comfortable in expecting for no wrongdoing to go unpunished. If push came to shove, her arm was still a great self-defense weapon - she wasn’t at all unfamiliar with doing some damage with its claws. Furiosa still followed the man and did her best to rid herself of the negative thoughts. He had led her into the tight maze of residences, stopping after a moment at what had to be his own.
When they finally entered the dimly-lit shack through the burlap curtain that provided their privacy, the man let go of his daughter. Millie promptly cast off the blanket and scurried away, though there was hardly anywhere to go. They had no furniture except for the table placed in the corner and the series of makeshift mattresses lined up against the wall. He was quick enough to beckon her back over, motioning to Furiosa as well to sit down at the table as he planted the box in the middle of it.

“Honey, can you take your toy arm off for me?” he asked his daughter quietly as Furiosa took a seat across from them. Millie hesitated, and the pause allowed Furiosa to examine the little girl. Her face was framed by messily cut hair - no doubt the handiwork of her father. She had dark eyes, and too many wrinkles and too tight of an expression for a girl her age. Millie had to be underdeveloped; there was something that put her face out of pace with her body, not unlike some of the pups she had seen that hadn’t gotten enough food when they were young. (It certainly seemed as though she got enough to eat here, but there was no telling when or if the rest of her body would catch up.)

It was only when Furiosa, by her own volition, took off her jacket and then her own prosthetic and placed it on the table that Millie bloomed and offered up her own for examination. Looking at the girl’s stump told more of her story. The seam that closed her flesh was ugly and raised, dotted where some form of catgut had been used to patch it together. She could see the redness where the strap was tight and the metal was cold against her skin; it wouldn’t surprise Furiosa at all if it gave her sores when she grew.

The man took his own turn to pause before pulling his daughter into his lap. He didn’t hesitate to zero in on the bolt he had taken, and advised Millie to “watch close” as he worked to remove it from the mechanism. Furiosa could tell that she took it to heart and watched intently. That was one good thing her father had been doing.

Once the bolt was out, he set out to get something that he knew would work for now. It didn’t need to fit his exact specifications; it just had to fit. There was a general acceptance that she’d very much like back her part as soon as possible, and it sure would be before she left. He worked diligently, laying the parts out in rows to compare the diameter and length - a duplicate was thought to be found until he discovered that the threading was completely wrong, and there was no nut present to secure it.

It was only near the bottom of the container that he found one that was good. “It’ll work,” he grinned as he fit the part into the arm. It was longer and a tad thinner than what he had intended, but that wasn’t a big concern. They could always re-use it if they rebuilt the arm. Pleased with finding something that was good enough, the man decided to search for something that was a closer match to the specs. He handed over her original part, too, and she was quick to fit it back into place on her arm.

“Oh! Actually…” The man turned in his chair to grab something - his own little container that he sat down on Furiosa’s side of the table. “Do some maintenance, get some grease if you need it. Least I can offer.”

She hesitantly accepted the offer, uttering a quiet thanks before opening the box. It was a well put-together kit, not unlike something she’d fix for herself in the War Rig. There were a multitude of tools inside, all sorts of screwdriver heads and allen wrenches and probes, cushioned by cloth handkerchiefs and stuffed in alongside a tube of grease. It had to be from Before - there were designs on it she couldn’t recognize, but she could read the text well enough to know it was alright to use.

Furiosa set herself to work to rid the prosthetic of all of the sand and grit it had collected in the weeks past since her flight from the Citadel. It was everywhere, naturally; in the joints, in the pneumatics, and caked into the hollow of the claws. Most of it was easily picked away and quietly swept off the
not like the floor can get any dirtier,” the man hummed while tapping the pressed ground. The rest was scraped at once, twice, and a third time before she left it alone and finally put her arm and jacket back on.

There was somewhat little surprise when the man found the perfect part to complete Millie’s arm. He quickly packed away the rest of the hardware before sliding it across the table to Furiosa, and claiming his own back when he noticed it had been closed as well. Instead of putting the bolt in himself, he decided to invite his daughter to the opportunity, and couldn’t help but smile as he watched her take it apart - correctly - to prepare it for final assembly. “I won’t be around forever. She’ll need to know how to fix it herself.”

In response to the statement, Millie paused and slapped her father’s leg with an open palm. Furiosa jumped at the gesture, unsure of how he’d react, but he was gentle enough that she could calm back down. “I know… I’m sorry. You don’t like to hear that kind of stuff,” he apologized as he ruffled her hair and kissed the top of her head. Furiosa knew well enough why she didn’t, figuring it had something to do why there were three mattresses for two people.

With a sigh, the man took his daughter and stood, placing her back in the chair to finish working on her arm. “When you’re done, come find me and we’ll look at it, okay, honey?” Millie gave him a tight nod, and that was enough for him to wave Furiosa along as he stepped outside of the shack and into the day. She followed carefully, pocketing the box she had brought. An effort was made to not disturb the girl, but she still managed to gaze up at Furiosa before she stepped out into the sun.

“You know I can’t thank you enough for the part, yeah?” The man looked over at Furiosa with his shoulders tense around his neck and his hands tucked firmly into his pockets. He towered nearly a head over her but still felt himself intimidated by her. It couldn’t be helped, and he didn’t hold it against her. There was just too much of what he did last night versus what he knew in the present that conflicted in his mind; it commanded him to do good, but there was very little enough he could think of that he wasn’t already doing.

“It’s fine,” Furiosa comforted him, but wasn’t sure if it was. There was certainly very little for her to do, but there was very little else she wanted than to just be over it. She had the part back and cleaned her arm. They were in the compound, but they were safe inside the walls and free to go. The man appeared to have learned his lesson, and he got what he needed. For better or worse, and despite how they got there, they were both better off. “Don’t let all this hang over your head, and I’ll try to take the same advice.”

The man hummed in response and seemed to take it well. He shuffled his feet as though to move away, whether it be back inside or elsewhere, but instead turned to face her and held out his hand.

“Gideon.”

The gesture made her freeze - not because it wasn’t expected, but because her first instinct was to take it and offer Furiosa in return. She was absolutely right to hesitate. There was no telling how far her name as Imperator had spread, but she knew that it would only carry a negative connotation with it. Her identity would need to be kept under wraps for as long as it could be, and that meant creating another to take its place.

The names that came instantly were terminologies for cars and mechanics and tools and nicknames of faceless War Boys, just another thing that the Citadel had ingrained in her mind. She had to work to set herself back in the Green Place and grab something from the past to use. Furiosa could almost choke. Gideon’s hopeful half-smile began to falter and his hand began to withdraw. Still, she took it before it could fall and chose the name of her initiate mother to serve her.

“Katie.”
Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to Jen for being an awesome beta!

Check out my tumblr for the odd chance I post something about these stories.
Discussing Men

“Katie?” Max couldn’t help but repeat the name. It was best to do so; if that was to be Furiosa’s assumed identity, then he needed to get used to saying it. Honestly, it would probably be easier than he’d like. He could count on his fingers how many times he said her true name.

“Mmm-hm.” Furiosa squirmed in the passenger seat of the Interceptor, trying to get comfortable again. She had just returned as Max was portioning out morning rations from what was left of their food and water. The two took their breakfast into the car to avoid any possible prying eyes and straining ears, and it was only then that she revealed the good news and the request that he do his best to call her Katie.

“Why Katie?”

“It was the name of one of my mothers.”

“The Many Mothers?”

“The Many Mothers,” she repeated as confirmation.

Max hummed to himself and continued to eat his meal. “What of the fathers?”

She couldn’t help but sigh - it was such a heavy question, one that she wasn’t even sure she had the best answer to. Furiosa thought it was almost better to blow it off. It seemed as though there had always been a curtain drawn over the whole reason of why the fathers - the men, in general - were hardly, if ever, seen. Surely she would have been informed of the proper situation when she had gotten older, but the Citadel stole her away before she had been mature enough to learn.

Max had a right to know as much as she knew, though. He’d end up finding out sooner or later. He was her key to making it back to the Green Place, but he had the right to back out. It was likely now or never. There was no telling how accepting they’d be of him, or if they’d segregate him into the fathers, though her word should be enough to keep Max with her. If they were going to anyway, they’d force it on him or exile him from the entire region. Furiosa knew that would spell certain death.

“They’re kept separate from the women,” she began after finishing off the small meal bar and washing it down with water. “The children grow with the women, but any boys are sent off on their 5000th day to live with the men. I don’t know how far away they live, but it’s far enough to never see one unless a convoy’s come for a meeting.”

“But why keep them separated?”

“The men are a second class. It’s the only way I can explain it - and know how to explain it. They don’t tell the young ones, but I suspect they have their reasons. If they wanted to make men out into boogey-men from the start, they would have, but I’m guessing they would wait until the girls were old enough to understand. Won’t get pregnant if the father’s made into a monster.”

“What’s the point, then, of having kids if you end up treating the father like that? The son like that?”

“I don’t fucking know, Max, it’s just that the women who wanted them had them and they either accepted it or didn’t fight it. Some odd obligation to continue the human race? If it was anything beyond that, I don’t know. I was young when I was taken, don’t forget that. My perspective’s only what I’ve seen and heard and how my experiences have shaped it.
“You know, when the Citadel stole me away, I thought for the longest time that it was justified. Joe did some of the worst things he could ever do to another person, to me. I hate him. I hate the Imperators. Hate the idiots I had to bump shoulders with when I was a War Boy, and the idiots I had to do trade with in Gas Town, the Bullet Farm, Bartertown. A lot of them were outright nasty, underhanded, bottom of the barrel scum. Everyone else fell in line behind them or never made the effort to break the mold.”

"What of the Ace?"

The question made her groan. Ace had been complicated. "I knew him for a long damn time, ever since I was cast down into the War Boys. He was... he was a friend. We were loyal to each other, but I thought that at the end of the day, his ultimate loyalty was to Joe, and that wasn't something I was willing to negotiate." It was a good enough answer, though. Max offered a hum and something like a nod in understanding.

"When I first saw you above the Powder Lakes, I thought I was going to have to kill you to take your car." That was enough for Max to turn fully in his seat and look at her with bewilderment, as though it was a sentiment that she still carried. "You looked like a wild man with that hair and that beard. War Boys called people like that feral. They hunt down ferals for the blood, think that fighting's in your blood, so they put it in those that are dying. I can't say for sure that I felt that way or thought that worked, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't afraid to handle you alone.

"I thought you'd shoot me, the way you had me like that. You could have done anything, but instead of doing what I thought a man would do - beat me, kill me, rape me - you saved me. You handed me a gun and somehow trusted me not to kill you. You let me keep the knife, kept your own distance, always offered me the out with no strings attached. To an extent, you didn't seem real. Never met a man who didn't look at me like a target or a piece of meat.

"Despite all of what happened, we're here, and suddenly it's different. No one's out for a fight or a fuck. I'll have you know, I almost had that man cowering because he was afraid of me. I almost had him in the palm of my hand. It's like the men here are actually human. Normal. More like the Vuvalini than anything else." Furiosa's face tightened as she came to grips with the idea that the men outside of the Green Place were more friendly and more welcome than those who had once been part of it. "Makes me think."

Max listened intently to her, but had no idea what to say to her. Maybe it was best to not say anything at all. How Furiosa dealt with the Green Place was better to be left to her, even if she had done her best to give him all the facts. Her perspective was unique to herself, and there'd always be something he wouldn't get. In the end, he stayed quiet, and the cabin of the Interceptor fell again into that same familiar uncomfortable silence that they had sat through many times before.

They were saved from it as men began to pool into the car lot, swarming onto and into many of the same vehicles that had abducted them and taken them in. One by one the cars and trucks started - at the end of it the noise was loud enough that people were beginning to take notice of it, and once again made their way to the open square near the front gate.

It made Furiosa nervous as she watched Max keep a sharp eye on the cars as they pulled out. If he wanted to, he could leave. This was the time. What would he do, though? Leave with her at his side? Offer her the chance to stay, or force it upon her? Or in the end would he stay?

Surely, he'll stay, she thought - he hadn't gone to get their weapons, but she looks down and her gut sinks. His shotgun is in its holster, the pistols surely hidden elsewhere. Max must have gotten them when she was busy working with Gideon on his daughter's arm. Of course, he did. It shouldn't surprise her anymore.
When the last vehicle was gone for the lot, Furiosa waited for it. She waited for something - *anything* to happen. The Interceptor would begin to pull out - he'd reach out and open her door - he'd turn and ask her "do you want to do this?" - and she doesn't even know what she'd do. There were less guarantees out there than there were inside the compound, but one of them was that they’d be going to the Green Place, and that very nearly trumped all.

Instead of doing what she expected him to do, Max opened his own door and shuffled out, meaning to travel towards the square. He paused as he was about to leave sight of the car and turned around to look at her. Silently, he waved her on - *come look at this* - and she followed. Max waited for her to come abreast of him before the pair continued through the rough maze of shacks, following the very last of the people who had come to watch.

They couldn't help but feel weird as they spectated from the rear of the crowd. It was easy to see that the people in the convoy were preparing to depart as usual, interacting with the men at the gates in order to make their exit as smooth as possible. The others that had gathered - the proper civilian population - simply watched. Occasionally, one of the crowd would break through and approach one of the cars, one of the convoy and say something, kiss them, hug them, do whatever. Furiosa could spot Gideon, could spot Millie being held up by a woman so she could see above the heads.

"They do this every time, in case you want to know," spoke a quiet voice behind them both. They turn to face the source and find that it's Chuck, one of Gunner's men. "They want to see all they can of their family before they leave, in case they don't make it back. Families want to do the same. It's, uh... don't try to interrupt it." He moved to disappear into the shanties, but nervously offered a final parting word. "Good chance to do some trade with the, uh, people who aren't as invested."

It's not a bad idea, and the two of them are easily persuaded by it to leave the square and make their way back to the car to pocket what they can bear to part with. Unfortunately, there's not much - trinkets that had slid under seats, shards of colored glass, Max's sheared hair. There was the mortar, of course, but the question was whether or not it was something they could trade. Not everyone's looking for a signal flare, especially traders who only deal with civilians.

They took it anyways and began looking for the traders - Furiosa was the first to find them, a row of shacks with chest-high holes cut out of the paneling to face the path. She stopped him before he could go any further. "Are we looking for anything specific?"

He can't say for sure - he's led a relatively spartan lifestyle, keeping only what he needed and conserving the rest to trade for ammo, rations, or guzz. "Rations and guzz," he confirmed aloud, and she nodded in response. The short list made sense; Max had his eyes on getting out. There was some hope that he was planning on taking her with him - if she wasn't going to, he would have given her free reign to *not* get something that was vital to life on the road.

Furiosa forced herself not to read too much into it. Maybe he was using her. Admittedly, a lot of what she was carrying was not what she had personally collected herself, so it would make sense that she had no right to exchange the items freely. It deflated her, and she did her best to drive all thoughts of it out of her mind. Focusing on his plan would only do harm. She knew that all she needed to do was ask, but if she got an answer she didn't like, it would drive a wedge between them and probably only expedite his departure from the compound.

For now, she'd go along with it. There'd be no knowing, no *wanting* to know. There was only what she knew, what he said, what the two have gone through, and the context and perspective it provided her. He hadn't given her a reason to worry much before - *barring the Highlands, which was still a frustrating thing to comprehend* - and hopefully wouldn't start now. Max had enough sense and cared enough not to.
It was easy to find what they needed to. The food and guzzoline distributors had a much more elaborate front and a much larger building. Neither of them budged much - they never had a reason to budge, and figured that they shouldn't mess around and try to dictate what each item was worth. The mortar netted them the most supplies, almost double what the rest of their offers had earned them combined, but in the end it was not a lot. Two 5-liter guzz cans - "bring 'em back if you can, when you top up?" - and two days of dry rations. Not a lot.

While they were happy to get what they could, it was very clearly not enough to get where they - they? wanted to go. The huge guzz tanks Max had rigged up in the back of the Interceptor weren't even a quarter of the way full. Their food and water wouldn't last them outside of a week. It was easy to tell that they should have just traded what they wanted. If they were to get what they needed, they would have to work long and hard, and they would need to start today.
A Hard Day's Work

Chapter Summary

Their first day in the compound already underway, Max and Furiosa do their best to earn payment for supplies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Their first idea was to return to the gate - Gunner had spoken of the need to pull in what heaps of scraps had been left outside to use as reinforcement. It fell through quick enough; the metal fixture had been closed and barred once more, and the guards were back on watch. Some of the relatives lingered and watched through cracks as the last of the dust plumes finally sank into the valley beyond.

They both chose black-thumbs’ work as their second option. It was their next best job in terms of payment, and they weren’t looking to shortchange themselves if they didn’t have to. This decision led them back towards the Interceptor; neither of them were surprised to find the lot bare except for a single junker at the far end, closest to what had to be the resident mechanic’s work station.

Max and Furiosa had little trouble approaching the tradesman. He appeared to be yet another relic of the old world - his age was told by his hair, his skin, and in the splits of his calluses. A toothless grin encouraged them to stand over the engine bay, and he explained all of what was wrong. Of course, it would have been easier to explain what wasn’t wrong. The two of them had the idea of recommending just scrapping it, but one more vehicle meant more mobility, another way for people to get out if need be.

While there was a lot they couldn’t do, there was a lot they could. Wiring, tightening, adjusting, fixing the alternator, slipping a new fan belt on, stopping what would have been an oil leak if there was any to leak... the list went on. Time eventually let on that the man simply lacked the ability to do what he wanted with the vehicle; any true effort would have taken weeks into months into years. Any help they offered would accelerate the process of restoration, even though there was very little to look forward to in the end.

The work was welcome, though. It was somewhat therapeutic, despite the both of them having to work around the bruises on their chests from the rubber bullets. Eventually, as they struggled to find anything else they could tackle without more help or more equipment, the man stopped them. "Thankee for now. Think that's what can be done right now." He offered them both a firm handshake and asked for a moment as he turned his attention into his leather satchel. "Bit of payment for the help?"

Max hesitated to say anything - it didn't feel right to take from the old man. Still, Furiosa didn't miss a step, hardened by her hundreds of days of trade. "We'll appreciate anything you have to offer." She knew their end-goal was to get what they could and get out, or at least be prepared to. More valuables meant more to trade with - more food, more guzz, more anything they needed.

The mechanic smiled again and offered her a small, shaky handful of punched metal coins. "That's your local currency. Good at the market." She took them with gratitude and slid them into a pocket in
her jacket. When the man turned back to his own effects, they interpreted that as their dismissal and went back on their way.

Max and Furiosa returned to the Interceptor, where they wiped away what oil and grime they could with spare rags and tucked the coins into the glovebox. The market could wait for another time; running it dry the second they got payment felt unfair. Then again, any sort of hoarding of supplies felt unethical. It was clear that the illusion of an economy was necessary, but they were playing it for real and could end up with too many supplies for it to go unnoticed.

Despite the real worries they had, that idea was laid to rest; it could be worried about at another time. They had other things to do.

The day was wearing down - not quite approaching sunset just yet. Neither of them had the slightest clue when the patrol would be back, but with nothing to do, they figured they might as well camp out the front gate to wait for it. After stuffing a pistol each into their jackets - “just in case,” they agreed - both of them took what tools they thought they could use and headed on their way.

It wasn’t surprising to see none of the faces they were already familiar with. The presence of others piddling about the gate did well to tell them they were close to the arrival. “Here for haulin’?” asked one of them - a short, stocky woman who only came up to Max’s shoulder. They could tell she was experienced, either built for the work or forged by her own will to do it.

“Aye,” Max replied, and it earned the pair a sharp nod.

“Right. We mostly just go for the hoods, doors, any panels we can. Frames are specialty, need the tow truck for those. The bodies? Snatch ‘em if you’re brave, good for the maggot farm. Just don’t scrabble over shit out there, keep an eye out, and you’ll be good.” The woman turned to the gate, eying the open space in front of the compound as though she’d see them before any of the guards. “Don’t expect too much trouble. What’s out there is from about ten days ago - good bit of handiwork on display.”

“Did the refugees come around then?” Furiosa offered the question without thinking, and only bit her tongue after it had all come out. If the two events were related, it might put Max at odds with wanting to do much out there.

“Yes, but just a day before. None of the bodies out there are theirs, all in safely that made it.” The response was comforting for both of them; no more death should come to those people. Whether or not any of them were of the original compound settlers, she didn’t say, but continued on with her observation. “Plus, your arrival was a bit of a tour de force - they know we’re organized, or at least don’t have our heads too far up our asses.”

Furiosa hummed in agreement. The Citadel only needed to keep its surrounding settlements subservient by sending patrols by every once in a while. While whoever they were keeping at bay were clearly malicious and an outstanding force themselves, it was good to show they had it together, weren’t sitting on their hands. She supposed that this patrol served that purpose as well, but their “capture” hadn’t been organized - it was spur of the moment and went off without a hitch. It just depended on how well their actions translated with larger numbers.

There wasn’t much more meaningful discussion to be had between them. They just blended into the group of rugged haulers, shifting weight between legs and fingering at the tools they tucked into their pockets. Everyone else managed to carry on as usual. Their small talk seemed to have its own history, and their exclusion from the same again reinforced the fact that Max and Furiosa were outsiders.
It didn’t bother them, really. Max had been used to the idea - the Hold had been his only haunt where he was a familiar face. Furiosa? She knew no attention was better, at times, than any attention. Plus, her need to keep the second identity as Katie wouldn’t be tried, and it made things a bit easier on her.

With nothing to do, the pair tucked their backs against the metal wall and watched on as the compound, still foreign, continued its day. After a moment of shuffling, they ended up wedging themselves together from the shoulder to the hip. It brought a sort of comfort for both of them - the warmth, the presence of a familiar, their companion. Neither of them were afraid of it, knew the gesture meant nothing more than being there.

They were glad that casual contact wasn’t a self-imposed taboo anymore. Last night had done a lot to break down that barrier, yes, but a lot of it was undue. They were both burdened with the company of a stranger for a long time, with Max denying her true company until they had passed the Hold. Furiosa had her own hesitation, facing a man when the men she knew practiced nothing but violence. It was humanizing. It felt good.

Maybe they wanted more.

“Oi!” The man on watch in the rock spire shouted down and whistled at the guards on the catwalk. “Clear, open up!” The convoy was returning. One of the guards repeated the order to open the gate, and they got to work.

Two of the haulers were swift to move - one raised a metal bar out of the ground near the middle of the gate, the other doing the same off to the left side by Max and Furiosa. Together, they helped the man move the gate, only then realizing its heft. It was a true conglomerate of metal, panels on panels of iron, tin, and what else they could find. Impossible for man to move alone, it even seemed unlikely for a vehicle to breach the fortification. The only question was if the rest of the walls could withstand the same.

It only took a few seconds for the vehicles to cross the small plains and return to the compound; the most heavily armored truck stayed out beyond the wreckage, guns out, aware of the haulers’ task. The lot of them needed no prodding to head out, only needed the reassurance of the guards to get to work. Pairs and threes split to conquer different targets, leaving Max and Furiosa to seek out their own.

Their target was the furthest out of all of the wreckage; the others had quickly claimed the closest, easiest. Of course, the closest didn’t necessarily mean the least valuable. They were the ones that had taken the most to incapacitate. More armor, bigger tires, more weapons of destruction. Those that nearly fell down back down into the valley were small and unremarkable. Still, something was anything. It was less cover for anyone who came in the future.

Max and Furiosa’s hands worked quickly at the carnage, doing their best to ignore the stench of decaying flesh that had only just reached them. Nuts and bolts were hardly obstacles for the veteran black-thumbs; years of experience let them glide through the process of disassembly with ease. The crumpled bonnet could be pounded back out into shape, same as the trunk. Both doors found their place on the ground after a few minutes, shortly accompanied by the only side panel they could manage to pry off with their bare hands.

Max couldn’t help but eye the engine bay and observe all the parts he could use - or at least hoard. It’s the scavenger in him that wanted to snag everything he can out of it and stuff what he could in his clothes. The only thing that kept him from doing so was the knowledge that when - if - they finally towed the shells and frames into the compound, they’d be wondering where the parts went, why they weren’t even present as chunks of burnt plastic and rubber. He didn’t know if the act even required permission, but he was better off safe than sorry. There was no need to pull any eyes back on them.
Furiosa was the first to begin packaging the metal for retrieval. A set of chains was wrapped around the window-frame of a door, upon which everything else was stacked. The makeshift sled worked well; while the weight was still considerable, and Max had to make sure he didn’t aggravate his knee, they managed to pull their haul all the way back into the compound. They were trailed by the final vehicle, already beat inside by everyone else.

The overall haul was impressive to look at. Everyone had had the same objects in mind, resulting in piles of doors and metal sheets. Despite the quantity, it could hardly compare to what was already fastened to the fortifications - it looked more like enough to make a double wide shack. Still, none of them would deny the material to reinforce what soft spots there may be.

A trio of men arrived at the lot of material as the gate was closed behind them. One of them - Fuchs, they deducted his name from the mumbles among the familiars - inspected the lot of them. He didn’t apply much of a science to the process, but the haulers apparently answered to him as the leader of the operation, so the pair let it go on. They needed a breather anyways.

Their pace of work had a sense of urgency behind it, and it tested the both of them, especially Max. While Furiosa was used to the manual labor of the Citadel, Max had spent the long majority of his time behind the wheel of the Interceptor. Any action he performed on foot or by hand had purpose, but the effort was without stress. Those few minutes had him breaking a sweat, something he tried to avoid as the hot day grew close to the cold night. His leather jacket begrudgingly stayed on; there were too many things tucked away inside, including the gun.

Payment came swiftly enough - the same sort of coinage the old man gave them was distributed by Fuchs in a relatively equal amount to everyone. No one stopped to hem and haw at the amount, but simply dispersed and allowed the three men to do with the supplies. With nothing else to do except to manage their hunger and tiredness, Max and Furiosa once again departed for the Interceptor.

They both unloaded into the vehicle, tools, money, and jackets alike. Max counted his lucky stars that he still had a spare black shirt, despite its holes and tears. There was a tight frown as he tried to remember its history - the temptation was there to say it was an MFP relic, but he knew there had been too many years gone for it to even exist as a patch of fabric. Regardless, the shirt came on, and his stained white top came off, laid on the roof to dry out. He felt sorry for Furiosa, who had damp spots running half-way down her back. Something else caught his eye - a scar of Immortan Joe’s insignia at the base of her neck. It wasn’t anything he’d talk about anytime soon, so he ignored it for the time being and focused more on their next goal - food.

If they didn’t know where to find the food distributor already, they would have found out soon enough. Most everyone had headed out to seek their evening rations. Max and Furiosa followed some distance behind the crowd, both of them wary of the hell that life-giving supplies could cause. The fear of chaos was unfounded, though. They had found that, for the most part, an orderly line had formed, and everyone waited quietly for their turn. The majority of these people came from more civilized places - this was no Bartertown, no slum. It was the closest thing to a proper soup kitchen than anywhere else in the Wasteland.

The sky was already orange-turning-people by the time they got their rations, water and pressed food bars. No need to go wondering what was in them. With an excess paid for by their mornings’ work, they had enough to put into storage and still have a healthy dinner. Little was spoken of - they shared the day already, and very little of it needed conversation to be jointly observed.

“‘M gonna sleep,” Max mumbled to Furiosa, wasting no time in shuffling into the rear of the Interceptor, same as last night. Furiosa sounded in the affirmative to respond and began to remove her prosthetic. He couldn’t help but watch expectantly, wondering if she was going to want the same
as last night. It was no problem if she didn’t; there were enough blankets for the both of them. Still, his movement forced her hand; she’d have to outright deny it to recline the seat.

In the end, she moved right back with him, back to his chest, legs finding some sort of comfort at the other end of the bench. They both settled into the embrace, Max’s arms around her waist, Furiosa’s head underneath his chin until they were both idly rubbing against each other’s texture. She went to reach for the blankets to place over them, but paused before she did anything with them, and shuffled her back against Max once more.

“I’m going to take my shirt off. I can’t stand the sweat.”

It was an interesting situation, to say the least. Back at the Citadel, she was surrounded by War Boys who wouldn’t have a clue what to do with a tit even if they were sat right back in front of the Milking Mothers. They didn’t care about her anatomy, more interested in what was familiar to themselves. Max had, admittedly, grown to have that same sort of fraternal effect on her, but it was only now that she had to consider that fact.

He wasn’t a War Boy, he was a man. Furiosa knew of men who reeked of sex and only sought more, knew men who would buy it, take it. She had fallen victim to such before. To even consider Max a threat felt traitorous after all he had done to ensure her space, comfort, and safety. It wasn’t as though exposing herself like this would trigger some animalistic instinct inside of him, but it wasn’t something she could do without a good moment’s thought.

Max was hard-pressed to find any response to her except for “okay.” He didn’t want to seem like he wanted it - which he didn’t - or that she needed his permission - which she didn’t. It was only that nudity, even as casual as this, was a completely different situation to wrap his mind around. The courtesy, the what-ifs, the connotation… whatever ideas his body may have separate from his mind.

He went quiet as she leaned forward and tugged the fabric unceremoniously off of her chest and went for a blanket to wrap herself up in first. Max offered no comment, no sound, just accepted her once more as she fell back against him with another blanket to cover them both. “No bright ideas.”

“Course not. It’s dark outside.” The joke, no matter how small or bad, was enough to earn Max a snort and a huff from Furiosa, and he couldn’t help but grin down into her hair. He stayed silent for a moment more, mind floating closer to sleep until a thought entered the void, and he lit up again. There was an initial instinct to swallow his words - perhaps the story could wait - but he decided it didn’t matter when it was told.

“Have I told you about the oil refinery?”

There was a pause from Furiosa before her reply - “no.”

“Wanna hear about it?”

“...Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

i feel like i just gave birth.
Interlude: The Refinery

It was a proper small refinery - had the derrick, had the stacks, had everything they needed to make guzz. They had everything they needed to defend it, too. Flamers, molotovs, bows, crossbows… they surrounded themselves with barbed wire, trenches, and spikes. Had lights that ran all the time. It was needed if they were going to keep an eye on the bandits.

“Bandits?”

Had to be more of them than all of who was in the compound. They seemed to all come from different walks of life, just got the push they needed to turn away from the law once it all went to shit. Then again, once you were out of the towns, law ceased to exist - even the illusion of protection that MFP could have provided was long gone.

Actually, I’m pretty sure there were some cops among the bunch. Standard uniforms, even a few patrol cars - they ran their sirens in the night. Most of the others were more trash the likes of Toecutter, only more fiendish. Properly bloodthirsty, almost animalistic. The lot of them followed one man, Lord Humungus. He hounded the people in the refinery, offered them freedom if they gave it up. It would have been death either way.

“How did you find it?”

I had an encounter with another scav - gyrocopter pilot. Baited me out and almost had me for good. Suppose he could have killed me if Dog didn’t help give me the upper hand.

“Dog?” Furiosa offered keener interest at the mention of the animal. The Citadel had no livestock, leaving her seven thousand days separated from the pets they had at the Green Place. Of course, they were used mostly to help with hunting, but she knew what a proper relationship was like with a dog that was attached to her.

“Mm-hmm.” Max had first encountered it in the middle of the night when it made it self at home in his camp. He couldn’t shoo him away, wouldn’t kill him; plus, there was something entertaining about the concept of a companion. Having a pet almost felt like something from Before.

I almost killed the gyropilot in turn until he told me about the refinery and helped me to it. We end up sat on top of a bluff watching as they’re holding off the raid. Probably more like a siege, now that I think it. They were hardly away for more than half a day, always lurking over the horizon if they’re not circling about the compound.

I make it in when some of them try to make a break for it. Four cars come out, three manage to get far. The fourth gets flipped. They rape and kill the woman, they guess they kill the man but he’s still breathing when I get to him. I try to make a bargain with him, help him for gas if I get him back, but he’s dead before we make it. The deal’s forfeit, and without him, there’s no knowing I’m not one of them. Ironically, they would have killed me if Humungus didn’t show back up.

Some of the refinery’s people have been tied up on their cars, onto the bonnet and on perches on the grill. Only two of them are alive. Probably from the other three vehicles that tried to run. They offer freedom in return for the compound and the gas they’ve made. It’s an offer they can’t take seriously.

In the end, their leader convinces them that they can make it only if they have the gas. They have the idea of going some two-thousand miles to some sort of paradise, somewhere better. They say they can only take the gas if they take their tanker, but they don’t have a rig to haul it.
The only thing that saved my ass is the fact that I had seen one some two days before and they would have been doomed without it.

The parallels were stark and weren’t missed by either of them. Their survival had only been guaranteed through sheer dumb luck. Their ability to travel was crippled by the looming threat of death or worse. The lot of them barely have it together.

That’s where the similarities appear to end. The refinery’s targeted commodity was oil - that could be and nearly was easily abandoned should all parties have held true. The compound... if the Hold was anything to judge by, then any amount of them making a break for it would be damn near impossible. Max shivered, subconsciously tugging Furiosa closer as he tried to pull into himself.

She hesitated, unsure, but asked: “What happened next?”

They force me to get the tanker on foot. End up getting help from a child - proper feral, don’t know any words. More animal than human. Could howl just like a wolf. Can’t help but wonder how he came to be that way.

I meet the gyro-pilot on the way to the rig, animosity gone since he- well, he’s still shackled from when I shackled him. I sort of coerce him into helping me get the tanker back to the compound, and it almost doesn’t work. Got a psychotic hanging onto the back of the rig and two other vehicles that come in behind me. All but the psycho are snuffed but they were this close to making it in.

Their leader wants me to go with them. Wants me to help. I don’t want to, I’ve held my end, but he gets angry at the idea that I wouldn’t, indignant, calls me a maggot -

“Oh, so that’s it, you lost some family!” Pappagallo figured it out. “That makes you something special, doesn’t it?” He deserved to get floored. Max would do it again. So many years later and he could still see them in the haze above the hot sand. To say Max should give up the ghosts because he wasn’t the only one was beyond frustrating, set him beyond words. The idea that no one mourns if everyone mourns was bullshit.

“You? You’re out there with the garbage. You’re nothing.” It was a direct callback to the fear he had confided in Fifi - that he would become one of them. If that was supposed to be a wake-up call, it didn’t work; it just set him to work faster to leave the compound.

I leave despite him. The raiders follow me as soon as I drive by; they follow me for hours. And then they crash me. I lose everything.

He should have died with all that rolling - hell, the explosives rigged under the gas tanks should have gone off before the car had even stopped, but they didn’t. The raider should have gotten his shot off. He should have bled out, died from the trauma, but he didn’t. In exchange for his life, they took the dog and the car. Lifelines cut. All alone.

The gyropilot - for all that Max had done for him, which was roundabout nothing - saved him. He deserved better than how Max had treated him, despite their initial meeting. He was one of the greats.

The gyropilot takes me back to the compound and I wake up in the back of a meat truck. The body of the man I had made the deal with was still there. I wonder what they did with him.

I tell the leader I want to run the truck. He counters, says no more deals. Says I’m too banged up to manage, and he’s about right. The same braced leg is fucked and I can only see out of one eye, but when you’ve only got to drive straight, not much I can’t manage. It’s not much needed to convince
him since he hands me the shotgun, lets me on my way.

They rig the compound to explode. The plan is to send me down the road one way with their leader, the gyropilot, and some guards, everyone else breaks for it, supposed to go North. And that’s what we do.

We go for hours. We lose everyone on the rig before we get too far, but our pursuers are held off for the most part. It’s just grueling, getting picked at and shot at, popped wheels, torn-off door. They get on the cabin too many times to be fine with, but they all get shot off or knocked off. Those stitches on my jacket? - someone latched onto me from behind with a claw.

At some point the feral kid had snuck onto the rig - only saw him when he was looking up at me from where the driver side door should have been. I have to admit that he helped, but it was no place for a child. Even worse that he almost seemed to enjoy it. He ended up climbing out behind the cabin, biting at the man ripping my shoulder when their leader drove up next to us. He said we had won. Jump over, kid. I don’t think he understood or even cared. The only thing that phased him was when the leader got speared through and span out.

No telling when it would all be over. I try to get everything I can - there’s a shell on the hood. I tell the kid to get it. It’s so fucking shit but I want it because there are still claws in me and we’re still getting followed by all too many of them. He’s out there on the hood, and it all happens so fast - one of them pops over the grill, grabs him, has a shot ready on his wristbow. We’re coming over a hill and I can see Humungus coming straight at us. Takes having the guy notice to get the kid back in the cabin, and it’s seconds before we collide.

It obliterates Humungus and I lose control of the rig. We end up turning over at a bend in the road, tanker and all overturned. Me and the kid are knocked out. I guess seeing us crashed marks the end of the chase for everyone else, and they… I don’t know what they did next. Probably dead by now.

When I come to, I get me and the kid out of the cabin and onto the road. I expect to see a growing pool of guzz coming out of the tanker, but instead, I see piles of sand. They filled it with sand. Had to have made off with the guzz some other way. It was ingenious.

The gyropilot comes up the road on his chopper - can’t fly anymore. He picks us up, and we start heading in the direction of the caravan. I could have gone with them, but I didn’t. I told him to stop once we had gotten to the vehicle that their leader had driven. It was in the best condition out of all of them. We part ways, and that’s about it. I scavenge what I can and go on.

“The lot of them made it to their paradise in the North. They had to.” There was no way Max would know for certain, but there was certainly no way in hell he would allow himself to imagine what all could have gone wrong should they have not. It would be too much lost, as though enough hadn’t been lost already.

“They made it,” Furiosa echoed his sentiment, aiming to comfort him. She thought of what could have happened if she had made her flight out of the Citadel with the Wives. Would they have reached their paradise? They certainly had none of the advantages that the oil refinery did. There were no distractions, nothing to leave behind as a consolation prize. Joe would have chased them until their engines ran dry. Them being caught before they could even leave almost made sense, considering the hopelessness of it all.

She sighed and tried to relax against Max, knowing it would be, in turn, useless for her to focus on the negatives. “Let’s try to get some sleep.” There was no need for them to continue. The whole series of events had to be almost wholly discomforting for Max to recall, and she understood the need, in the end, to root some amount of positivity in it. The past wanted to repeat itself in the
compound. Any sort of light at the end of the tunnel would keep them going, even if it was just for another day.
Reflections: Furiosa

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

To their quiet and pleasant surprise, Max and Furiosa met the morning on their own terms. There was no one waiting at the car door with a gun, no voyeur hoping to disturb them. With no one and nothing in particular waiting for them, the fire beneath them both remained ashes for a while longer, and they took their time.

Last night’s sleep had been the best they had gotten since they first met, if not beyond that. It was odd to admit, but it was true - they found themselves removed from a great litany of factors that often kept them up at night.

After her capture, Furiosa’s sleeping arrangements were in the Bio-dome. The women imprisoned alongside her were able to provide some small comfort. Still, nothing could help the fact that she wasn’t home, and that the Vault door could open at anytime, and he would come through and have anything - anyone he wanted.

Arguably, it was worse when she was cast down into the company of the War Boys. The lot of them were angry, hormonal, did everything they could to make themselves out as boogeymen. That, of course, was to each other, let alone a former Wife. She was proud of her ability to fend off the lot of them and thankful to find the company of more rationally-minded War Boys like the likes of Ace and those he surrounded himself with.

It was still so different to sleep in a pile among them. Legs and arms and hands that felt desperately for heat, lungs that ran themselves ragged, lumps that Furiosa was afraid to find on herself in the morning - nothing like the Wives or Valkyrie back home. Death himself seemed to walk through the darkness of the chamber at night, and while he didn’t come for her, she wormed her way into the security of the dogpile all the same.

The chamber she earned when she was granted the rank of Imperator helped to soothe much of the worries she held as a War Boy. One of the best sights to behold was the bar she could place over the door. Another was the bed; it was hewn from stone, but it was cushioned and had blankets. Almost better than home.

There was still reconciling what she had to do to get there. She had to sleep with the ghosts she made. Immortan Joe rewarded intelligence and cunning, but he also rewarded brutality. Sadism. While Furiosa went nowhere near the extremes often visited by the other Imperators, there were things she had to do just because she was a woman, and therefore viewed as inherently weaker. The sparring pits became a regular haunt. Her name got associated with imminent violence. Her metal prosthetic was the extension of Immortan Joe’s iron grip over the Triumvirate and those dependent on it to survive.

She just wanted to go home.

Furiosa’s attempts to escape had been solely concerned about herself. There was nothing to worry about except everything between her and the Green Place and how she would get past them. She knew there would be consequences if she were caught, and they were hers to bear - many times. They did very little to dissuade her; if anything, they only drove her harder.

Involving the Wives meant many more variables entered the equation. It meant she needed the Rig.
Joe could not need any reason to visit the Vault. The women themselves couldn’t be seen as they traveled through and between towers. Nothing could indicate that they were stowed away within the vehicle’s storage space. Even if all of that went off without a hitch, anyone still watching would know something was wrong the second she turned off the Last Road.

It grew hard to sleep as the plan’s execution date grew closer. Furiosa’s mind was absorbed by everything that could go wrong, and everything that could happen as a result. When she could sleep, her dreams made sure to give her visual aid. All paths seemed to lead to her demise, whether it came quickly or at an agonizing pace. The Wives? Angharad would be spared any harm. The Dag, perhaps, though her eagerness to scrap and fight wouldn’t get her anywhere. The rest of them? If they were to live, it would be in shackles.

While she was more put together than Max after she fled the Citadel, and had some relief once they were finally clear of danger, Furiosa had her own share of bad dreams and restless nights. They grew complex as she became close with Max and as her - their options slowly ran out. She had to reconcile the failure of the plan before it was put into action and the placement of her fate in a complete stranger's hands. While she couldn’t quite handle the former, Furiosa did well enough to make peace and more with the latter. The ordinary horror of the Citadel gave way to the uncertainty of the wasteland and the company of Max, and her dreams simmered in an odd soup of warmth and bleakness. It was better and faster in the end to accept they’d stay that way for a while.

Physically sleeping after her flight was something else as well. She hadn’t slept in the dirt and on rocks in a long time, and it wasn’t helped by the presence of Max. He had been a stranger, a wild man, unproven in all of his intentions. Time eased her inhibitions, though. While his standoffishness was a product of his own mind, Max gained her trust as a companion. Once they had found the Hold, any remaining barrier between them crumbled. They were in it for the long haul together, and for a while, they were alone.

Furiosa had gone from sleeping across from him armed with a knife, to sleeping in the car across from him, then next to him, then finally with him. It was different from when she had slept with others before - her crew, the Wives, even the Vuvalini back home. She rationalized it easily; Max was a man. He was a unique breed that stood out against all the others she had already met outside of the Green Place. While Max navigated the world with ease, he almost didn’t belong, as though he had one foot planted in the past. Furiosa felt much of the same when the past meant family and peace and better times worth fighting her way back to. The two of them had a lot in common, and she used that to rationalize how she hadn’t felt so peculiar about anyone else before.

Chapter End Notes

This is part 2A of this little interlude here - 2B/Reflections: Max coming soon, I swear.

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