I originally wrote and submitted Scars on deviantArt back in 2010–2011. For personal reasons, I removed myself from the site as well as removed the work I did for the L4D2 fandom. I have chosen to re-upload this old work in pieces, to simulate its original release. Enjoy.
"So how'd you get that?" Nick asked, pointing at the small slit that ran across the bridge of his nose.

Ellis shook his head with a touch of embarrassment. "Oh, nuh uh... I'll only tell if'ya tell me how you got that," he returned, referring to the scar on the man's brow.

Nick laughed and shifted against the wall, flashing a large grin at him. "Alright," he consented, "but you might not like it."

Ellis stared across the room at the white-jacketed man. It was late, real late, probably around two AM– he hadn't bothered to check the time. In a couple hours they'd be waking Coach and Rochelle to get some shuteye themselves, relinquishing watch to them until the sun came up a ways and they all hit the road again. The four of them were holed up in a safehouse just south of Brunswick tonight; they had walked to get there and it had been a pretty long day. Hell, it had been a long three days. It felt like it had been longer than that... longer than that that he had met the three other survivors up in his hometown and they had grouped together.

Coach was a pretty cool guy. Amiable, a love for all things food– Ellis could relate– and a decent leader when it came down to it. Sometimes he got grumpy though and didn't always have a lot of patience when it came to tomfoolery, likely from working with all those youngsters in the high school where he used to coach. He was reasonably familiar with Georgia, being a native.

Rochelle was neat too. Very friendly towards him, sometimes a little sassy towards the other two men of their party. She had rather impressed Ellis from the get-go with her ability to handle a gun, cuz he didn't know all that many girls who took to that kind of thing so easy. She was also knowledgeable about random things, Ellis supposed because of her job working as a newscaster.

And Nick.

Nick was just... well, goddamn interesting. The man was like a puzzle.

As it was, staying up on watch with him wasn't so bad at all, for all that Coach and Rochelle expressed a distinct desire not to. Personally, he didn't understand their aversion to him. Sure, he was a little different, but different wasn't always bad was it? Ellis squirmed in anticipation of the story. Nick had quite a few; they had been sharing back and forth all week... heck, the guy had half as many as he had himself, maybe– and that was pretty good for anyone who wasn't good friends with Keith!

"I had a guy try to knife me in the alley," Nick said casually.

Ellis' eyes widened. "For serious?"

"Yeah, I guess he didn't really like my face." Nick laughed. "I was plastering him at a game of Poker. I donno what he expected; when I sat down to play I warned them all I worked at the casino. They don't just let any dumb twit work the tables, you know." His pale green eyes flashed with a kind of mischief.

"Which one?" Ellis couldn't help but ask now, bubbling over with interest at this tidbit. "Y'dun mean Vegas, do you?" he asked incredulously.

Nick swept his hands out show-offishly. "Of course, Vegas, Overalls! Where else?" He chuckled a bit before returning to the question. "I worked at the Rio," he nodded.
"I was gonna bust a gut if ya said Circus Circus," Ellis said, his imagination placing the conman in the middle of all those clowns and animals and striped backdrops. It was quite the ridiculous sight.

Nick shuddered. "Ugh, I can't stand that place. I wouldn't set foot in there if they had the last slots on earth." He lifted an eyebrow with a smirk. "I had a respectable job, thanks."

Ellis stuck out his tongue. He would've jumped at the opportunity to visit the destination, but it hadn't ever exactly been within 'road-trip' distance. Hell, he hadn't even ever been outta Georgia. Though this whole apocalypse thing was going to change that.

Nick continued. "And, of course, as an employee, I wasn't allowed to bet in-house, so," he shrugged, "I took my gambling elsewhere." The conman gave a pause. "Happened to just pick a bad spot that night. You know, 'wrong place, wrong time' sort of thing. And this guy I was playing with kept ordering beer after beer– as if he was going to have enough cash to pay his tab when I was done with him..." he shook his head with a smile, playing with the rings on his fingers. "Anyway, I stepped out of the bar to get some fresh air and count my winnings and he comes out of nowhere with this thing," the conman held his hands out to indicate the length of the blade– a good six inches. "And yours truly manages to duck, but not soon enough to save me the shave."

"You didn't kill 'im, did'ju?" Ellis asked with shock.

Nick laughed. "Hardly. A bloke like that ain't worth the trouble. You know much it costs to hire a lawyer in Vegas?" Ellis chuckled uneasily as he went on. "No, no reason to kill a drunk idiot, but I can tell you he got a mean uppercut," Nick lifted his fist, then studied the floor, brow knitting ever so slightly. "Had trouble with the wife though. I guess she had difficulty believing I could get a scrape like that from slipping and falling on a roulette table."

"Well, sure she'd be worried about you," Ellis said matter-of-factly, finding her concern understandable.

"She could've at least appreciated the extra one grand I brought home that night," he said with subtle humor. "Not every guy can bring home a bonus like that on a regular basis."

The hick gave a shrug. "Money ain't everythin'."

Nick eyed him and inclined his head. "You got that right."

Ellis wondered at his sentiment a moment. He certainly hadn't expected the man to agree so readily, dressed as he was.

A puzzle, like he said.

"That's my end of the bargain," Nick stated, a smile creeping across his features.

Ellis rubbed the back of his head with chagrin. "Oh boy, well, shit that's a story-topper before I even got mine told," he said.

Nick stuck out his palm and curled his fingers. "Ante up, El."

El, ha. The conman had been calling him that ever since he had told him he preferred his full name. He wasn't sure if he was trying to get his goat or just be contrary. But either way it didn't really upset him on account of the fact that the way Nick said it made it sound so nice. Not like the way Keith said it when he was teasing him for stuff, nothing like that at all. It had actually made Ellis realize that maybe the reason he didn't like the shorthand was because of Keith, who always
made it into some kind of joke when Ellis didn't want to try his next great scheme that might get the both of them killed. He looked up at Nick and blushed, then considered how to word his story. "Well, okay. Y'see, Keith an' I…"

"Christ, I should've known," Nick interjected.

Ellis continued without pause, already gaining steam. "Keith an' I went deep sea fishin' this one time. A'course, we didn't know nuthin' about it or anythin'– it ain't like regular fishin', y'know. Anyway, Keith figured, fish is fish, right?" Ellis stopped to laugh. " Couldn't've been more wrong. He brought 'is favorite rod, the one he used at the lake, on the boat, put some bait on'it an' cast her in. Well I didn't think he was gonna catch nothin', cuz the boat was movin' so dang-awful fast, but what'd'ya know if he did? That mother pulled 'im off the railing so fast– oh man!– ya wouldn't've been able tuh blink! Next thing I know he's there in the ocean, an' disappearin' fast too, wavin' 'is arms an' yellin' an' I don't figure there's much hope fer the people runnin' the boat tuh stop an' notice, so I wave at Keith to tell 'im tuh throw me the line, ya'know? So he does, but Keith ain't always all that good uv'a shot, an' the hook grabs me by the nose an' I almost fall off the railin' my-damn-self! So then there I am, holdin' ontuh the line by the wrong end, tryin' to reel my buddy Keith intuh the boat, as if he were the damn fish!" Ellis gave a snort, and Nick gave a chuckle. "I did evenshuhly git 'im back in an' he looked so wet an' cold an' miserable… an' I was bleedin' like crazy, but there wasn't much I could do about it. But… but…"

Ellis blinked, still a little unaccustomed to actually managing to finish his stories. Over the past couple days the conman had obliged him, unlike the other two, and he had to admit, it was real nice having someone to talk to, or rather at. "Well, I guess tha's it!" he concluded. He then gave a wry chuckle. " Ain't nothin' cool like yours was though."

Nick gave a shrug. "It's not just about how you got them, it's also about how you wear them afterwards."

"I hadn't ever thought of it that way," Ellis thought aloud. He looked at him curiously. "Do I wear mine good?"

The conman chuckled. "You wear it fine. It suits you."

Ellis tipped his hat, complimented. "Thank'ya. He scratched at his nose, that weird feeling happening where the thought of it made you itchy there all of a sudden. "I git the feelin' I'm gonna have a few more after all'is is over," he said.

Nick nodded. "You and me both, kid."
Chapter Notes

Thanks for the comments, all. Good to know this old work of mine still holds interest, haha. Here's chapter two, enjoy!

He hadn't been too keen at first on informing his fellow survivors that he did indeed know how to hot-wire a car, mostly because he didn't figure it would help his initial reputation any. The kid… Ellis had an excuse, he was a mechanic. Of course he knew how; there would be something wrong if he didn't. But the sleazy-looking guy in the expensive suit?

Yeah.

Only Ellis had expressed out loud: "Cool! It's like we got similar talents an' stuff!" and Nick was pretty sure the kid's reaction was because he hadn't realized the implications behind his know-how. And there certainly wasn't any reason to go into that– why he knew how. Still and all, he appreciated the boy's blithe exuberance because it was way better than the scowl from Coach or the worried frown from Rochelle.

But the last thing he was going to do was stand around and be useless and let the kid do all the work, so he had fessed up rather readily.

As he was bent under yet another steering wheel, cramped and feeling overly warm, but not so unbearably so as to remove his suit jacket, he found another reason to wish he hadn't let on. He was quickly losing patience with the whole operation.

He took his left gloved hand– Ellis had the right glove, not being ambidextrous– and twisted the two wires together. They gave a pop and a spark inches from his face and he grit his teeth, knowing the only thing that had just saved him from a nasty bit of electrocution was the protective glove. He really ought to try and stay focused. But somehow it just wasn't as easy when he was working on the fifth goddamn car that day. He could now say that he had hot-wired more cars in the last three days than he had the whole rest of his life.

The engine of the SUV roared to life, briefly, then shuddered and sputtered back into silence.

Yep. Another one out of gas. No big surprise there. He lifted his head to see Rochelle looking at him with disappointment knitted all across her brow. "Shit…" she mumbled from her seat on the sheet metal barrier, rubbing an arm.

"They're all going to be like this," Nick said, lifting an eyebrow as he sat up. He pulled off the glove and dropped it to the pavement. "It would be a better use of our time to quit trying and walk."

"Six hundred miles??" she said with exasperation. "You've got to be joking."

Coach placed a calming hand on her shoulder. "Maybe, maybe not. Ain't no reason we can't keep our hopes up. One of the evac stations on the way could still be open." He began to list them off, in order, "Jacksonville, Tallahassee…"
Nick rolled his eyes to himself, leaning back on the floormat while Coach continued to ramble. Brunswick hadn't been open when they had gotten there, and he had no reason to believe any of the other towns would be either. He studied the underside of the steering wheel absently with a frown. The maps laid out there at the abandoned evac-station had been just the same as those in Savannah. Big, ugly, red X's over all the little cities, including Charleston and Atlanta and Charlotte and anywhere else that was big and close and seemed like should have still been open—literally everything except New Orleans and Chicago. And hell if they were going to Chicago. Not only was it an extra two hundred miles, but it was north.

And a lot closer to that hideous reddened circle in Pennsylvania.

So, at his own relentless urging, they had taken the time to map out their course before leaving Savannah. They'd work their way down to Jacksonville on I-95, then head west on I-10 until they got to New Orleans. The whole trip was about seven hundred miles, rounded up. At the time, none of them had appreciated his, admittedly, cynical opinion that they'd have to be pretty damn lucky to even get down to New Orleans in time to be evacuated. And his own confidence about the unlikelihood was certainly growing with each and every precious minute they were wasting stationary on these damn cars.

The truth of the matter was that they were all going to be empty spread out along the highway like this, because for the most part, the owners had run out of gas in their retreat with no place to stop to re-fuel, forced to continue their journeys on foot. So unless the four of them were 'lucky' enough to find a vehicle that stopped because its owner turned while driving instead, they too were stuck on foot.

Nick had never had trouble describing his own luck in terms of others' misfortune before, but for some reason this wasn't setting well with him.

Perhaps though it was because of the dead, rotting zombified carcasses they found in those cars, bleeding and leaking into the plush seats and carpeted interiors; the vehicles wrecked or upside-down, having lost control at high speeds, likely above the speed limit if the long black skid marks were any indication. And the smell. The god-awful, horrifying stench of bloating corpses baking in their enclosed little metal ovens for who knew how many days.

All that aside, most of the cars that hadn't suffered such a fate, that would have been available for them to salvage, had been left idle until they also ran out of gas.

He frowned. There simply wasn't much for stragglers like them to benefit from, and that was the plain and hard truth of it.

Coach fired his gun at something in the distance, but didn't raise an alarm. "How's it goin', boy?" he called.

"I've almost got it…!" Ellis drawled back. Nick didn't know how the hick kept so enthusiastic what with the circumstances, but not understanding aside, he appreciated it; shit, it even managed to make him smile just a little. He closed his eyes and imagined the kid, lying on his back as he worked meticulously at the car's wires. He could just as easily stand and take a look, but there was a certain kind of satisfaction with just picturing it instead. It was an odd pleasure, but he didn't deny himself it.

Now, why he had taken an attraction to the young man… especially such a quick one… was beyond him.

Well, sort of.
The kid had a charming quality about him. He was friendly, and while that usually equated to 'target' in his book, Ellis was also curiously nonjudgemental.

"Aaaaan' there we go!" The Ford Pinto the hick had chosen to 'work his magic on' as he had put it, rattled uncertainly before the engine caught... and stayed on.

Nick lifted an eyebrow. Lucky twice. This was the second car the hick had brought back from the dead. The first being the one that had gotten them from the outskirts of Savannah to Brunswick.

He stood.

Ellis pushed himself into the driver's seat, leaning in to quickly look over the gauges. "Well boy-howdy, it ain't much, but it's sumthin'!" He waved them over, "Get in, y'all!"

They all hurried to the little car. Rochelle made for the passenger's seat and Ellis motioned at her. "Nuh uh, my main man Nick here gets shotgun, he been doin' work!" the hick grinned and she laughed and consented, clambering to the seat behind the driver's.

Coach joined her. The whole car gave a large shift downward as he settled in. "I am too big a man for this little thing," he said, shaking his head with chagrin. Nick withheld any commentary about finding the man a wheelbarrow.

Appreciative of the extra legroom he had just been granted, the gambler plopped himself in front and slammed the door shut. "Let's roll," he said, casting the boy a smirk.

"Alright, alright," Ellis gave a couple bobs of his head. He put the vehicle into gear and steered onto the median to get around the wreckage in the street. "I reckon she's got about fifty miles left in her," he nodded with a grin, tapping the indicator as he sped up to thirty.

"You got those wires tight together?" Nick asked. The car jerked up and down on the rough terrain, so he had need for concern. If they rattled loose, they'd lose the engine permanently.

"Shucks, I think so," Ellis said, his head ducking down to check.

Nick suppressed a wince and leaned over to grab the steering wheel before they ended up in a ditch or something.

Coach laughed. "You crazy, boy."

"Sweetie, you're supposed to keep your eyes on the road," Rochelle said in a gentle, reminding tone.

Ellis came up a couple moments later. "Sorry, Ro'," he apologized, then looked at Nick and took the wheel back from him. "We're gooood." He got past the road block and drove the car back onto the freeway, easing the little compact up to sixty.

"Fun fact about Ford Pintos," Ellis began to jabber happily. "The original gas tanks– you know, the ones put in by the manufacturer, not like if ya git 'em replaced– which a lotta folks did, I did bunches uv'um myself, I kin really thank Ford for that." He laughed. "Well anyway, they were defective cuz they wanted tuh keep the weight under 2,000 pounds– iono marketing or sumthin'– so they were sorta structurally weak an' whatnot, an' it turns out that if you crash a Pinto at twenty-five miles an hour or faster, it consistently– like I'm talkin' every single time– the tank'd rupture an' gas'd leak all over the place, an' half the time it'd light an' man oh man." Nick gave him an amused sideways glance; the kid's grin was huge.

"Oh, that makes me feel bunches better," Rochelle said now eyeing the backseat. Coach shifted.
"Dun worry," Ellis was quick to interject, "this one's been replaced. I checked when I was tappin' it. Most uv'um have been."

Nick looked over, suspicious that he was missing something, but almost too proud to bring it into question. He fiddled with the lock on the door. Against his better judgement, he finally decided to ask. "Tapping it?"

"Yeah, tuh see if there was any gas in it," Ellis nodded, his gaze steady on the road.

Nick licked his lower lip. "You're telling me there is a way to tell?" he clarified.

"Well shit, man, sure. I mean, it does take a bit uv'a trained ear sometimes," he admitted. "But if it sounds hollow, it ain't got nuthin' left, an' if not, well, then there might be sumthin' in there. No guarantee, but yeah."

Okay, so it wasn't a complete crap-shoot. Nick gave himself a brief moment to feel stupid for not thinking of such a simplistic check, and a longer moment to appreciate the mechanic's expertise. At least one of them had a useful background when it came to dealing with a zombie apocalypse; he couldn't say the same for football has-been or little miss reporter.

Coach chuckled from the rear, giving the back of his chair a kick. "You just got schooled, Nick."

The conman frowned and held his tongue stringently because telling the man that his fat ass wouldn't even fit underneath the vehicles wasn't likely to make this short car trip any nicer.

Oddly though, the hick came to his defense. "Come on, Coach, give the guy a break." He gave a snorting laugh, "You prolly wouldn't'a thought uv'it either." The older man lapsed into silence at this and Ellis leaned over and drove an elbow into the conman's arm. "Ain't like he lives underneath a car like I do."

His mind conjured the image before he could stop it– the boy on his back again, legs spread, head back…

Okay, time to quit thinking about that. He squeezed the door handle and willed it away, staring out the side window. But the boy wasn't too helpful when it came to getting to stop thinking about him.

"Any of y'all wanna sing a song?" he asked abruptly, his eyes on the rear view mirror to peer at Coach and Rochelle in the backseat. The two exchanged somewhat hesitant glances.

"One hundred bottles of beer on the wall…" Nick mumbled to himself, half sing-song.

Ellis heard it and grinned. "One hundred bottles a'beer!" he continued.

There was no stopping the kid now. Nick joined him, both their voices growing in volume; he matched the kid's baritone. "Take one down, pass it around…"

"Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall," Coach and Rochelle couldn't help but add in.

And so they went down the road.
They only got through fifty-two of the bottles before the car pooped out. Ellis grumbled to himself for being wrong about the mileage, because they had only gotten about thirty miles further down the road, but worst of all, he had passed the off-ramp that lead to a safehouse in Kingsland about five miles ago— the freeway sign about the various eats had been spray-painted over with a bright orange house and cross— and he had figured they could get to the next one, or at least close, cuz the sign also had 'next 18' marked on it.

So, they'd be backtracking, unless they wanted to walk another thirteen miles.

The previous owners of the vehicle must've mistreated the poor thing, abusing regular maintenance checkups to ruin its mpg the way they had, that was for damn sure. Ellis gave an irritated huff.

Nick, as it turned out, wanted to go the thirteen forward. Coach and Rochelle wanted to go the five back. And Ellis, well, heck if he knew what was the right call… sure shootin' he could hoof it the next thirteen, though it'd make for an awful long day considering the ten they had put behind them before acquiring the Pinto. What more concerned him was the lack of vehicles they had passed on the drive. Oh, they had passed a few in the last thirty miles, but most of them had been wrecked or turned upside down.

That, and they had passed a lotta zombies.

As they all got out of the car, Nick took to clearing the area, magnum firing cleanly as he took down six of the nearby wandering monstrosities. "The place is probably crawling with these things," he said off-handedly, reloading.

"And what's to say the next place isn't?" Coach eyed him.

Nick glared back, stuffing his gun into the holster at his thigh. "Nothing. But at least we'd be further down the road."

There was a brief pause. Ellis could tell that as far as Coach was concerned, the argument had already been won the moment Rochelle sided with him earlier. Mostly because the gambler couldn't form a majority by himself what with Ellis 'holding-out' like he was. Ellis tentatively stepped around the car to join them on the right side.

"I'm gettin' real sick of your attitude, Nick," the elder man grumbled.

The conman turned and lifted a supple eyebrow. "Fine, you know what? Maybe I'll just go myself." He swept out a hand south with an all too confident smirk. "Then, you won't have to deal with my 'attitude'." His fingers made the quotation marks in the air, though the tone of his voice was enough to get the implication across on its own.

Ellis felt his stomach do a flip-flop. "Whoa, whoa," he quickly stepped in between them. He looked back and forth at the each of them, making sure both were calming down. "Let's not get hasty none," he said. He looked up at Nick, feeling… well, honestly, a little hurt by his threat. He thought they had gotten past the whole 'I'd be better off without all you' jag he'd been on their first day together, at least, he hadn't brought it up since.

The man's green eyes shifted and unhardened when they met the blue. "Relax, El, I didn't mean it."
"Like hell," Coach grunted, folding his arms.

Nick’s brow drew down, but he didn’t say anything more, sinking into a brooding silence.

Rochelle shifted awkwardly on her feet, still standing close to the car, having kept out of the argument thus far, probably not wanting to aggravate it or make it worse. "So, we're heading back, right?" she asked off-handedly, scratching an itch.

He felt Coach and Nick’s glances both round on him. Ellis swallowed uncomfortably and studied his feet, stalling for a little time to think.

Damn he hated bein' stuck in the middle of decidin' things like this.

And he imagined if he sided with Nick, it'd start a real ruckus.

Nick, however, spared him the decision. "Yeah, we are," he said, his feet already starting into motion, headed northward briskly. All of them were a little surprised by his quick change of mind, Ellis included. Rochelle bent to get the few scant supplies they had out of the car; Coach took their backpack from her and put it on. Ellis snagged the knapsack of food and water and his hunting rifle, securing it to his back. Both Coach and Rochelle began walking, but chose to maintain the distance the cardshark had gained on them, staying in the rear. Ellis gave them each a glance, before jogging to catch up with the man.

Nick emotionlessly plugged off what was in front of him as he went along, his face pulled into a deep, but unreadable concentration. Ellis wasn't even sure if he had noticed him when he jogged up on his right. He waited a moment in lockstep, then plucked up the courage to speak. "Hey, uh…” he started, peering at him from around the lifted gun. The conman gave him his attention; Ellis quickly began fiddling with his hat. "I woulda agreed wit'chu… 'bout goin'."

"I know."

Ellis tilted his head. "You did?" he asked.

There was a subtle nod and another shot from the magnum.

Ellis straightened up, pulling his shoulders back; they gave a little crack with the stretch. He wasn't sure what to say to that, cuz if Nick had in fact known, like he was saying he did, that seemed like more of a reason to argue pressing on towards Yulee than relenting and going back up to Kingsland.

Didn't it?

The green eyes flitted over. "But thanks."

"Oh, no problem," Ellis drawled. He fiddled with the pistol on his waist. "Ya want some help?" he asked. Nick didn't respond for a moment, reloading once more. Ellis blinked, then blushed, hoping he hadn't come off wrong with the offer. His tone quickly changed to an apologetic one. "I know ya got it covered, I was jus'…"

"I'm not angry at you, kid." A smile fluttered across his features, as if to prove it. But Ellis was busy being impressed by his ability to read him with such ease. "A little irritated by the situation," the gambler admitted, "but not you."

Ellis scratched at the back of his head. "That one was my bad."

"You got us another twenty-five miles down the road," Nick reminded him. "What would have
been a full day's walk took half an hour cuz of you."

"I guess'so…" His mood began to lift. He smiled appreciatively. "Hey will you stay up on watch wit' me tuhnigh?"

The conman laughed. He seemed to weigh something in his head before responding. Ellis watched as the man put on a sneaky grin. "You don't have to ask. It's not a date."

The hick felt himself blush a second time. The reason they had been paired together the first time back in Savannah was because neither of them had been tired yet. Since then it'd just developed into the routine. He and Nick stayed up for six, then Coach and Ro' stayed up for six, then they got as far as they could in the next twelve or so hours before repeating the process. But in the short week that they had all been together, Ellis had grown attached to those six hours he got with the man, who seemed to understand him and listened to him and at the same time challenged him just a little bit. His mouth began to work awkwardly. "No, but, I mean… well…"

But the conman was quick to reassure him. "Of course I will, El." He switched his magnum to his left. "You take right, okay? I'm going to get in a little practice with this side."

Ellis lifted his pistol and smiled. He knew the man didn't need the practice, but he didn't care, just happy to be so readily accepted.
Chapter 4

Nick had been right about the swarm of zombies.

As they walked down off the northbound off-ramp, they were greeted by at least two dozen of the angry creatures, hissing and growling as they ran towards them. It had given Ellis more than enough reason to whip the machete off his hip and slice his way through half of them while the other three backed him up. The zombies practically lined themselves up for him and he dispatched them with several flourishing swings.

He lopped off a final head and gave a whoop, twirling the blade in a circle with his wrist. "That's how it's done right!" he announced, pulling his bill down further over his forehead.

Rochelle flashed him a quick thumbs up and Coach gave a nod before taking to scratching his scruffy chin.

The hick peered over at the conman, eager to garner his reaction as well, but the man's attention was to his far left, under the overpass.

"Nick?" he asked.

The green eyes blinked, then moved to focus on him. "Way to go, Tiger," he inputted, voice low.

The words would have normally made his chest swell, but the man's prior distraction deflated it for him. Ellis felt his eyebrow lift, wondering what he had been staring at, his own eyes now scrutinizing the direction with a sort of annoyance.

The other two hadn't noticed Nick's distraction.

"Sign says we just got a little further to go," Coach said, inclining his head at a sheet wood board that had been erected to the railing.

"Thank goodness," Rochelle said. "My feet are killing me."

"Just make sure nothing else does," Nick mumbled with a half-sided grin.

They stayed to the sidewalk, crossing an intersection. "Looks like we got eee-llec-tricity," Ellis drawled, motioning at the streetlights that shone a constant green for the high-traffic through-street and red for lesser. It was one of those ones that was rigged to operate with metal detectors, so when cars got in a particular lane, it'd flip to accommodate them.

Which probably made this the longest red light ever, cuz there weren't no traffic to switch for.

As they passed by the corner, he couldn't help but give the crosswalk button a push to force it into changing.

The system gave an immediate chirp and he winced, not even having considered the possibility that it'd be fixed up for blind folks too. Coach shot him a disparaging glare that made his shoulders droop. Nick and Rochelle both pulled close as the chirps continued and the indicator across the street displayed the count-down. Ellis gawked. Twenty freaking seconds? It wasn't even that big of an intersection!

He quickly switched to his pistol, eyes darting around him. He could hear the scrambling of feet. Nick leveled his magnum, east; Rochelle peered through her scope, south; Coach closed in the
rear direction from where they had come. They waited, wordlessly.

All four of them began firing seconds later.

Zombies poured out in all directions.

Thankfully, out in the open as they were, the creatures had to close quite a distance to reach them, and that gave them a significant advantage. In his head he kept track of the shots.

Nick tugged his eighth. Ellis briefly backed him in the split second it took him to shove another clip in. He returned to his own angle until he had to feed a new magazine into his own pistol. Now Ro’ reached fifteen; he turned a 180° to plug a few coming her way and Nick tossed the magnum into his left hand to cover his angle during his short absence. Coach shoved a new shell into his shotgun with each shot he took, taking aim for any zombies that made the mistake of being clumped, maximizing the spray of his ammo. Ellis turned from Ro’ as Nick reloaded a second time, and his eyes flitted to the blinking display.

9… 8… 7… Chirp, chirp, chirp.

Nick covered his reloading time again. The brunt was now coming from the south.

"Boys…?" Rochelle's voice was laced with a hint of panic as her fingers fumbled at the empty clip of her rifle.

All three men turned to mow down the predicament headed her way. Coach half-unloaded to a remainder of four. Ellis blasted his balance to the west while the older man refilled to capacity.

2… and 1.

A few more frenzied moments.

Then silence.

All four heaved a sigh. Ellis straightened his hunched posture awkwardly, rolling his neck.

Coach's gun smoked at the barrel. "Can't'cha keep your hands off anything, boy?" he asked gruffly.

"Not really…" Ellis mumbled, taking cover under his hat.

Nick cast the older man a glance, twirling his magnum on his finger into its holster, his face the picture of calm despite the onslaught. "The kid probably did us a favor," he said, admiring the littering of corpses. "Cleared things out."

Rochelle gave a shrug of her pink shoulders. "A little warning might have been nice," she laughed semi-uneasily. "But yeah, it sure did. Thanks, Ellis."

Coach grunted. Ellis felt mollification, but moreover, he felt a kind of gladness and light-headedness that the conman had stood up for him, even if had been kind of a stupid thing to have gone and done in retrospect.

They stepped their way around the bodies, following another safehouse sign to the right and down the street a few blocks.

Ellis scrunched up his nose and Rochelle gave an exasperated sigh.

"Son of a–!" Nick cursed.
The safehouse was a converted McDonald's. Where the entrances had once been now stood the thick red metal doors, and all of the original sheet glass windows had been replaced with a dull grey steel. But what had given them all pause was the huge crowd of zombies wandering the spacious parking lot. They were as of yet unaware of their presence, but there sure were a lot of them.

"Goddammit," Coach grunted at the spectacle. "You'd think there wasn't a better place to hang out than a rest stop in Southern Georgia."

Ellis noticed Nick's face was a wash of "I told you so", but the man kept it to himself.

One of the zombies upchucked quite monumentally then, emptying what had to be the entire contents of its stomach onto the pavement in a single projectile heave. A few others nearby followed suit.

"Must be some good eats," the cardshark commented. Rochelle blanched.

Ellis readied his machete once more, fingers tightening around the handle. He didn't have many glock clips left, and he didn't want to waste any of the 7 mm Remington mags for his hunting rifle in the chance he might not be able to replace them. Rochelle nervously rubbed her palms on her jeans, likely to get rid of any perspiration there that might make her hands slip on her weapon. Ellis knew that one. His hands were always getting all sweaty, especially when he got all pumped up.

"Hold up," the oldest man grumbled at the both of them, now turning to dig through the bag on his back. He removed a pipe bomb– they still had a few they had found in the hotel in Savannah, but they had used them rather sparingly on account of the fact they didn't know when or where or even if they'd be finding any more. Coach depressed the button on the side and heaved the small device quite professionally into the center of the lot. The beeping immediately attracted the desired attention as every nearby zombie rushed forward to claw at it in a mindless rage.

Both Rochelle and Coach turned their heads away for the bloody explosion that followed shortly thereafter.

Ellis stuck out his tongue at the smear left on the asphalt. "Well now that's sumthin' that really kills a person's appetite."

"I donno, I could go for a BigMac," the gambler grinned back at the football player. "What about you, Coach?" It wasn't clear whether or not he was teasing him, but Ellis figured he probably was, cuz really when wasn't he?

"Mmhmm…" the man mumbled, clearly in favor of the idea, regardless of whether or not he was being poked fun of. "And an order a'fries," he added. "Extra large."

"Well, let's go git us some grub!" Ellis announced jovially, leading the way down to the restaurant.
Chapter 5

They found plenty of food in the walk-in freezer. Nick watched the goosebumps prickle up over Ellis' exposed forearms as he helped him collect the patties, fries and other various foodstuffs. Coach and Rochelle meanwhile busied themselves firing up the grill and fryer. He and the hick found everything they needed to prepare burgers, including cheese, onions, pickles, lettuce—though that wasn't looking too good anymore—the works. Some of it didn't really belong in the freezer, like the buns, but it had been placed there by someone to ensure it stayed, while not fresh, edible, which was the important part.

"Thank God for deep frozen meat," Nick mumbled, dropping a bag of quarter-pounders on the counter. "A freezer like that could hold a lot of food for a long time… assuming the power stayed on."

Ellis dumped the sack of fries into the fryer net in preparation; the oil needed a few more minutes to heat before he could drop it in to start cooking. "The sick thing is," Ellis commented with a sideways grin, "these'd prolly last forever with or without it!"

Nick stuck out his tongue with semi-mock disgust. McDonald's fries were rather… notorious for their unnatural longevity after all.

Rochelle opened the bag of patties and threw a few of the meat pucks on the grill. They started to sizzle and pop instantly and she reached for the sliced cheese next.

Coach took a deep breath, practically hovering over her shoulder as she worked gracefully over the slate. "S'already smellin' good," he said, eyes half closed in desire.

Rochelle laughed as she reached for a spatula hanging above her head. "I worked in a fast food restaurant for a little while before I broke into the news business," she said, now flipping a patty over with the metal utensil. "Who knew it'd come in handy again, huh?"

"I'll say it sure-as-shit is now," Coach nodded.

Nick folded his arms and leaned against the countertop coolly. It was kind of gross but he was salivating himself, looking forward to a meal of grease and a couple thousand calories. For a good few minutes none of them spoke, listening to the sole sound of sizzling.

Ellis stared at the vat of oil in a kind of half cross-eyed fashion that signaled to Nick that the kid was in thought. A grin spread across the hick's features just a moment later. "Did I ever tell you guys about the time mah buddy Keith tried tuh deep fry a turkey?"

Rochelle took her eyes off the grill long enough to raise a thin eyebrow at him. She laughed. "I don't think it'd fit, sweetie."

"Well, that was part a'the problem," Ellis scratched his head. "An' he didn't pick no small turkey neither, sucker had tuh be at least twenty-five pounds! He kept havin' tuh turn it around tuh git it evenly cooked on all sides, an' then his arms started gettin' tired…"

Coach frowned at him. "There a point to this story, boy?" he asked, clearly still in a bad mood from the kid's earlier miss-step at the crosswalk.

Ellis shrugged with dismissal. "Shit, iono." The fryer gave a beep, signaling it had fully heated. The hick smiled again and dropped the net in, then turned his attention back to his companions. "Well anyway," he continued, undeterred, "the damn thing slipped an' ended up splashin' him
sumthin' awful. Third degree burns over ninety percent'a 'is body!"

The kid was obviously exaggerating, but it didn't stop the story from amusing him at least. "Deep fried Keith," Nick chuckled, examining his fingernails. "Sounds tasty."

Ellis stuck out his tongue at him. "Weren't nothin' tasty about it; looked gross as hell."

"You sure have an active imagination," the hooped earrings bobbed as Rochelle shook her head with incredulity and flipped the burgers.

Ellis' face rearranged into a frown and he scratched his nose, studying the checkerboard tiled floor.

Nick felt his spine quiver ever so slightly. He licked his top lip. "I'm going to look for ammo," he announced, popping himself off the counter with a quick flex of his back. He regarded them briefly. "I'll assume you guys can handle the minimum wage jobs?" He held up his left hand and provocatively rubbed his fingers and thumb together, trying to entice a negative response from either of his companions.

Ellis perked, either ignoring or not catching the insult— not that it had been meant for him anyway. "M'comin' wit'cha," he said quickly, "I ain't hardly got no more pistol rounds."

Nick gave a passive shrug.

Of course, the gesture was a bold-faced lie, because he had grown quite fond of when the kid chose to follow him around. And this was hardly an exception. He proceeded out of the kitchen, Ellis on his heels, a smirk on his face.

"Asshole," Coach said once he was out of earshot.

"I'm going to spit on his burger," Rochelle mumbled with another flip.
Thankfully, like the food situation, the ammunition stockpile was just as good. Rather ironically, all of it had been stored in the 'play place' of the McDonald's. Weapons littered the multi-colored tables, to which the hick rushed into the room with a "oooooooh!" and started touching every single last one, fiddling with their various mechanisms.

The kid was goddamn adorable was what he was.

Which was probably what compelled him to ridicule the twenty-three year old a little. "Didn't your mom ever tell you not to put your hands on everything?" he asked. "You don't know where those have been," he teased, as if to imply the hick could catch germs or a cold or something from handling all the guns.

Ellis looked up at him and cocked an eyebrow. "Well sure she did," he drawled. "Tol me tuh keep outta the mud too, but heck if I listened." He grinned.

"I can tell that one," Nick said, casting a glance at the dirty overalls.

Ellis just chuckled and lifted a scope to his face, peeking through it towards the corkscrew slide.

Nick observed him sneakily while he was still distracted, letting his green eyes dance over the slender form. He had had a hell of a time keeping his eyes off him during the short twenty-second skirmish that had occurred outside. Kid knew how to shoot. And it was sexy as hell. Shit, just look at the way the S of his spine curved into those baggy coveralls, tied so tauntingly low on his hips… the way his taut stomach--

Ellis looked back up.

Nick turned on his heel and grabbed both a box of .50s and 9mm out of the little shoe rack, quickly redirecting his former thoughts. "You know, you have pretty much got this down to an art," he said conversationally, tossing the lower caliber container to the kid.

Ellis caught it and his brow knit, baited. "What'chu mean?" he asked.

Nick regarded him. "Counting shots," he said with mild deference. Flattery had always gotten him his way with women in the past, not that he expected it to work quite the same on Ellis.

The hick laughed as he pried open the box to get at the little cylinders encased in brass. "Well shucks, yeah, t'only makes sense." He jingled a few into his palm with a shrug. "Sides, you do it too."

Ah El, always so humble.

"Four guns is a lot to keep track of," he continued. He began to pull the multitude of empty cartridges from his pockets where he had stored them, setting them one by one on the red plexiglas table in front of him. He flashed him a coy smile. "Especially when the hands aren't all the same."

Ellis cocked an eyebrow, clearly confused by his usage of the word 'hands' instead of 'rounds'.

"I'm saying you'd make a good card player," Nick elucidated smoothly.

The hick blushed and his fingers hurriedly started into motion to fill a clip. "Naw," he shook his head, as he finished one and started another. "Playin' cards an' shootin' guns ain't anythin' alike."
Nick gave a shrug. "If you say so." Both men continued to refill, but Nick kept his eyes on El surreptitiously, eyes half lidded.

The hick snorted rather suddenly. "How many a'those you got?" he laughed incredulously.

The conman picked up his fifth from the table. "Not enough," he replied sarcastically. He had actually been collecting them like some kind of packrat; whenever he came across another clip he stuffed it away in a pocket. The count at this point was eleven, but he wanted to get his hands on more if possible because eighty-eight shots wasn't sufficient.

At least, not if they were going to start coming across hordes like the last two with any increasing frequency.

Not to mention the hulking thing that he'd seen lumber under the overpass…

His stomach tightened involuntarily.

But El came to his rescue, his voice quickly driving the thought away, drowning it in drawl. "I actshuhly ain't ever played nuthin' more than War with my younger cousins," he admitted, scratching his chin.

Nick dropped his gaze to him. "Oh, that's got to be rectified," he delivered deadpan. A smart kid like El ought to be at least playing something with a sizable skill component. He wouldn't peg the kid for Bridge or anything, but shit, goddamn War??

Ellis laughed and returned the box of bullets to the cubby. He briefly searched them, no doubt for refills for his rifle. "Well, y'see, mah Ma said that cards is 'the devil's bible',' he explained. "I got a real floggin' when she found out later that night I had been playin'." He gave a short whistle, as if to indicate the severity of it.

Nick shook his index finger at him. "Your mom's got it all wrong, kid. Idle hands are the devil's tools." Ellis gave him an amused glance, his lips pursed—obviously he had heard that one as well, but had never equated the two; Nick continued. "And I tell you right now," he flashed a devilish grin himself, "I teach you how to play poker and your mom's going to be real proud of you, cuz your hands aren't ever gonna be idle again."

Ellis blew a raspberry at him, now taking a seat and leaning it back on its two back legs as he propped up his boots on the blue table. "Or maybe you jus' got an interestin' way of interpretin' things," he said.

Nick chuckled and finished loading his eleventh clip, stuffing it into his magnum with finality as it gave a click. "That's a safe bet."

There was another short silence. Ellis studied his hands which he had folded on his lap. "'Sides," he said, scratching his nose, "no one ever said I didn't know how tuh play, all I said was I hadn't."

Nick eyed him shiftily, disinclined to believe the claim. "Oh yeah? Who taught you?"

"Keith," Ellis replied shortly.

He should have figured that. Nick bit his lip with mild irritation. Asshole beat him to the punch.

The hick grinned at him keenly, removing his hat to momentarily run a hand through his hair before replacing it. "But I'm a'bettin' you could prolly teach me a hell'va lot better," he nodded and Nick allowed himself a half-smile. Ellis shook his head. "Keith was always losin' all sorts
a'money whenever we had poker night at his house." He gave a quick shrug. "I jus' watched a'course. But Keith-- aw, Keith'd buy all this beer an' try tuh get the guys tuh drink it, so they'd get intoxicated so he'd have an edge, y'know? But then he always ended up drinkin' hisself an' purdy soon he didn't have an edge no more. Guy was like clockwork; completely cockeyed by nine. An' next thing you knew, he was out another hundred or two." Nick laughed; Ellis paused to eye him. "An' you, well..." he chuckled, tipping the seat forward again and leaning onto his elbows; Nick watched his biceps flex, as the blue eyes addressed him slyly, "you prolly don't ever lose, do you?"

He stared at the young man wordlessly, testing his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

So he had complimented the kid and the kid was complimenting him back.

It was nothing more than that, right?

Nick returned to the conversation at hand. He was tempted to play along with the claim, though the truth was that he lost plenty of rounds, all the time, but he knew when he had a bad hand or when others had a better one and never bet high on them, so he always left the table at a gain. Though that in itself could easily be considered 'not losing'. "Not... often," he responded, finding his compulsion towards honestly odd.

Ellis obviously thought it was too, giving him a confused look. He scratched his chin, dismissing it. "Well, anyways, I dun see why I couldn't give it a shot. Now," he added with a snark. "Ain't got nothin' tuh lose."

His face fell suddenly, playfulness drained out. "Or a Ma tuh swat mah behind..."

Nick gave an uncomfortable shift on his feet. "Your mom was probably right to keep you from playing," he said quickly, though he had no idea why he said it. Maybe he thought it'd bring the kid some solace, or at least distract him from his missing mother. He motioned his hand. "Gambling is an addiction. And if you play half as bad as you say your friend did, you're going end up flat broke and on the streets." Ellis laughed at this. "Well, he had his Uncle tuh keep him afloat," he said, and Nick gave an internal sigh of relief that he had managed to effectively redirect the conversation. The hick continued. "Ma didn't lend me so much as a dime, an' even if she a'had, last thing I would'a gone an' done was put it on the line like that."

Nick studied him, a little bit impressed by the show of responsibility amidst all his playful nature.

From the kitchen he heard the fry alarm start going off. He inwardly cursed the timing. Just when he was getting to know a little more about the kid. It figured.

The mechanic leapt to his feet eagerly at the sound. Nick swept out his hand in an 'after you' and the kid tipped his hat as he passed him. The conman followed.

Ellis, however, looked back at him with a sideways smirk, resuming their conversation. "I still dun think mah Ma would like ya vury much though, Nick, if'n she met'cha."

"What?" Nick asked as he skirted around a table to come to his side as they made their way toward the front of the restaurant. "You're telling me you'd actually introduce me to the old crone?"

"Hey hey, watch it," Ellis said warningly, though he was all grin. His eyelids drew down slyly. "She ain't all that much older than you, Nick."
Even though it was supposed to be a slam to his advancing age, Nick had to stifle a laugh for the implication it gave the other direction– that his mom had had kids when she was quite young (her teens considering Ellis' own age) which wasn't what he had meant at all.

"What'chu smirkin' at?" Ellis snorted.


The hick fell privy to the unspoken joke. "Aww, you ass," Ellis gave him a friendly shove as they entered the kitchen. "You have no shame."
Ellis put away five burgers. Only Coach, who slathered his in an excess of ketchup—perhaps only to lubricate them on their rather quick way down—had consumed more, his count at seven. And 'daintily' Nick and Rochelle had three apiece, totaling eighteen between the four of them. All of which didn't include the rounds of fries and apple pies.

Ellis couldn't recall a time he had eaten more, save Thanksgiving dinner at his aunt's house.

Stuffed to capacity, it took them all a while to even consider moving from their spots in the large round corner booth of the restaurant.

Rochelle took to scooping up the dozens of small twisted empty ketchup packets onto the plastic tray for disposal. Ellis reached an arm over, offering to get up for her to get rid of them; he was on one of the ends while she sat between Coach and Nick. "Thanks, Ellis," she said sweetly, handing it over. The hick tipped his hat and popped out of his seat, proceeding to the nearest trashcan. He dumped them in through the swinging hatch and returned the tray to the top with the rest. No reason not to clean up after themselves and be polite to the next people who came through this way after all.

Coach leaned back in his seat and patted his stomach. "Well, I donno about you all," he said, "but I'm gonna hit the hay. Been a successful day and we got more ground to cover in the mornin'."

Nick set his drink of water in a paper cup down and flicked his wrist at the older man dismissively as if to say 'go ahead'.

"Where'ya gonna sleep?" Ellis asked curiously, now returning to the table, though he didn't sit. The McDonald's didn't offer much in the way of places to lay down other than the floor, especially for someone Coach's size and height. And the hardened tiles didn't seem like they'd make a very good sleeping surface.

Coach frowned, looking around uncertainly. "Guess one'a the booths," he admitted wearily. "Ain't got much more option."

Nick chuckled.

The football player eyed him. "You got somethin' to say, Nicholas?"

Ellis shifted on his feet, hoping this wasn't about to go anywhere, but getting the bad feeling it was.

The conman stood and smoothed down the front of his jacket; Ellis watched him do it, watched him trail his hands slowly down his own form, carefully and deliberately. It was a very eye-catching motion… Ellis found himself unable to look anywhere else as the hands graced over chest and abdomen, coming to rest on his thighs where the coat ended. "Just that I'm glad I'm not the booth," the gambler said, flashing a smile. Ellis winced.

Coach rolled his eyes. "You got about five more years before all that," he inclined his head at his torso, "turns into a gut."

"Doubtful," Nick mumbled, entwining his fingers behind his head smugly, showoff-ishly. Ellis was still staring at his chest, which gapped from the dress shirt wider in the position.

"Boys," Rochelle interrupted with exasperation, "is this really necessary?" Her eyes darted
between the two men with a harshness that said she was about ready to slap them both if they didn't cut it out right now.

The elderly man gave a grunt, backing down.

"I'll be outside," Nick grumbled, pushing past in his own form of surrender. Ellis nearly turned and grabbed his jacket to stop him, but restrained himself, letting the man go even though he didn't want him to and it left him with the uncomfortable aftermath of the dialogue.

Rochelle shook her head. "Seriously, why is he like that??" she addressed Ellis, motioning at the gambler as he disappeared through the door. The hick blinked, feeling rather put on the spot, but Rochelle continued, apparently not actually expecting a real response to her question. "I don't know how you can stand staying up with him," she said seriously, leaning on an elbow. "I really don't."

Ellis opened his mouth to say that Nick didn't treat him that way, but thought better of it.

"He's just an asshole, like I said before," Coach interrupted with a shrug. "Nothin' more to it than that, Ro'."

Apparently they had been having this discussion already, while he was absent. He pursed his lips tightly together, wondering what all had been said… behind his back… behind Nick's back…

"But everyone has a story," the woman spoke, her journalism roots showing through. She shook her head again, this time with further exasperation. "I don't know. It just seems to me like he has to have some reason to be such a jackass." She laughed. "Not that he'd ever open up to tell us if there was."

"I wouldn't hold my breath," Coach agreed.

Rochelle sighed. "I just wish he could get down off that egomaniacal pedestal of his and join the rest of us 'down here'."

Ellis dropped his gaze to his feet, uncomfortable to be hearing this. His ears burned a little as he stared far too intently at a crack in the tiling, dead silent.

Rochelle touched him on the arm. He gave a little jump; he hadn't even noticed her stand up and come to his side. "Ellis, sweetie, you okay, honey?" she asked, voice laced with gentle affect.

"Stomach ache," he lied swiftly, without looking up. Good as cover as any with as much as he had eaten.

"Maybe you should lie down," she offered.

Ellis shook his head stubbornly. "Naw, I'm fine, dun worry 'bout it. I jus'..." he hesitated. "You... you an' Coach should git some rest."

"You sure?" she asked carefully. "You don't look okay."

"A'course he's not," Coach laughed ruefully, pulling himself from his own seat at last. "The way he gets to spend the next six hours I wouldn't look too happy either."

Ellis bit his lip angrily at the man's assumption for his distress. As it so turned out, he had been looking forward to spending time with Nick. All day in fact. If the two of them were already settled in for the night, he could be now. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself a little before he spoke. "You know, maybe if ya'd jus' give him a chance, you wouldn't think he such'a
bad guy."

They both laughed at him.

His face felt like it must have gone the same color as the ketchup.

Rochelle leaned against the table, scuffing her boots together in an absent-minded motion. "Ellis, sweetie, we've been giving him a chance." One of her eyebrows lifted as she studied the hick, as if to scry his intentions. Ellis dropped his face behind his hat to break eye contact with her, not in full agreement with her evaluation of the situation. She went on. "It's good you have the patience to deal with him. You sure have a lot more of it than Coach and I."

"You can say that again," the elder man mumbled.

Rochelle gave a shrug. "Besides, he hasn't exactly given us a chance."

"He's with us, ain't he?" Ellis argued.

"Yeah, for now," Coach gave a belly-laugh. "But you saw the stunt he pulled earlier, boy. He was ready to leave us all for Yulee."

"Ugh, I know," Rochelle agreed, rolling her eyes.

But he hadn't left them for Yulee. He hadn't. He'd been willing to go back to Kingsland the moment they locked eyes with one another, blue on green.

Not that Coach or Ro would know that.

Ellis frowned, because it seemed to him like they were intentionally missing his point though. That Nick wasn't a bad person who was 'out to get them' or make their lives difficult, that he was part of the team and wanted to get to New Orleans just the same as the rest of them. "All I was tryin' tuh say is that you could try tuh be a little nicer," he tried one last time. "Ya never know, you might get some kindness in return."

Rochelle peered at him. She pressed a hand to his left shoulder, squeezing. He looked up at her this time, and she was smiling. "You're probably right, Ellis. We're all in this mess together..." she paused as Coach shifted, "for now, anyway; so we ought to stay civil and not harbor any aggressions. We'll both try to be a little nicer to Nick and 'turn the other cheek'." Her gaze settled on the stationary football player. "We can do that, right, Coach?"

The man gave a grunt and folded his arms over his chest, nodding solemnly. "Yeah, alright."

Ellis smiled too, a genuine smile. He tipped his hat to each of them, glad to have come to an accord. "Thanks Ro', Coach."

"Don't be thankin' me yet, youngin'," the heavyset man joked. "I haven't made good on it yet."
Chapter 8

It took them a few moments to get settled in, but once they had, Ellis waited only a couple anxious minutes longer inside before heading outside to search for Nick.

It wasn't hard to find him, in fact, as he rushed out of the building he almost ran right past him. He was standing, propped against the wall just a few feet from the entrance, hands in his pockets, one leg crossed over the other. Ellis was quite glad he hadn't wandered far, though he wouldn't have stopped searching until he found him if he had.

The conman glanced over at him. "Howdy, par'ner," he said with fake accent and a tip of an imaginary hat.

Ellis chuckled. "Evenin', slick," he returned, unable to conjure anything other than his Southern twang.

"Tuck the twerps into bed?" Nick asked.

Ellis gave a snort because referring to Coach and Rochelle as 'twerps' that needed a bedtime was sort of ridiculous, but still amusing. "Yeah, I got 'em tuh settle down eventually," he went along with it, the sentiment closer to the truth than the conman had any right to know. He shook his head. "But heck'if they'd let me read 'em a bedtime story," he quipped, alluding to his prodigious story-telling.

Come to think of it he had been reminded of a time when Keith stuck a straw in each nostril and attempted to drink Coca-cola through his nose... it hadn't worked out all that well for the guy, needless to really say.

Nick snerked. "Their loss." He let his form slide down against the wall, until he was sitting, then propped his elbows on his knees, hands on his elbows, and invited him to sit with a subtle gesture of his hand. "My gain," he smiled.

The hick eagerly plopped himself right beside the man, no more than a foot away. Only after he had done it did he realize he maybe shouldn't have, but it was too late to shift away and anyway, Nick didn't offer any immediate objections to his proximity. Really it was just Ellis' intention to be close enough so they could hear each other just fine while speaking quietly– after all, they weren't technically in the saferoom– but still, he didn't want to make the gambler uncomfortable none.

Ellis waited a few moments longer just in case he was asked to move, but Nick remained motionless and silent, so he figured it must be alright with him.

Ellis scratched the scruff growing on his chin. "So... what'chu wanna talk about tuhnigh't?" he asked eagerly.

Nick grinned and dropped his gaze to the ground between his legs, shaking his head a little. "I don't know," came the bemused reply. His head lifted with a smirk. "You want to talk about something?"

That almost made it sound like Nick thought he had something in particular in mind. Well, he had asked him earlier to stay up on watch with him, so maybe he had unintentionally given him a reason to believe he did. Ellis fiddled with his hat. "Shucks, beats me," he chuckled, feeling sort of chagrinned that he didn't really have anything either. They sat in a momentary silence.
"Your hat," Nick said.

Ellis blinked at him, pulling an eyebrow downward. "Whatta'bout it?"

"Tell me about your hat," he requested, and Ellis thought at first he must be joking. But then from the subtle smile playing about the man's lips he realized he was honestly asking.

The hick let himself laugh, a pile of memories already stacking up in his head, too many to say all at once even if he tried. "It's jus' an old thing," he admitted, now removing it from his head to study the front of it-- the logo-- in his hands. He tapped the patch with his index finger. "When Keith an' I opened up our garage we decided tuh git matchin' hats. Sort of like they was a part'a our uniform or whatever I suh'ppose, but also I guess fer advertisin' a bit, tuh let people 'round town know we were runnin' a shop an' all..." He paused a moment to grin. "An' at first Keith an' I had a bit uv'a bet goin' or sumthin' as tuh which one'uv us could wear ours longer an' not take 'em off, y'know? Shit, we was wearin' 'em tuh bed, wearin' 'em in the shower-- heck-- even wearin' 'em in church. Shoot fire, was Pastor Redfield mad!"

Nick laughed. "Don't tell me I just made you lose your bet," he said, tipping his head at the accessory that no longer sat on his head.

Ellis gave a snort. "Aw, hell no, I won a long time ago." He turned the cap over in his hands. "See, Keith's ladyfriend got real angry at him fer wearin' it 'in the sack',' he gave the cardshark a sideways glance and a quick curl of the side of his mouth, "an' I guess it was either her or the hat."

Nick joined him in a chuckle. "Women," he said jokingly. "One thing they will never understand is a bet between one guy and another." The sentiment amused Ellis, and the man lifted his right hand and stuck out his palm, a wordless inquiry if he could see said cap.

Ellis bit his lip, fiddling with the edges of it protectively. Usually it never left his head, let alone got out of his reach. He knew it shouldn't be a big deal, cuz it was 'just a hat', right? But that's not how he felt. He eyed the conman's waiting hand, eyed the single ring around his middle finger. But he supposed now that if he was gonna trust anyone with holding onto his prized possession in this crazy new world, it would be Nick. Reluctantly he handed it over.

The gambler examined it with odd care, fingers brushing over the mesh and seams with a delicacy that made clear he knew how much it meant to him.

Letting him touch it was rather personal, like touching an extension of his body almost. The talented fingers caressed the bill.

Ellis' breath nearly hitched.

"So you've had this... what... two, three years?" he asked.

"Longer than that," Ellis laughed.

Nick's face readjusted with a bit of surprise. "Four?" came the curious next guess.

"Try six," he grinned with a touch of pride.

Nick tipped his head, truly impressed. "You're telling me you started up a shop when you were seventeen?"

Ellis nodded. "Yessssssir," he held the reply smugly.
"Well, I don't know what the law is in Georgia," the conman regarded him, "but in Nevada I'm pretty sure you have to be eighteen to start your own business."

"Oh, yeah, it's the same here," the hick nodded. "Keith's three years older than me though, so he's the one who done filled out all the paperwork an' such; I jus' worked under the table fer a year," he explained.

"I guess I figured you were both the same age," the gambler chuckled and gave a shrug. "Hanging out together as much as you say you did."

"Well, we was the same grade," Ellis elucidated. "He got held back a'couple of years back in grade school, an' me, well, I took this ac-cel-er-ated program, or whatever ya call it, tuh graduate a year early." He grinned from ear-to-ear. He didn't mean to brag, but it was one of his accomplishments he was more proud of because he had flown through his classes without so much as a lick of trouble, and he could still see his beaming Ma as he was awarded his diploma on that hot summer day in June.

Nick seemed to perceive his sense of fulfillment, though he issued no praise on the matter. Instead there was something decidedly different from the man. "So then why start a shop?" he asked carefully, his green eyes illuminated in the low light.

Ellis could tell he wanted to know why he hadn't continued with his education instead. Really, that was more of a compliment than telling him congratulations for having graduated early. He scrunched up the bill of his hat awkwardly, inclining his shoulder in half a shrug. "Mah Ma needed the help… financially, a'course."

The conman presented him with a pained half-smile that said he understood and an "oh".

Nick handed back the hat and Ellis took it gratefully. "Well, it's a neat logo."

"Oh yeah," Ellis laughed, "Mah sister Emma's actshuhly the one who designed it." He smiled and touched the patch, fingers tracing the outline of the tow truck. "She was the artistic one in the family; she was good, real good. An' she painted the sign on our garage too! Full size," the hick stretched out his arms as wide as they would go to emphasize his point, "the whole twenty foot span so you could see it from waaaay down the street, an' it looked real swell I kin tell you. That twelve-foot ladder didn't scare her a bit, jus' up there paintin' away like there was no tomorrow. Had a real passion, that girl." Ellis shook his head, reminiscing. "An' she was only eleven at the time, kin you believe it?"

Nick smiled. "Kids can surprise you."

"Yeah, they sure can." Ellis blinked, thinking of all his siblings now– all his younger– and how proud he was of them as they too grew up. Thought of the weekend visits to his Ma's house, catching up, listening to and telling stories. Even as each of them moved out and got their own
jobs and residences they all rendezvoused back at the little house where they grew up to visit with one another from time to time.

Not knowing where they were or how they were made his stomach churn uncomfortably. He forced the feeling back quickly before it could take further hold of him.

"I reckon I'll have a few uv'um," he said, keeping his mouth going so his head wouldn't trip him up. "You know, eventually, not like right now or anythin'," he added quickly. Golly gosh he wasn't ready for kids. Shit, he didn't even have a girlfriend.

Nick chuckled. "Yeah, I should probably have some too."

Ellis quirked an eyebrow. "Ain't'cha?"

The gambler shook his head with a smirk. "Hell no."

Ellis scratched an arm, oddly relieved but still quite surprised. It was good to know that the man's divorce hadn't separated him from any offspring; it was too often kids got left without a father figure from that sort of thing, in his opinion. "Well, I guess tha's fer the better anyhow," he half-mumbled. "On account'a… all this," he shrugged out towards the night, towards the sleepy town.

Towards the zombies.

Silence again permeated their conversation.

Until Nick drew a breath. His voice came out shallow and low. "I'm sorry, kid."

Ellis choked. It had taken the man a long time to say it– unlike Coach and Rochelle, who had offered their condolences their very first day together; though in hindsight, their quickness to offer sympathy when he had simply mentioned in passing that he didn't know where his family had gotten off to spoke more of tact and politeness rather than actual sympathy. Ellis had given up on hearing anything of the like from Nick. The guy seemed like the type to just move on, especially when it came to things in his own life, things that should've effected him greatly, that would have a normal person. Just like water off a windshield after applying a fresh coat of Rain-x. Impenetrable. That's what he was. What he seemed like.

As such, he seemed even less the type to express any form of regret on the behalf of another person.

Ellis closed his eyes momentarily, letting it sink deep. "Thank you," he murmured, touched by the words. Nick remained quiet, though his green eyed gaze stayed on him, watching him with the very mildest of concerns. Ellis swallowed and attempted to regarner his enthusiasm, staring up at the unlit sign in the parking lot. "'Sides, I'm still doin' okay, ain't I? So maybe they is too."

Nick nodded, though guardedly.

"Hell," the mechanic continued, "they prolly headed out a lot earlier than I dun did, when they got word'a the infection."

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What he really didn't understand about the whole situation was why he never got a phone call from his Ma while the phone lines were still up, before she left. Or from Dave, who must've also fled town early from the number of messages he had left him that never got answered; Dave was sometimes pretty bad about getting back to him, but never that bad. Not to mention any of the rest of his family. But shit, someone.

He shifted. "Anyway, suhppose I won't know 'til we git to New Orleans. Maybe they'll have a list or sumthin' 'bout who made it intuh the evacs, maybe even where they been 'ported to…" he thought out loud. He glanced over at the stoney conman, realizing suddenly that he was the only one talking. He shoved away his embarrassment for hogging the conversation. "Anyone yer gonna look up when we git there?" he asked.

"Fraid not," Nick kicked one leg out in front of him lazily, in a mannerism that added he didn't care either. Or at least that he was pretending not to.

Ellis quickly took to looking at the ground. He didn't know what he had expected from the question, but he hadn't expected that. No parents? No siblings? No other relatives? Friends? He thought there'd be someone. Everyone had someone, didn't they?

They should.

Nick should.

He briefly twiddled this thumbs. "You ain't got any brothers or sisters?" he queried timidly; he couldn't even begin to imagine a childhood growing up all alone, without any playmates, confidants.

The gambler peered at him, green eyes discerning, then set his head back against the building. "Nope. I was an only child." An eyebrow lifted and he chuckled, motioning a hand. "And an 'accident' one at that, as I was frequently reminded."

"Yer parents said that?" he asked, incredulously.

Nick nodded. "Tha's a terrible thing for 'em tuh say…" he mumbled, stricken by the harshness. You didn't just tell your kid they were an unwanted mistake. He had been an 'accident' himself, the first of his kin, but so had all of them technically. It wasn't a matter of 'they didn't want them', it was just they had them when they had them, no particular schedule or number of them in mind; they were 'happy accidents', so to speak. It was kind of hard to explain, but he knew his Ma, and his Pa– when he had been alive– loved them all very much.

"Yeah, well, that's about how it happened," Nick went on mildly, lips drawing into the smallest of sneers, "a 'terrible' thing that ruined their perfect lives." Ellis flushed at his matter-of-factness toward the subject, his overall lack of resentment. "Middle of the seventies. Three guesses how it happened," he muttered rhetorically.

Ellis felt his mouth quirk rigidly, unease settling in the pit of his stomach. He had always been taught to 'respect your elders', but he couldn't really imagine now how you could respect your parents in that kind of situation, when you were conceived as a consequence of drug use. Not only must he have been told he was an accident then, but also how said accident occurred. Ellis gave a little shudder at the thought. No wonder Nick hadn't had kids of his own yet, with that kind of experience.

But the man's parents had to have wanted him a little though, if they hadn't sought an abortion.
Right? He desperately tried to justify their actions in his head. Unless they just hadn't had the cash, had spent it elsewhere on other things... but now he was just speculating— he shouldn't do that, not without good reason.

Nick kicked at a rock, sending it sprawling out into the parking lot, bouncing off the asphalt.

He wondered briefly what would Rochelle would say if she was hearing this. If this sort of thing was a good enough 'reason' to be an asshole.

He finally found his voice, though it was meek and tiny. "Man, m'sorry."

"Don't be," Nick snorted. He cast him a sidelong glance. "I'm here now, that's what I can thank them for. About all I can thank them for, but…" he shrugged, not finishing the sentence.

Ellis supposed that much was true. The gift of life or whatever. At least he didn't have any side effects from the drugs, he had been real lucky in that respect from what he heard about pregnancy and substance abuse. Still, it brought up so many questions in his mind about the conman's past, about his childhood...

And he was definitely not brave enough to ask them.

"Well, I'm glad yer here," he admitted.

The gambler looked at him.

"Ain't no one else could pull mah ass outta hot water like you did at the crosswalk," he joked with a grin, attempting levity.

Nick's shoulders gave the tiniest of slumps as his eyes fell away.

Well, he had mussed that one up.

Ellis floundered, but he was unable to find anything else to say that could possibly salvage the lost moment. "We should prolly talk about sumthin' else," he mumbled, defeated, "all this's gettin' downright depressin'…" He scratched the back of his head with an uncomfortable chuckle.

The man's response was as contained as ever. "Whatever you want, kid." Nick looked at him again, and it wasn't a mean look, nor a sad one, it was just a look and nothing more. And it made Ellis pine a little bit on the inside.

What he wanted to do was lean over and give the man a hug, but he kept his hands to himself.
Chapter 9

He didn't manage to secure a lot of sleep that night. Mostly because he couldn't stop thinking.

About two things.

The behemoth that awaited them at the highway.

And the kid who was snoring on the opposite side of the booth.

Part of him wanted to warn the others about what he had seen earlier that day coming down the offramp, but another part of him said he was just being paranoid. In all likelihood, the huge motherfucker had long since wandered off, cleared out of the area, in search of... food or whatever the hell. And even if it hadn't, if they just stayed reasonably quiet and kept moving, the thing probably wouldn't take any notice of them, and there wouldn't be any sort of confrontation, much like their first passing of it. It hadn't been stirred into action like the other regular zombies had been, so maybe he had no cause for alarm. Maybe it wasn't even hostile.

But from what appeared to be eight feet and four, maybe five, hundred pounds of solid zombie, that seemed more like wishful thinking.

He shuddered against the cushion. It was not something he wanted to deal with, regardless of some of the brawls he had taken part in and come out on top off when he had had no right to. You didn't press your luck. You never pressed your luck. That was the rule to any game, high stakes or low. You only faced what you knew you could handle.

The thing had had its back turned. For some reason or another it hadn't heard them.

That had been luck. 100%.

Ellis gave a snort in his sleep and rolled over onto his side, hat nearly falling as he shifted his neck and legs, now facing him. It was somewhat amusing to watch the kid sleep with it on, one of many curiosities he had about him that, thanks to tonight, he had gotten the privilege to learn about. Nick stared at him contemplatively.

"I'm glad yer here..."

He heard the words the hick had spoken to him in his head. He let them repeat again, listening hard to the way they sounded... the way they had been said to him. Because it had rather startled him at the time. Because he hadn't known El felt that way. Sure, the kid liked to follow him around and bend his ear, but he had kind of figured that was just the way the hillbilly was, that he would've done that to anyone if they let him.

But that wasn't just a casual 'I'm glad you're here', it was more of a you-mean-something-to-me 'I'm glad you're here'.

He shut his eyes tightly. He was deluding himself and he knew it.

But the kid really had opened up that night— that was undeniable. Ellis was far from 'closed off', what with all his yammering, but there was a big difference between being told yet another Keith story and the discussion they had had about his garage, or especially about his little sister. He for one hoped she and the rest of Ellis' likely crazy family were alright, but he wasn't going to hold his breath or get the kid's hopes up. Though as far as he could tell, the crazy kid's hopes were already up just about as far as they could be— like the four of them were just making a jaunt down to New Orleans and when they got there he'd be reunited with his family and Ellis could introduce his
newfound friends to them all.

Nick was unable to summon much more than figuring they'd make it to the next safehouse alive, and tonight, he was having difficulty with that much. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

All in all he found it a little ridiculous that the one of them who had the most to lose was also the one who was most optimistic about the whole situation.

But maybe those sorts of things went hand in hand. Anyway, it still kind of bothered him. All he could really do was keep the kid company, be there for him, be supportive. That was what he was doing, right? He studied the placid face a little longer then gave a sigh and returned his gaze to the ceiling, wishing he could sleep so peacefully. But his thoughts wouldn't settle down and his mind kept racing in little circles.

Not to mention a rather throbbing erection, the doubtless result of not having had the opportunity to relieve himself for the past three days. But he was alone now—Coach and Rochelle gone outside to take watch like he and El had done— at least as alone as he was going to get, so he fished it out to quickly take care of business.

Except when he curled a ringed hand around it, he found he didn't just want to get it over with.

He wanted to look back over at the sleeping hick.

Testing his tongue on his upper lip, he allowed his head to incline to the side and glanced over.

His eyes grew wide and he let them roam, hungry and intent. It was dark in the saferoom, but there was ambient light enough he could see the kid top to bottom from both their positions under the table's edge. He worked himself over, slowly, stealing his eyes across the muscular chest and down his front, coming to rest on the curved haunches contained by his coveralls.

His chest gave a flutter and he pumped his arm a little faster, imagining holding those hips in his hands, imagined pulling him close by them. Imagined untying the sleeves around that deliciously thin waist and slipping the fabric off the swell of his firm backside and down strong thighs. He teased the tip with his thumb and bit down on his lower lip.

Shit. Shit shit shit, this wasn't right, he shouldn't be doing this, but he couldn't stop himself. The fantasy had cued itself up, playing in his head like a naughty movie in a porno theatre that he'd paid too much to get in for to just get up and walk out.

Ellis was returning the affection. Was undressing him, slowly, one button at a time. With his teeth. And he imagined Ellis' lips then… thick and plump and in motion— not with talking, but kissing. Imagined them dragging over his own exposed flesh, every-little-where– his neck, his chest, his stomach… lower.

He quickly gave his fingers an eager lick to replicate the fantasy, trailing the moist pads over his cock.

And he was soon reaching for some of the shitty paper napkins the table had to offer him.

Nick cleaned up breathlessly and shoved the wad out of sight. Once he had himself back in his pants and zipped, he began to feel the effects of the release. He relaxed his back into the cushion, body tingling with that post-orgasm thrill, sleepiness already creeping into the crevices of his mind.
Chapter 10

Rochelle was kind enough to have breakfast ready for them when they awoke, in the form of freshly prepared hash browns, neatly wrapped in their paper packages. Ellis hurried forward to snatch one and took an eager bite of the potato morsel, only to end up burning his tongue. "Hot!" he yelped, fanning at his open mouth with his free hand frantically.

"They did just come out, sweetie," the girl laughed at him from afar.

Nick took a more precautionary nibble out of the side of one, lip twitching as he sat down at a booth.

Ellis managed to swallow at last, and he blinked back the moisture pooled in his corners of his eyes, taste buds a little raw and still stinging. "They's good though. Thanks, Ro'."

"No problem!" she said, chipper. She held aloft a few wrapped bundles smugly. "I even packed us lunch."

"Good thinking," Nick mumbled, his first words of the day. Ellis nodded in rapid, full-fledged agreement, mouth too full to speak, at least politely like he ought to to a lady.

"Anything else you'd like, Nick?" Rochelle asked kindly.

The conman looked up and quirked an eyebrow at her. For a while he didn't even respond. "… Orange juice…" he answered slowly, with a hint of skepticism.

Ellis swallowed the remainder of his patty. "Me too, please!" he threw in.

"No problem, I mixed up some of the concentrate this morning," she said, turning to the machine that dispensed the fluid. She quickly delivered a medium-sized paper cup to each of them. "Two cups of sunshine," she grinned and Ellis tipped his hat as he took his beverage.

Nick took a cautious sip, as if he were concerned about being poisoned by said sunshine. Then he cleared his throat and found his manners. "Thanks, sweetheart," he mumbled, taking another bite of hash brown.

Rochelle's lips drew into a smirk and she started putting the wrapped burgers into their provision knapsack.

Ellis watched her, now chewing on his second helping. He took a large drink– it was pretty thick on the pulp, but that was okay with him, it made it seem more like he was drinking actual oranges. But he could remember hating it as a kid and throwing a tantrum if he discovered even so much as a sliver of the fruit flesh in his drink. He was still sometimes a little picky when it came to food, but he never made a big deal out of it or anything. He frowned into the cup, studying the liquid, then looked back to Ro. "Mine don't have pickles, does it?" he inquired suddenly.

Rochelle laughed again. "No, hun, no pickles. I remembered your 'order' from last night." She gave him a wink; the gesture betrayed she was referring to more than just the vinegared cucumbers.

Ellis blushed and beamed. Ro was really making an effort towards being nicer to the conman, and he honestly couldn't appreciate it more. "Yeah, okay, jus' makin' sure," he smiled.

She tightened the drawstring on the sack and gave his cap a knowing ruffle.
Coach came out of the bathroom then, tucking his polo into his pants, the door gliding shut behind him. He took brief stock of the situation. "We all ready to get a move on?" he asked, pulling the fingerless gloves back on over his recently-washed hands.

Ellis stuffed the remainder of his hash brown into his mouth. "M'ready when Nick's ready!" he said around potato.

The gambler glanced over at Coach with irritation. "Gimme a second, I just started eating here." He rolled his eyes and gave a huff, taking another rather uninterested bite, not much bigger than the last, his gaze fixated on the countertop.

Ellis reached for a third patty in that case. "You can bring it with ya," the heavyset man concluded, as if the matter were already decided. Ellis peered at him and scratched his cheek, hoping he hadn't already forgotten about the deal he had made last evening. Especially after Ro went to the bother of acting so gosh-darn nice; he didn't want the older man to ruin what she had tried to set in motion.

Nick however, reacted slightly different than Ellis expected him to. There wasn't any anger, no snap of retaliation, or even muttered curse, just a subtle pull at the left corner of his mouth. "I think it would be better if we didn't have our hands full," he said with hesitance.

Ellis wondered what was making the gambler so anxious. He munched a little faster and sipped at his drink, studying the man's body language a moment or so more. "I kin cover you," he said quickly, reassuring him, but Nick still didn't look satisfied by the suggestion; his green eyes fluttered back downward and he managed another nibble. "We should probably get going..." Rochelle said apologetically. "Those eighteen miles aren't going to walk themselves," she attempted humor with a smile.

The conman's expression soured. "Fine," he groused, standing and shoving his unfinished portion at the hick.

Ellis took it in his free hand and blinked down at it. He guessed it was for him then. He began to nom at one and then the other consecutively. Most people he probably wouldn't have 'shared spit' with, 'cept for his Ma or siblings of course, but Nick was just so goddamn clean he didn't even think twice about it as he gobbled into every place the man's mouth had been. Besides, it was hardly the time to be picky like that, what with being in a zombie-apocalypse and the like. Food was food and you should be glad to have it; though he found it funny the cardshark had thought to even offer it to him, because he could have just of easily assumed he wouldn't care to take it. He wished Nick were more hungry, but maybe he would be later. If he was, Ellis would make sure to offer him part of his meal– he wouldn't need it after tucking away three and a half greasy hash browns and a big glass of juice– though he rather suddenly occurred to him it might not work the other direction... Nick might not be willing to share spit with him. He gave the minutest of blushes and licked his now-empty left fingertips clean.

Coach grabbed up his arms and exited the restaurant. Rochelle shortly followed him and Ellis gathered his own things, machete and rifle and knapsack, balancing potato patty in his teeth until his hands were again free.

Nick meanwhile bent to curl his fingers around his new gun, hefting it to his back with a deliberate cautiousness. Ellis had wondered at the conman's choice to arm himself with an extra weapon that morning when they woke up, mumbling something about 'evening the score'. Thus far the man had never carried anything save the single magnum, and an AK-47 was quite the step up. Ellis had no clue what the gambler's intentions for the high-powered weapon were... what
was making him so goddamn edgy?

Nick downed his orange juice quickly and discarded the cup with a flick of his wrist onto the floor in the vicinity of the trash can, pushing out the door.

"Keep a sharp eye out, kid," he disclosed in a mutter.

Ellis stiffened and followed him out.
Chapter 11

Nick was quite relieved when they chose to head to the southern onramp, rather than the northern one they had come off of. They made their way up the long stretch of asphalt, and when he saw the clear open stretch of highway in front of him he breathed a lot easier.

Their feet carried them forward, Coach and Rochelle in the lead, he and El in the rear for the next twenty or so minutes. If he wasn't such a pessimist, he might have even concluded they had successfully evaded it, that they were out of the woods and safe. That the AK had been an unnecessary precaution.

So he couldn't say he was terribly surprised when the female member of their party spoke up.

"Is the ground shaking…?" Rochelle asked suddenly, worriedly.

The three others froze in their tracks as if to evaluate the claim. "Well, shoot, now that'cha mention it," Ellis wondered aloud, pushing his hat up on his head as he peered at the earth. Nick felt the small shockwaves in the soles of his shoes and, filled with dread, turned to look north.

And there it was about a football field's length away. The huge, hulking beast of a zombie from the northern overpass.

But this time, instead of having its back towards them, it was barreling towards them on its fists.

"Fuck… we've got company," he informed his compatriots with a grimace.

They all turned at his words. "Holy shit…" Rochelle whispered, her brown eyes growing wide and wider.

Ellis used the scope of his hunting rifle to take a closer look at the approaching creature. "Now normally," he spoke, not lifting his gaze, "I'd say you ought tuh be polite when you've got company, maybe offer 'em a seat or a drink or sumthin', but from the looks'a that big motherfucker, I dun think it'd be awful prudent."

Nick cast him a disbelieving glance for his overall lack of concern, a chuckle held on his lips; he quickly made to draw the AK off his back, readying the mechanism with a click of the bolt. He was well aware that at this distance, coupled with his relative inexperience with such a high-powered automatic weapon, it wasn't likely to be of much use yet, as half the bullet spray would likely miss its target, but that didn't stop him from preparing the weapon. His eyes briefly moved to Coach, who was shifting on his feet, meaty fingers gripped so tightly on his shotty that Nick had to assume the man was harboring similar considerations about his own weapon choice.

Ellis took several pot-shots at the creature then, perhaps to test its resilience; it gave a howl from afar that sounded more like mere annoyance than the infliction of grievous wounds.

Rochelle lifted her own hunting rifle to take aim and follow his lead.

"Thing's built like a goddamn tank…" Coach swore, watching as the two smallest survivors each sunk a full clip and reloaded. "How much do you think it's gonna take to bring it down?"

Nick licked his lips, getting down on one knee to steady himself as best as possible. "I intend to find out," he muttered, narrowing his eyes down.

It was getting steadily closer; if he had to guess, he would've said it had crossed the first thirty yard
line. Coach would know better. The thumps beneath their feet had grown in intensity, creating a
distinct audible rumble of the loose debris and spent casings on the pavement.

Rochelle reloaded a third time. "This is not good," she shook her head. "Definitely not good."

"S'like it's not even makin' a dent," Ellis added in, frustration straining his vocal chords, testing his
original nonchalance.

"You two might want to save your ammo," Coach commented. They both gave him incredulous
glances. But the big man's concern was valid in Nick's opinion. At this rate, they were quickly
depleting their clips to the point where they would need to make a return trip back to the
McDonald's, or take a chance on the amount of infected they would bump into in the next
seventeen of eighteen miles.

Under the working assumption that they'd make it out of this, of course.

Ellis grudgingly lowered his weapon. Rochelle did the same.

The gap was closing.

Well, it was now or never, he supposed. Nick bit at his lip, worrying at the kick of the automatic
weapon. "One of you two want to steady me?" he asked. If they weren't going to be firing, they
ought to be doing something.

Ellis looked to Rochelle and Rochelle looked to Ellis, but they seemed to simultaneously make the
decision. El swooped down to his rear and pressed his palms to his upper back.

The hands felt reassuring and warm through the suit coat– solid, firm. Nick shouldered his
weapon and took aim down the sight, directly for the center of the raging beast, finger hesitating at
the trigger.

He squeezed it down and bullets screamed from the muzzle at 2,300 feet per second– double that
of his magnum. He very nearly lost his grip on the thing in the mere four seconds it took to unload
the magazine. The recoil carried backwards through his body, but thanks to the kid, all the bullets
found their mark, ripping into the behemoth's shoulder, sending a cascade of crimson streaming
out the backside.

The tank visibly stumbled in the distance, the assault briefly slowing it.

"It's workin'!" Coach announced, his voice booming.

Nick fed in his second clip. "Ready?" he cleared with the hick quickly.

"I got'cha," he affirmed, giving a nod; Nick could see the cocky grin on his face just from the way
he spoke.

The conman opened fire, sending a second barrage tearing into its flesh, stripping muscle into
ribbons that clung to its body... lodging bullets deep into its musculature, creating pock-marks that
surged with darkened blood. It screamed and howled its displeasure; Nick smirked, hand moving
for a third. They had this in the bag.

But then the creature did something he didn't expect. It took a massive swerve and hurtled itself
into the brush that served as a windbreaker to the freeway.

Rochelle and Coach both simultaneously took an instinctive step back.
Nick warily trained the gun where he had seen the tank disappear, alarm pulsing through his veins. He didn't dare waste the shots he had shooting 'where he thought it was', he only had so many; he needed to know they were hitting their mark. The heavy foot falls had ceased– it wasn't moving. But it couldn't be dead either. Not yet.

Ellis' hands didn't falter. "What's'it doin'…?" he whispered.

They all heard the creak and wrench of metal. But none of them suspected to see a Dodge Caravan come hurtling overhead, directly for their position.

"MOVE!" Coach bellowed.

They scattered to the left and right; the minivan connected with the ground all but fifty feet in front of them, bouncing, not once, but twice as it barrel-rolled over its sides, glass shattering, fiberglass shredding. Metal screeched against asphalt as it keeled past them, far too close for comfort, finally coming to rest upside-down many feet beyond.

The tank re-emerged, its intent back on them, and it had covered sufficient ground in the interim. Thirty yards, perhaps, was all that stood between them and it, and that distance wouldn't last long.

So Nick didn't hesitate to hunker back down and take his own aim, knowing their window of safety was short, and relatively sure Ellis' help was now mostly extraneous due to its proximity.

Coach came to the same conclusion; he began unloading his shotgun, furiously pumping refills in through the bottom as fast as his fingers would load them. Rochelle panicked and resumed firing her rifle, her aim spotty and inconsistent because she wasn't shouldering it correctly. Ellis whipped out his pistol to add a little more lead to the chaos, though its efficacity seemed questionable.

The tank forced them back. Nick gave up on his crouched position. They went all out, back-peddling; flesh tore from its body, blood soaked the ground in a trail behind it. Its movements became jerky and uneven, massive arms lunging helplessly, too far out of range to reach them. Finally, the creature gave a last dying roar before it collapsed face-first onto the pavement.

Nick dropped his AK; it clattered to the ground. He felt at his palms. They were soft and numb to the touch from the relentless vibration of the gun, and his ears still rang from the gunfire. For a long moment, all four of them were silent, recovering from the monumentous trial; but next thing he knew, they were all grinning from ear to ear at their triumph over the beast.

Coach folded his arms. "We have got to find a better way to do that," he said matter-of-factly, chuckling and shaking his head with a chagrinned smile that spoke worlds.

"I already gots an idea," Ellis piped up, looking rather smug. "Heavens to Betsy," he continued, "Yulee better damn-well have a liquor store."

"Don't tell me you're going to start singing again," Nick teasingly plugged his ears, in reference to their short-lived car drive the previous day.

Ellis laughed and gave him a friendly shove. "Nah, it's sumthin' Keith gone shown me how'ta make." He grinned widely, face lighting up with pure mischief. "Fire in a bottle, baby."

"Molotov cocktails…" Rochelle wondered aloud, nodding her head appreciatively. "Those things are nasty; get thrown around a lot in riots. I've done coverage on the damage." She lifted an eyebrow with a subtle pull to her lips. "Extensive, to say the least."

"Not a bad plan, young'un," Coach pitched in. "You light anything up it ain't gonna last long." He gave him a hearty clap on the back.
And then, like clockwork, Ellis turned to collect his opinion on the proposition.

"What can I say?" Nick supplied with a cavalier shrug. "The idiot's a genius."

He got another shove.
Chapter 12

The St Mary's River loomed ahead, wide and looping back on itself in numerous near oxbows. The water, which Ellis had learned years ago from his 'local geography' class drained from the Okefenokee Swamp to the west, served to separate and designate Georgia from Florida, giving the latter state its famous 'boot' shape. Distractions of intermittent zombie attacks aside, Ellis couldn't help but gnaw his bottom lip in anticipation as they approached the long expanse of bridge that would carry them across the border— he kept looking back behind him and gradually he found himself falling further and further behind his compatriots. His footfalls became progressively fewer and at the bridge's commencement, he stopped dead in his tracks altogether, staring at the toes of his well-worn work boots. Coach and Rochelle had already gotten a good sixty feet or more across the trestles, not a hesitation or falter to their steps, but the gambler, who had seemed to be pacing him ever since the tank, noticed his pause and turned to look at him.

Ellis caught the green-eyed gaze. "This's it," he informed the man, motioning at the seam that divided asphalt and metal bridge. "Soon as we cross this bridge, I'll've finally been outta Georgia."

Nick chuckled, waving at him, magnum still in hand from the last thing he had shot down half a mile back. "C'mon, Dorothy."

Ellis stuck out his tongue at the man for associating him with the fictional Kansas female. "M'comin', hold yer horses." He licked his slightly chapped lips and turned to peer back one last time at the expanse of his home state that he was about to leave behind. He'd spent all his life there, all his twenty-three years in one place, and he'd never ever thought to leave in his whole time there. It had always been his home.

He couldn't help but wonder when he'd be back again. If he would.

Nick waited, patiently, some twelve feet onto the long bridge, unmoving; he was apparently scanning the landscape with partially squinted eyes. The water beneath them carried with it a light breeze oceanward, not more than a lazy five or ten miles an hour, he would've guessed, and Ellis noticed now the way it fluttered the man's jacket and swept at his greasy hair, attempting to free strands from the mass that was the rest. He looked rather brave standing there all alone like that, he realized, and for a fleeting instant he had to wonder what might be going on in that contained reserved mind, if any of his thoughts were on 'home' as well.

But that was probably silly.

Ellis peered around him; Rochelle and Coach's forms were shrinking with every delayed moment, getting ahead of them. Nick didn't look terribly concerned, but when did he ever really, besides earlier that morning? Since their triumph over the tank the conman had gone back to his typical aloof demeanor, calm but cautious. They couldn't stay standing here forever though. Ellis bit his lip. With a heavy heart, he took a deep breath and stepped onto the bridge. In a few quick strides, he had joined the conman and they both resumed southward together. "'Sides," he broke the silence, "this ain't much'uva yellow brick road," he quipped as he deposited his hands to the pockets of his coveralls, shrugging his shoulders as they walked side by side.

"And New Orleans probably won't be much of an Emerald City, either," Nick carried on semi-sarcastically, his eyes to the west, toward the mentioned destination.

Ellis scratched the stubble on his cheek. "Still dun think we'll make it in time?" he asked.

The gambler shrugged, which he supposed was the answer.
They spent the next few minutes at a slightly increased pace, closing the lost distance between them and the other two survivors. As they walked, Ellis couldn't help but glance over to his older compatriot. The way the conman walked, with such a purpose to each and every step… seemed so contradictory to his pessimistic notion that there was nothing waiting for them in New Orleans.

Everything about Nick still seemed like such a mystery… Sure, Ellis knew he must've lived a good portion of his adult life in Nevada, what with working at a casino and all, but was the silver state the only place he had lived, the place he would refer to as 'home'? Where else had he been? Had he travelled? For that matter, what had he been doing in Savannah when he had… to get himself into all this mess? As far as he had seen and heard, the west was clear of the infection, at least for now.

Ellis knew he should probably save the questions for later, but it was eating him up inside wanting to know at least something more about the man he was quickly beginning to so greatly admire. So he asked the one that seemed most relevant to his own thoughts. "Where'ju grow up?"

The older male didn't seem to be caught off guard by the sudden inquiry, instead eying him briefly, before turning his chin back to face front. "Cali," he said succinctly.

The answer didn't narrow it down all that much, but he supposed he wasn't going to get much more from the contemplative man at the moment. He fiddled with the safety on his pistol in its holster.

"Foothills," Nick added abruptly, and Ellis looked back to his profile. The man's voice dropped to a lower volume, partially mumbling. "North of LA. Hated it."

Ellis would have asked why– as it was he was bursting with inquisitiveness at the hint of information– but the gap was closing and Coach and Ro were now within earshot, and he knew Nick wouldn't be comfortable carrying on the dialogue any further. He shut his mouth, having respect for the man's privacy.

Rochelle noticed when they caught up and turned to flash them a smile. "How's about lunch?" she suggested. Ellis blinked and looked up toward the sun. It was a bit early in the day for their midday meal, but the bridge was literally abandoned; they hadn't seen a single infected across its length yet and they'd only need to cover the two angles— front and back— if anything did show up, so it made a good spot to stop, rest their legs, and refuel.

"A'right," Ellis agreed, pulling the provision sack from his back and handing it to her. She began to dole out the allotment she had packed to each of the men.

They all sat and dangled their legs out over the bridge, staring at the water of the St. Marys underneath them as they consumed their lunch, listening to its gentle churning.

"Would'ya look at that?" Coach said with slight wonder; he pointed a large arm south. Ellis followed it and felt his eyebrows raise.

They hadn't seen it before when they had been on the bridge proper, but their current positions nearly overhanging the ledge gave them a new perspective. A large freight boat was caught underneath the bridge; it hadn't made the clearance. Water flowed around its hull, eastward, towards the ocean, careless of its large intrusion, though various plant life had gotten stuck on it, the current not enough to sweep it away. Apparently, the bridge hadn't raised for the fleeing vessel, and the captain had decided to try and make it through anyway, only to wedge it into its current locked position. Ellis frowned. After that the ship must have been abandoned by its occupants and crew because it was very much desolate, no sign of anyone or anything on said craft, except for a message that looked like it had been blow-torched onto the side of the hull:
"What were they trying to do...?" Rochelle wondered aloud at the spectacle. "Weren't they headed for evac?"

"Apparently they thought they could make it their own way..." Coach trailed off.

"Dumbshits," Nick imputed.

There was a silence between the four.

Ellis couldn't help but wonder what the heck would make the passengers even attempt their own form of evacuation, rather than that provided by CEDA.

One thing the display did make clear was that the power in Florida, unlike Georgia, was out, considering the control box sat on the Florida side of the border. Moreover, it signified that the two states had handled the news of the infection differently—the more northern state endeavoring to keep electricity flowing and available within its border, the southern cutting it off, whether on purpose or accident it was impossible to divine. What it meant for them was that things were undoubtedly going to be a little less easy from here on out, that they'd be roughing it for a good long while if they were planning on following their original route—shit, it'd be until they got out of Pensacola, in the very toe of Florida, which was quite a ways off... and nothing guaranteed Alabama, or Mississippi, or even Louisiana itself— their destination— would be any different.

"Y'know, maybe we oughta jus' keep goin' south an' go tuh the Keys," Ellis joked to his compatriots, sinking his teeth into the quarter-pounder with cheese.

"It would be lovely this time of year," Rochelle nodded, motioning with a french fry, "A balmy eighty degrees, as they put it in the biz."

"I forgot my swimsuit," the conman quipped sarcastically.

"That's alright, we can all just go skinny-dipping," Coach joked back through a full mouth.

"Dear Lord," Nick pinched the brim of his nose at the thought, no doubt imagining the suggestee with a lack of proper swimwear.

"No thanks," Rochelle laughed, understandably uninterested.

Ellis just chuckled. No doubt the older male, once a minor football star, had no qualms with seeing other grown men naked— frequent after-game showers would have done that for him. The prospect didn't bother Ellis much either— it wasn't like he hadn't gone 'skinny-dipping' before. He and Keith and some other friends had done so on a couple of occasions, back at the lake when the fishing boat got too warm and they needed a quick cool-off. Of course, Keith always wanted to make a big deal out of it, make it a race, saying the last one undressed got to do the gutting and scaling on the day's catches, and then he'd stand there at the bow of the boat in the full nude, hands on his hips in triumph because inevitably he was always first to be stripped.

Ellis nibbled his bottom lip with a touch of a frown. At least with Nick and Coach and Ro he wouldn't be stuck gutting fish all the time.

He stared down at the swirling, ebbing water, letting them sweep the unwanted memories away. "Y'think they kin swim?" he asked suddenly, compelled. All three of his fellows knew exactly who he meant by 'they'.

"I don't see why not," Nick reasoned, leaning back on a palm. "If they could before getting
infected."

"I guess'so," Ellis stared hard at the flowing surface. "S'jus' you don't see zombies swimmin' in the movies, so…"

"I can think of one good way to find out," the conman said, filling his mouth with a large bite.

"What are you going to do?" Rochelle laughed, "find one and throw it in?"

Nick shrugged. "Sure."

"Sounds like sumthin' Keith'd do," Ellis contributed, unable to help himself. "This one time he was playin' with a rattler, trying to git it tuh swim, cuz I guess he'd seen this segment on the tv about water snakes not that long ago an' he was curious tuh see if they all could do that– they can't, by the way," he added, "an' anyway, he had this long stick– I didn't wanna git involved, cuz originally he wanted me tuh up an' distract it or sumthin' while he made a grab fer its head– an'…"

A coughing hack startled all four of them. Ellis jerked his head right, as did Nick; Coach and Ro both looked left. But they were still alone on the bridge.

"Damn echoes," Coach mumbled in dismissal, stuffing the remainder of his meal into his mouth.

Ellis peered over the edge uncertainly, feeling nervous, his story of his friend's resultingly swollen up, snake-bitten face long forgotten. Even if the water was causing an echo, that still meant whatever had made the noise was nearby. And it didn't sound like the typical infected they had been encountering. He eyed the northerly bank momentarily, and set down his food on its paper package to grab the hunting rifle from his back to use its scope to take a closer inspection.

"See anything?" Nick inquired calmly after the mechanic had spent a moment searching.

"Nothin'…" Ellis pulled his eye away, biting his lower lip.

"What about on the ship?" he inclined his shoulder, eyes not leaving his half-consumed burger. The guy was really digging in, which was good; Ellis was glad to see him properly filling his belly since his breakfast was sparse.

The hick swung the weapon around to access the threat, his left eye– his bad eye– squeezed shut. "No…” he murmured. There was another hack and then a slick whirling noise that reminded him of a loose fan belt.

"What the shit?!" the man got out. The appendage went taut and instantly he was pulled right from the ledge. Ellis' fast reflexes caused him to abandon his rifle and seize ahold of the man's arm. He only realized how stupid a thing it probably was to do when they were both tumbling from the bridge, through air, towards the quickly approaching water below.

He heard Rochelle shout out in alarm before the crash that was their bodies hitting the surface of the river and rushing into his eardrums. The water swallowed them up in its cold maw and the world became muffled; he forced his eyes open underwater to get his bearings, to determine which direction was up– seeking out the light of the sun through the murk. His fingers were still clutched around the gambler's bicep… the man was struggling with something, kicking his legs, likely trying to get free of whatever had snagged him, and Ellis pumped his own to get them above water, his lungs already pounding in his chest.
His head breeched the surface with a gasp and he was joined by two others–

Nick and something entirely else.

Its face was covered in boils, so much so that all that remained of the person's original face was a single glowing eye and a wide open mouth from which a long muscle protruded.

The thing hooked around Nick's leg was a tongue. A couple other tendrils coiled and curled about its head, moving to find targets to wrap themselves around– least of all the conman's neck. Ellis flailed to get them away from the advancing writhing, slimy muscles.

Next thing he knew there was a loud pop! and the air around them filled with a green smoky vapor– and the creature was gone, its body sinking beneath the surface. Rochelle must have picked it off from the bridge with her hunting rifle.

"Christ!" Ellis coughed, it stung his eyes– he was already having a hard enough time catching his breath and…

"It's still got–" Nick managed to get out before his head submerged again.

Ellis' eyes widened and he dove. The weight of the dead infected's body was what was dragging the man down, its tongue still tightly wrapped around his ankle. Nick was struggling at the now-lifeless bindings with his fingers, loosening them slowly but not nearly fast enough. Ellis yanked the machete from his hip and took a slow-motion swing through the water. The dull blade sliced the darkened appendage and released him from the anchor.

Both men resurfaced sputtering.

"Shit…!" Nick spat river water numerous times, understandably still shaken by the encounter.

Ellis re-secured his machete quickly, but next his hand jerked to his head because he realized what was missing from it. Frantically he scanned the surface and gasped when he located his hat, barely floating a bit off. He made a beeline for it and managed to snag it before it went under, plopping the wet headgear back over his hair with a quick prayer to the Lord– he probably would have never been able to retrieve it from the depths of the river. He gave a sweep of his arms, turning to face back upstream.

The river had managed to carry them quite a distance from the bridge. While it was by no means fast flowing, they were quickly losing sight of the far-off forms of Coach and Rochelle– dots of concerned pink and purple standing on the edge.

"North or south??" Ellis shouted to his comrade; they needed to decide quick before they lost visual contact altogether.

Nick grimaced as he buoyed. "We don't know what might be waiting for us on the south side," he cautioned over the rush of water.

Ellis nodded his understanding.

They paddled for the north bank. It made his arms and legs feel heavy as hell. Shit, he wouldn't have guessed swimming in full clothing would be so much damn harder, though the steel-toed boots were for sure weighing him down considerably. When they finally got there and crawled up onto land, he flopped down and rolled onto his back to take a breather, not caring how much dirt would be caking onto his wet shirt later.
Nick took a seat beside him in a patch of dried grass; he was already fussing over his damp magnum, draining the water from the barrel. Droplets drained out of his hair, dripping along his jawbone and off his chin and nose; he drug a soaked sleeve across his eyes. The dress shirt underneath the jacket clung to his chest and torso, some of its opacity lost, and Ellis couldn't help but notice just how toned the man was underneath all the formerly obscuring clothing. Especially in the abdomen– shit, did it look good… damn. He flushed a little and sat up.

Coach and Rochelle's shouts sounded to their rights; they were on their way to meet them. He cupped his hands to his mouth. "We're over here!" he sounded out to them, then waved his arms. They caught sight of them and hurried their pace; Ellis could see they had his hunting rifle– he was instantly glad he hadn't lost it to the river. Nick was probably lucky his thigh holster was so tight. Ellis looked back to the wet cardshark.

"Guess that answers your question," Nick flashed him a smirk as he slicked some of his loose hair back into place with chagrin.

"Yeah," Ellis laughed humorlessly, ringing water from his hat as he shook his head, "I guess'so."
Chapter 13

It had taken he and Ellis a good few hours to dry out, mostly because the humidity prevented it. His shoes were still soggy, even as they entered the outskirts of town, but he could get over it. Rochelle had even been kind enough to take his suit coat for a bit, wringing it out as best she could and shaking it in the wind so the dampness could drain away from the fabric. Though naturally her concern for the hick had been more immediate– it was only after multiple reassurances of ‘m’fine’ from the thick lips that she finally relented and accepted the answer. Coach didn't have much to contribute to the discussion of the encounter, looking stoney-faced and serious, and the big man’s silence certainly didn't upset him any as he surreptitiously shook off the cold that numbed his fingers and ears. Ultimately Nick knew that the older man's thoughts were hung up on the facts– that their little group had been separated within the time frame of an eyeblink, literally.

Which personally just reinforced in his mind what he had been preaching to himself from the beginning– that they all needed to keep a sharp eye out and take better stock of their surroundings. They certainly wouldn't be hanging their feet off any more ledges, that was for damn sure.

He was a little chilly at first without the extra layer of his suit coat; he just wasn't used to the climate– but the sun was warm and dried their skin quickly, bringing heat back to their bodies as they resumed their trek. Fuck if Ellis hadn't decided to physically remove his little muscle shirt to give it a quick wring out, and the display of still-wet skin and flexing muscle warmed him faster than the sun ever could; he'd honestly been that close to sporting an embarrassing bump in the front of his trousers before the kid pulled it back over his head.

He had been very careful with his magnum the first few fires, and he encouraged Ellis to ensure his pistol was free of waterlogging before he did the same, though glocks were particularly resistant due to their construction.

Thankfully, neither of them suffered any misfires, though Nick was adamant about giving his weapon a good thorough cleaning when they arrived at their safehouse.

There was in fact a liquor store in Yulee as Ellis had hoped, one of those little corner-store hole-in-the-walls with iron bars over all the windows, that doubled as a bait and tackle supplier– it made sense considering the town's proximity to the river. Nick didn't have any trouble picking the thick padlock set onto the door with the provided bobby pin from Rochelle, at which point he stepped back to let Coach take over. The ex-football player took a running start at it, throwing his massive shoulder into the door. It smashed the interior bolt loose from the doorframe, fracturing and splintering wood as it flew open on its hinges, colliding with the check-out counter just inside the door with a crash. The elder man rolled his shoulder in its socket once, stretching his neck in quick recovery. So maybe his weight and background had some merit. Nick made a mental note not to stand in front of the man when he was on the move from there on out.

They split up but Nick stayed at the store entrance, just inside the door, his eyes outside, keeping watch in the off chance something tried to jump them during their raid of the small shop. But there were only a few meandering commons that came to explore the loud crash caused by their breach of the door, and he was more than happy to oblige their curiosity with a .50 cal bullet hole between each pair of searching yellow eyes.

Of course even with the supplied target practice, he couldn't stop thinking about how the mechanic had grabbed his arm as they toppled over that bridge together. How they had both taken the twenty-foot plummet into the water below, even though he had been the one to get pulled. He swore he could still feel the imprint of Ellis' fingers, the tightness with which the young man had
clutched with instinctual urgency– Nick couldn't help but wonder if he had unintentionally left bruises on the skin. He briefly reached up to touch where they had been.

He wouldn't go so far as to say the kid had saved his life or anything, but the appreciation he felt nonetheless was undeniable. He honestly wouldn't have expected the other two to dive in after him had he fallen in all alone. He turned a jade eye to Ellis.

The kid swept an armful of beer bottles from the shelf and deposited them to the plastic basket in his left hand. Nick watched warily as Ellis counted them out. They had already managed to find a hardware store where they had grabbed supplies, which included, but wasn't limited to, a large gallon-sized tin of turpentine that would be serving as the flammable ingredient for their makeshift bombs, along with a pint of motor oil– for cohesion purposes– both of which had been put into his possession. He absently swung the brown paper bag at his side, letting it brush against his leg– the one he had been so rudely snagged by– gently, listening to the sway of fluid inside the containers. It was a good 144 ounces of liquid altogether when mixed, so they'd be able to whip up a full dozen of the things if they filled the bottles to their full capacity. Now, how they were going to carry them all was another matter altogether; they had to be stored mostly upright. But he supposed they weren't worrying about that just yet.

"Alrighty!" the hick lifted the basket a moment later, with an eager nod, "I think I gots what we need." He had added a small vessel of vodka to the twelve beers– no doubt what they would be soaking the cloth wicks in– trundling over to them with his spoils.

Coach had helped himself to a small bottle of chocolate liqueur, which he was practically suckling with frequent sips; he gave a hearty nod to the boy. "Good," he paused the mouth of the bottle at his lip to speak. He shrugged his shoulder to the east, "Then let's get outta here and get to that safehouse."

Nick wagered the older man was eager to get back so they could actually take some time to relax. The seventeen-mile distance had only taken them seven hours after the run-in with the tank, even with the backtracking the smoker had caused them, and as such, they had agreed on the walk to give themselves each a little time to catch an extra hour and a half of sleep, figuring the lost time on the road would refresh their bodies and benefit them in the long run. Nick had to admit, it was a rather strenuous pace they had adopted, especially for anyone who wasn't used to regular physical exertion, which he doubted Rochelle was. And Coach's prime had long since come and gone. Thankfully they were both keeping up. Though he still probably owed the reporter for plugging off that long-tongued freak before it could sink its claws into him. God had that thing been nasty to look at.

"Sounds good tuh me!" Ellis responded enthusiastically to the football player, never dampened, not even after twenty damn miles or an inadvertent swim in the river. He popped the top off of one of the beers to take a ready swig; Nick lifted an eyebrow. Oh God, he hoped to hell the kid wasn't planning on drinking too many of those to empty them out. Ellis caught his gaze and, misinterpreting it, offered him the brown bottle with a grin. "Want'some?"

Nick's mouth quirked. Under normal circumstances he wouldn't be adverse to consuming alcohol, especially something with such a low percentage because his drink of choice was primarily scotch, but he wasn't too keen on the possibility of inhibiting any of his faculties, even slightly; he needed to be on the top of his game. His stomach gave a growl, as if to remind him how little was there to dilute the drug. Ellis waggled it provocatively. Ah, what the heck, what harm could a sip do? He took it and slugged back a single quick swallow, letting his tongue linger on the twist-off glass edge before handing it back. Hick spit, he noted with a pleased lift of an eyebrow. Little had he known when he handed over that morning's hash brown that he'd be starting something. Sheesh, next thing you knew they'd be sharing everything.
The concept of 'sharing a bed' came to mind, but he roughly shoved it away as quick as it had come. "We're not there yet," he commented cooly, "so don't get drunk off your ass." He meant it; drinking and shooting were not a good mix, and with the way Coach was sucking down that liqueur, he didn't want he and Rochelle to be the only ones left able to point a gun.

Ellis chuckled, lifting a dirty blonde eyebrow beneath the almost-lost hat. "Yer gettin' me confused wit' Keith," he said matter-of-factly. "I told'ju he was the one who liked gettin' plastered, not me. Shoot," he swore and shook his head, mouth starting, "you shoulda seen 'im this one time. He went fer this beer run in the middle'a the night, an' the manager a'the store didn't wanna sell him no more alcohol on account'a the fact that he was already so schnockered he could barely stand…"

"Good Lord, Nicolas, look what'chu gone and started," Coach mumbled over the kid, half joking, half serious. He clapped Ellis on the back. "How's about you save it for later, boy," he suggested.

Ellis' gaze dropped with an "Okay," effectively silenced. He took another drink, though more timidly under the beefy man's arm; Nick shifted anxiously in the doorway.

"C'mon, baby girl," Coach beckoned to the female survivor inside the shop, turning to head out the store door.

Rochelle was standing with her back towards them, in front of the west wall of the little building, still eying a singleton case of Mike's Hard Lemonade inside one of the formerly-refrigerated displays. She shifted on her feet before looking back to them, almost questioningly.

Nick gave her a teasing lift of an eyebrow. "Just take it," he said, flicking his wrist. "It's not going to hurt anything." He could tell her conscience was what was holding her back, eating at her. It was one thing to take supplies from designated safehouses, another to rob from an abandoned convenience store. She hadn't much liked absconding with the turpentine and motor oil either, though she couldn't argue how great a commodity having the mollies would be. She'd best get used to swiping things though, in his opinion. Who knew where their next meal would be coming from. It was quite possible they would have to resort to burglary frequently in the near future, though he wondered about the potential scarcity of provisions further down the road, depending on who all had made the same judgement call.

"Well, maybe you're used to stealing," Ro shot back at him, though good-humoredly.

"Not stealing if no one misses it," he shrugged with a grin.

She glanced back in through the glass door, considering the logic behind his statement, before opening it up and snagging one of the four, leaving the other three. She proceeded out the door with her fellow survivors, closing the broken door behind her. "Tonight's top story," she said aloud, tracing the sky with the bottle like a headline, "Yulee Liquor Store Plundered. Culprits, as of yet, unknown, but security cameras indicate one man dressed in a white suit…"

All three men laughed, Nick's a chuckle. "As if it'd be that easy to catch me," he murmured and she gave him a sharp elbow to the arm, opening her beverage with a pop of the screw-top bottle cap. He meant it though; he was not easy to catch when it came to making an escape.

Again, not anything anybody needed to know though.

They set out, goods in tow.
Chapter 14

Their safehouse turned out to be a duplex that had had its interior walls knocked out. The result was six full-sized bedrooms, and a couple of kitchens and bathrooms, though one of said bathrooms had been modified for reasons he could not discern into what they could only guess was some kind of storage room; it had been sealed off with numerous locks and upon the thick metal door were spray-painted the words ‘in case of emergency’ in all caps. The lettering was messy and uneven, as if it had been written in a hurry, the can discarded to the floor, though the carefully hammered nail that the keyring for the padlocks hung from didn't convey the same urgency.

None of them really knew what to make of it. And while they couldn't classify anything they had been put through as of yet an 'emergency'– zombie apocalypse of course withstanding– all four were helplessly curious as to what lie inside.

But for the moment they agreed and decided to leave the room alone and check out the rest of their sanctuary– Coach the kitchen, Nick and Ro the sleeping accommodations. Ellis chose to scout the outside perimeter of the house quickly, to make sure it was secure. The original fencing, a rather simple design made of 2x4s and 2x8s, reaching the standard six foot height, had been partially re-engineered, reinforced with steel rebar, horizontally connecting the wooden boards. In addition, razor wire had been strung over the top to discourage the 'hopping' of said fence. All in all it looked like an effective deterrent to whatever might want to get in from the outside– he sure as hell wouldn't want to try and breach it.

There was a smallish backyard with a cute little shared redwood deck, carefully assembled with screws, and even a barbecue grill hooked up to a propane tank, which he quickly determined was still in operation; they'd be able to cook even with a lack of electricity– that was good news. There was also a large septic tank in one corner, in the other a shed, which he found to contain the typical kinds of shed items– a lawnmower, various gardening tools, a few coils of watering hose, fertilizer. A rocking seat built for two stood near the sliding glass doors that had been covered by corrugated metal panelling, welded into place and already partially rusting. Well that was sure to increase property value; Ellis gave a laughing snort.

Satisfied by the short explore, he went back around to the front to join his group and tell them the news.

He tromped in through the red metal door, kicking it closed behind him. His comrades had settled in, having set their things down on the coffee table in the center of the living room. Nick and Rochelle both sat on the couch, the former with his legs up on said table as a foot rest. "Looks like it's hooked up tuh a well y'all," he informed his two present fellows, swiping his hat quickly across his brow with a grin. "We should have runnin' water."

"You're shitting me," Nick's green eyes widened.

"Hallelujah," Rochelle exclaimed, standing in her excitement.

The man and the woman looked to one another, their thoughts simultaneous.

"Now there may not be hot water..." the hick began to warn each of them before they got in a fight over the shower. He couldn't imagine the water heater, if there was one, was operational without power, but he didn't know if that alone was enough to stop the two cleanly survivors from having a row.
"Ladies first," the conman concluded, waving his hand and looking promptly away.

The reporter laughed. "Even after the drink you took back at the river? You sure?" she seemed a little incredulous, but she was smiling, tapping her right hoop earring with a finger absently.

"Might have been a longer one if it weren't for you," the man shrugged his thanks with as careless an attitude as he could summon, intentionally not looking back at her. Ellis cocked his head with interest. The gambler gave a pert nod. "Was some sharp shooting," he admitted with a flash of green.

"Well that's nice of you, Nick," Rochelle smiled.

He shrugged, then focused his attention to getting some dirt out from under his lengthening fingernails. "I've been filthy for days… another hour isn't going to hurt," he reasoned with faux-nonchalance.

Ellis beamed from ear to ear. Rochelle's brown eyes caught his and she smiled widely at him. They shared the brief exchange of wordless mutual appreciation before she turned to go utilize the blessing of running water, snagging the backpack that contained their scant toiletries on her way.

Ellis hid his smile the best he could and took what had been her seat next to the conman, relaxing into the cushions with a sigh. It felt so nice to get off his feet he realized as he put them up with Nick's; they were downright sore from all the walking around, he wouldn't be surprised if they had swollen up so much it'd be hard to get them out of the boots.

"So… did you do that, Overalls?" the conman asked, blase.

"Do what?" he played dumb.

"Convince cupcake to be nice to me." The sly eyes tilted at him knowingly.

Ellis didn't know how the man did that. He was a card player, not a mind reader. Least, last time he checked.

He also didn't know what to say. He looked away briefly, quickly considering his response. Would Nick appreciate his attempts to create civility behind his back, or would he be insulted? Or– perhaps most likely– would he simply remain indifferent as if nothing had happened at all? If he could have predicted the outcome, it would have made the decision of what to say considerably easier, but he was plum out of luck on that one.

"Yeah," he chose to admit slowly. "I asked 'em both tuh treat'chu a little more fairly." He paused, then continued with assertion, "Y'ain't given 'um any reason not tuh trust ya." He looked up, but to him the green gaze was completely unreadable, masked by emotionlessness. Ellis bit his lip and hoped the explanation was enough.

The conman wasn't going to let him in unless he wanted him in.

Nick gave a noise somewhere between a grunt and a cough, slinging one of his arms over the far-end of the back of the couch to look away again. Ellis shifted and drummed his fingers across a knee, disconcerted by the unusual silence stretching between them. He was about ready to say something, anything really, most likely apologize, when at long last a smirk pulled back across the man's maw, signaling he was going to speak. "I haven't given them any reason to trust me either," the cardshark pointed out, an eyebrow lifting tightly.

"I donno, man," Ellis shook his head, eager to prove him wrong on that note. "I think that whole
thing with the tank pretty much showed ya gots our best interests in mind," he brought up the rather monumental event with a fond chuckle. "Shit, was that ever cool," he said with a mild awe. He still couldn't get the image out of his head, it kept coming back… of holding him steady as the man coolly blasted bullets into its hulking form, steadily taking it down. And though it was gruesome to watch and bore a much more striking reality than a few of the worse horror films he'd been subjected to– compliments of Keith– he savored the moment for an entirely different reason.

He had gotten to touch the man.

The gambler gave a small laugh now too. "Guess I'll give you that one," he nodded and slung his other arm over the back of the couch too. The action would have placed it around his shoulders, had it not been for the construction of the furniture. It wasn't a romantic gesture by any stretch; the man was just getting comfortable. Ellis flushed for even having thought of it.

"Man, I can't wait for that shower," the cardshark added.

Ellis laughed. "Yeah, me either. I still feel all slimy… an' it didn't even hook me!" he poked at him teasingly.

And then Nick did something he never would have predicted.

He pulled that arm Ellis had been so self-conscious about from the back of the couch and hooked it right around the back of his neck, pulling him into a firm, but gentle head lock, briefly knuckling the top of his head through his cap, grinning like a hyena the whole time.

The chummy gesture shocked him into baffled speechlessness, even as he was let go.

"Thanks for watching my back today, kiddo," the gambler relayed, still smirking that amazingly beautiful white smile, green eyes half lidded. It made Ellis freeze, time suspended for just an instant as he lost himself in it.

"No problem," he recovered, looking mildly embarrassed, but mostly relieved. He couldn't pull his gaze away, so instead he just smiled and left it at that.
Coach had found a large freezer full of meat in one of the kitchens, and though there was no power to the device any more, the meat had not yet thawed completely due to the sheer amount of it and was safe for consumption still. Upon news of the barbecue out back, he opted to cook for the evening’s meal with hearty enthusiasm. Since they had had hamburger the night previous, he went for grilling up a generous sampling of chicken legs, thighs and breasts for them all to enjoy, which went fairly well with the canned green beans and canned corn he discovered in the pantry. At least, Ellis certainly opted for seconds of everything.

About the time Coach had a second batch ready, Rochelle joined them, her rinse-off complete. She smelled like hotel bar soap, the oatmeal stuff they had snagged from some rooms of the Vannah before departure. Though her hair was still wet, she had already put it back up into the bob behind her head. It looked as though she had also chosen to give her pink Depeche Mode shirt a quick cleaning, scrubbed with the soap no doubt, then wrung out to get most of the dampness out. It clung to her slightly as a result; Ellis could easily make out her bra straps underneath, though he made a point not to stare. He probably ought to follow her lead and do the same to his own clothing to the best of his ability— he was certain they smelled like sweat, and as of the day's misadventure, the muddy St. Marys.

Rochelle took a paper plate from the stack and the big man motioned her over to the grill to pick out which pieces she liked best.

"Guess I'm next for the shower," Nick concluded, pushing his plate of chicken bones away and standing. He'd literally wolfed down two and a half chicken's worth of thighs and drumsticks— Ellis had watched him do it— and he had no doubt in his mind it was because of his petite breakfast and lunch cut short combined.

"Enjoy," Rochelle tittered, not looking up as she shoveled some corn out of a can and onto her plate with a plastic spork. "I left the things on the counter."

The gambler nodded and turned to go.

Ellis watched him leave from his seat in the swinging chair, rocking it leisurely as he bit at a chicken leg between his fingers, paper plate propped in his lap. He couldn't help but wonder how long the conman would be; briefly he studied his other two compatriots from afar. While he didn't have any problem spending time with Coach and Rochelle, he'd rather hang out with Nick.

Coach turned off the grill and sat down at the small folding card table they had found inside the duplex, beginning to dig into his portion. Rochelle chose to come over to him and take the second place on the rocking seat, drawing her legs up indian style.

Ellis kept up the gentle swinging by rolling his shoes from the toes to the balls of his feet, putting a little more effort into the motion so he could rock their combined weights. He looked to the girl, swallowed his food and opened his mouth to speak. "Hey, Ro', I jus' wanted tuh say thanks… again."

Rochelle placed a palm to his knee, patting it gently. "No problem, sweetie," she said with a smile. "Anything for you."

Ellis flushed, finding the statement a little difficult to believe. She was probably just saying that– a turn of phrase or something– though it had sounded genuine enough. He looked away, scratching his head with some amount of awkwardness.
Rochelle caught the gesture. Her hand pulled away from his leg and quickly went back to the spork to push the little yellow kernels of corn around on her plate. "Sorry," she said suddenly, in half a laugh.

The hick looked back at her, confused as to why she was apologizing to him. "Fer?" he asked.

She shook her head and stared down at her food. "Oh nothing," she started, clearly hesitating at her next words, whether she even wanted to say them, but she followed through. "Just… for treating you like my little brother."

Ellis laughed. "Well, I mean, in'a way we're all brothers an' sisters," he said, keeping the swinging chair going as he shrugged. "So it's alright."

"Amen to that," Coach imputed from the table a few feet away. He shoveled a sporkful of green beans into his mouth, chewing heartily at the vegetable matter.

Rochelle smiled downward with chagrin, quiet for a second or two. Finally she lifted her head. "I meant my actual baby brother. Elijah," she clarified.

"Oh," Ellis blinked with a touch of surprise, not sure what to say; he felt a little silly for having misinterpreted what she had said. "Well, shit, I didn't know ya had siblin's, Ro'." She hadn't even mentioned them until now after all, so why should he have assumed such?

The reporter laughed and shrugged. "He's the only one."

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"Oh yeah," she gave a gesture with a flick of her wrist, the bangles moving with her arm as she did so. She took a quick bite of chicken. "He and Mom are fine. Got on a plane for evac early. They even sent me a postcard."

Ellis chuckled, though the reaction was partially fake, a certain jealousy– or maybe it was worry–filling his heart at the fact that his fellow survivor had heard from her loved ones that they were safe and sound and had successfully made evac.

"You want to see him?" she asked Ellis.

Ellis blinked, caught off guard by the offer. He had never been much of one for sharing pictures or albums or the like, but he gave a shrug and an ever-polite "sure", mildly curious about the girl's family.

The reporter set down her plate and got up to spritely fetch said postcard from indoors, licking her fingers clean of chicken grease as she went. Ellis got another bone clean himself in the interim. She was only a minute or two, hoping back onto the wood deck with the card in hand; Ellis stopped the swing briefly for her so she could settle back in. "I was keeping it on my clipboard," she explained, sitting down and handing it to him. Ellis knew the one– she had still been carrying it around still when they had met her. She explained she was a reporter from WTTQ 10, and on it was her schedule for the broadcast she had been planning on doing the next day. The photograph must've been clipped somewhere behind it, Ellis reasoned. Rochelle resumed her meal, having delivered it to him.

Ellis frowned down at the little piece of mail. On the front, which had been presented to him, was
a photo of Ro's aforementioned brother and mother, taken up against some backdrop or another for the snapshot; large letters stenciled in the upper left corner pronounced "CEDA, Internment #44111". He didn't turn it over immediately, studying the woman and boy in the picture a little longer. Rochelle's mom looked a lot like her– a little older, a little greyer, a little rounder about the middle, but ultimately the same strong upright woman. Rochelle's little brother, on the other hand, was decidedly only half-black, the other half white, which took him briefly by surprise because it meant Ro and her brother didn't share the same father. The kid was more gangly, and taller, than his mother too, wearing dark jeans and a tight-fitting top. Ellis had to wonder what he and the boy shared in common that so enamored Ro to him. It couldn't just be the similarity in names after all.

He flipped the card over to take stock of the more specifics of the mailing. It was 'postage paid', no stamp required, and looked to be quite strictly formatted, only a couple of lines inside a small box allowed for writing– hardly enough to fit a proper heartfelt greeting if you asked him. Rochelle's mom had succinctly written "Good luck in Savannah. Miss you lots, Mom and Eli" in a highly loopy cursive with pink sharpie. He bit his lower lip nervously, the distinct lack of a postmark making his stomach do flip-flops. Without it there was no way to tell when, or, more pertinently, where it had mailed from. Which was assuredly intentional on CEDA's part.

He swallowed hard, but didn't point it out.

"Can I see?" Coach asked, breaking him out of the silent reverie he had fallen into.

"Yeah, a'course," Ellis quickly stood to hand it to the bigger man, not upset in the slightest to have the little piece of mail out of his hands. He nervously rocked the swing a little faster, staring at his feet as he tried to resume eating.

"Aww," the football player's lips spread into a smile after just a moment. "Your mom looks like a sweet gal, Ro'."

Rochelle laughed, one eyebrow pulled high on her forehead. "Looks can be deceiving."

Coach belly laughed.

Ellis scratched his arm and politely attempted to get back into the conversation. "How old's Eli?" he asked, automatically choosing to use the shorthand as Rochelle's mother had done, hoping to glean a little more info on his 'counterpart'.

"He's a fair bit younger than you," the girl admitted, swallowing another bite of corn in order to answer his question. "Turned seventeen just last month."

Coach's interest piqued once again. "He play any football?" he asked. It was hardly a surprising question coming from Coach now that the info that the boy was in high school had come out.

"He was more into basketball," Rochelle grinned teasingly. "And cars."

Oh, so there was the connection.

"Ahh," Coach shook his head as if it were a terrible shame. "Too bad, looks like he would'a made a good wide receiver," he chuckled with good-humor, poking at the boy in the picture with a stubby forefinger. He reached for the corn to finish the remainder left in the bottom of the tin.

Rochelle stood to take back the postcard; Coach readily returned it. The reporter just stood for a minute, her lips pulled back into a smile and her eyes locked on the photograph. Ellis licked his lips, watching her enviously, wishing he had thought to grab one of the many pictures of his family off his mother's davenport before leaving; then again, he had assumed there'd be a helicopter waiting for him on that hotel rooftop, assumed he'd be seeing them all sometime that
evening at the latest, maybe even Keith and Dave as well.

God, what an idiot he'd been.

"I guess I just miss him," Rochelle said with a roll of her eyes, though she was still smiling. "Silly, I know."

"Naw, makes sense tuh me," the hick reassured her. He looked into the brown pools of her eyes, but they didn't really connect, as if they were just looking past one another, beyond. To be perfectly honest, he didn't think missing her little brother was a very good excuse to use him as some kind of substitute, and though he wasn't angry at her for doing so, he thought it was important to clarify to her that he wasn't Eli. Ellis licked his lips. "We all got family we miss," he said frankly, meaning the words very much.

Rochelle's face twisted into instant sympathy. "Oh sweetie…" she swooped down to give him a hug.

Ellis took it but didn't offer any affection back.

"We'll all be back with all of our families soon," Coach asserted, sensing his upset. "Don't you worry, boy," he motioned firmly with his spork, "just keep your chin up and your eyes forward."

The hick glanced at him from under the bill of his cap, keeping his tongue pressed firmly to the roof of his mouth to avoid speaking. Slowly he put on a smile, giving him a nod to assure him he was doing just that.

And while he knew he should appreciate the older man's outlook… for some reason he connected more with the prospect presented by the male currently absent from their group.

He hoped he'd be done with his shower soon.
He was eager to start immediately on the creation of the mollies, partially to distract himself from the negative thoughts that had been trying to take over his mind; draining the twelve bottles and gathering a plastic five gallon water drum to do the mixing. He intentionally chose to sit under the eaves on the west porch of the duplex-turned-safehouse, for ventilation purposes—he didn’t want to stink up the inside of the evening’s accommodations with the smell of rotting pine resin; as it was the smell could carry quite a distance. He unscrewed the cap to the turpentine and poured it carefully in, watching the liquid glug-glug-glug out of its tin.

"Hey, sport. Already starting?"

The unexpected but welcome sound of the man's cool voice caused him to briefly pause what he was doing. Ellis turned to grin at his compatriot who had come out onto the stoop, freshened from his shower—the man had even shaved and re-gelled his hair, and was looking more clean-cut than Ellis had ever seen him before, the stains on his suit notwithstanding. If he was a little bit bolder, he might have actually complimented him on his appearance. Ellis nodded as he gave the can a shake, ensuring the square container was completely empty before discarding it to the side. "Yup. I figure, the sooner we gots these ready, the better."

Nick took a seat next to him, dusting off beneath where he sat—as if it mattered—first. "Probably right." He inclined his head at the plastic basket full of recently drained bottles. "How are we planning to carry them all?"

Ellis took to adding the pint of motor oil. "I figure we'll actshuhly only take one the each'a us; leave the other eight here fer other folks tuh find an' use."

The conman nodded to the idea.

Ellis screwed the cap onto the water jug. He grinned and held it up. "Wanna swirl it?"

Nick chuckled. "Not really, but sure," he took it from his hands and began to gyrate it around in a circle; the greasy liquid coated the insides in a mini-vortex.

The hick watched him a moment longer before becoming satisfied with his technique and made to ripping up strips of cloth with his father's pocket knife which he fetched from his back pocket with a flip. "We're jus' gonna have tuh keep the vodka on us," he said. "Alcohol evaporates purdy quickly, so we ain't gonna be wettin' the wicks 'til round the time we need tuh throw'um." He worked for a moment more until Nick stopped, the mixture well-homogenized.

"Stirred but not shaken," the gambler joked, offering it.

Ellis chuckled at the play on the movie reference and took the jug back.

"So your buddy Keith taught you how to make these…?" Nick said conversationally, leaning back on his palms to watch him work.

Ellis stuck their funnel into the top of one of the bottles and began to pour slowly and cautiously, eyes glued to the task. "Uh huh. He was makin' 'em out in his uncle's backyard, along with some fireworks." He shrugged. "I didn't have nothin' better tuh do that day, so I let him show me.” He tipped the container away and made to grab for a second bottle; Nick intercepted and handed one to him so he wouldn't have to reach as far. "Thanks," he said quickly, resuming pouring and talking. "An' this was before I gone an' took chemistry, but he seemed tuh know what he was
doin’… ‘cept maybe on them fireworks, m’purdy sure yer supposed tuh use powder, not gasoline, in a firework. But anyway, about halfway through the lesson, Keith's ladyfriend of the time comes over…"

"This can't be good…" Nick shook his head.

The hick grinned. "No, it sure as hell wasn't. She was mad as piss at'im cuz I guess he'd tole her he wasn't gonna make anymore after he accidentally set fire tuh her mom's car— way I heard it, he'd been tryin' 'um out or sumthin' an' it was jus' an unlucky throw or some shit, went right through her front windshield, ione— he got his uncle tuh pay fer the damages, so'm not sure what the problem was. But anyway, she gets the bright idea to grab one'a the filled bottles an' chuck it at him…"

"Jesus Christ," the man said incredulously, handing him a third.

Ellis tipped the brim of his hat up ever so slightly. "Yeah well, Keith dodged it, but it hit the side'a the house an' went goddamn everywhere… the lawn, the patio, the whole number. About tha' time I decide I prolly oughta git goin' cuz it's not really my place an' I dun really wanna see another argument between 'um. Cuz I mean, it's like the third one that week an' anyway tha's when she decides she's gonna have a smoke tuh calm her nerves or whatever…"

Nick face-palmed. "You're shitting me."

"Nope. An' I guess when she threw the dang thing, she must've tipped it up over her head or sumthin' cuz when she flicked her lighter, woooosh! he snapped his fingers dramatically— "her hair went up in flames faster than you could say 'Jack Robinson!'" He shook his head with a grin. "She started scrammin' an' wavin' her arms— an' oh Lord, lemme tell you, could that girl scream— I mean, I hadn't ever heard her scream a'fore, 'cept at Keith, but this was an entirely different kind'a scrammin'. An' Keith, well, poor Keith dun tried tuh help her out, but all he really ended up doin' was lightin' himself up too." Ellis shook his head as he filled a sixth bottle. "I left in a hurry 'bout that point tuh go an' call 9-1-1… cuz I was pretty sure they was gonna need it. Iono what happened next," he shrugged, "'cept I guess they broke up not long after that."

"Shit, why? Sounds like they were made for each other," Nick grinned.

Ellis laughed long and hard. "I guess you could see it tha' way." He continued filling and he and Nick stayed quiet until he finished off the twelfth and final bottle, tipping the remainder of the fluid from the jug into it, letting it drip before setting it aside.

Nick shifted on the porch, staring out at the road. He ran a hand through his hair. "So I get to hear plenty about Keith's 'ladyfriends'…" the green eyes flickered over to him, "what about yours?"

"Whattabout my what?" Ellis asked, face falling.

"Your girlfriends," the conman clarified.

The hick blushed. "Well, shit, I ain't ever had no girlfriends. Can't talk about somethin' you don't got."

There was a short silence. "You're kidding me," Nick arched an eyebrow. "You're telling me your idiot friend could hook himself a new gal whenever he wanted, but you've never ever had a single one?" Incredulity and disbelief twanged in the conman's voice, and rightly so.

Ellis scratched the back of his head beneath his hat awkwardly. "Well, I had a crush on this girl in the third grade…" It was the only thing he could think of that was closest without admitting more than he wanted to. His gaze drifted away from the man and he hurriedly began to stuff cloth into
one of the bottles to at least keep his fingers occupied.

The cardshark shook his head. "That doesn't make any sense. Girls are stupid, but they're not that stupid." He considered him seriously, and Ellis wondered then if the gambler could see right through him with that piercing gaze. "They couldn't all miss a nice guy like you," he said, and it seemed to Ellis that he was perhaps fishing for an explanation.

Ellis bit his lip and gave a tentative sigh. He set the single completed molotov back in the basket, staring at the label of the bottle for a long moment. "I jus' didn't wanna git in a serious relationship wit' no one while I was still helpin' tuh support mah Ma." He rubbed his arm, squeezing at the tattoo that adorned said bicep. He'd turned down a dozen girls, be it for the high school prom or just an afternoon at the movies. Not that he'd ever told anyone. Not Keith, not Dave, and especially not his Ma– man, would she have had his head to have known.

So exactly why the conman had managed to loosen his tongue on the subject confused him mightily.

But maybe it was the damn apocalypse. It was part of a life he no longer lived, part of a mantra he'd adopted and stuck to for years, obliterated in the space of a week by an epidemic that had swept the entire east coast. None of it mattered anymore. There wasn't an auto shop, there weren't any pay checks, there weren't groceries to buy or mortgages to pay or any of that. He could pick up a girlfriend tomorrow– well, if there were one to pick up.

Or maybe it really was because it was Nick.

The green eyes were staring at him, but not with the sort of look he had expected. Sure, it was surprised, but it was also tentatively curious. Nick's posture relaxed, lightly clasping his own wrist as he leaned his elbows out onto his knees. "So girls did want to get with you, you just said no."

"Yeah," he responded. Ellis started on a second bottle, nervously packing cloth into the neck. The conman was quiet, contemplative.

And he couldn't stand it.

"I mean, you understand, right?" he suddenly asked, feeling a touch desperate. "It was already a stretch… payin' the rent on mah apartment an' sendin' the rest'a what I didn't need back tuh her. There weren't really no way I could hook up wit' someone… I– I would'a had tuh git us a bigger place, I would'a had tuh git a better payin' job." He gestured with the bottle. "An' then there'd be two mouths tuh feed, an' two've us tuh clothe…" He felt silly, hot and embarrassed, half-spluttering the words, wishing he hadn't said anything at all because it made him feel stupid.

"No, no, I get it," Nick reassured him, still looking partially confused. He shook his head with chagrin. "It's just so…" the dark eyebrows raised, "selfless."

Ellis dodged the faint emerald gaze again. He resumed work under the long stretching silence, trying not to fidget too much.

"You and I led very different lives," the man wondered aloud, drawing Ellis' attention back to him with curiosity. The gambler continued. "I was always stealing my dad's credit cards." There was that mischievous twinkle again. "Not that he much missed the cash."

Ellis allowed himself to chuckle uncomfortably. Somehow it hardly surprised him to learn. A distinct part of him wanted to know more, about that childhood, but another part of him was too awkward and nervous to say anything. He poked wadded material into another bottle. "What'd'ya buy?" he settled on the innocuous question.
Nick shook his head then. "Shit," he said bluntly, "To make me feel better." He paused for half a beat—enough to make Ellis partially seize up. "Not that it ever did." The conman smirked at him, but it was a gesture filled with irony.

Ellis nibbled at his lip without a word. He didn't know what to say to such a declaration… or the honesty.

"I bet you didn't have much growing up," the gambler spoke, his voice unwavering, confident in the guess. His head tipped ever so slightly. "Am I right?"

The hick gave an involuntary shiver; memories filling his head as if summoned to the surface. Of sparse Christmases, re-used wrapping paper, hand-me-down gifts and arts-and-crafts paper tree ornaments. Meager birthdays, no parties, but a home-made baked cake and a round of 'happy birthday to you', a single heartfelt gift from the whole family, allowances pooled together, to bestow upon the birthday boy or girl of the occasion. Infrequent 'family vacations' to the beach or wherever was cheap, souvenirs coming in the form of shells or pebbles rather than those purchased from a store. Literally sliding by on what he later learned was his father's slowly dwindling reserve to pay the mortgage and bills. "Not a whole lot," Ellis admitted, only committing to generalities; he wasn't looking for sympathy from the man, not on that.

Nick's look was far-away, however, almost lost. "I bet you were pretty happy anyway." A touch of wistfulness had been added to the tone.

Ellis inclined his shoulder with a pained shrug; he felt an odd mixture of nostalgia and sorrow drift through him. "Yeah," he smiled despite the subtle pressure around his heart. "Yeah, I was."
Coach and Rochelle retired shortly after the big man was finished with his shower. He and the kid chose to spend their watch in the front room where they could keep their eyes on the door, though ultimately he thought there was little reason for concern tonight. The safehouse was practically a goddamn fort; CEDA had really gone all out. Still and all, Nick couldn't claim that he minded getting to spend a rather relaxed seven and a half hours with the hick. He quickly fetched a cleaning kit for his magnum from the counter where their twelve molotovs now stood, a little shocked that he had the good fortune enough that both he and his gun were getting clean that evening. Ellis plopped himself comfortably into the couch, and rather than occupy the armchair a few feet away, Nick made the decision to sit with him, securing a proximity that was at once pleasingly close and devastatingly distant.

He applied himself to dismantling his gun to keep his mind off it.

Ellis shifted against the cushions, watching him work with a subtle curiosity. "Y'look like ya know what'cher doin'," he commented as Nick slid the bolt loose from the slide.

Nick chuckled briefly. A good observation. "Yeah. Probably ought to get into the habit of doing this every night," he said as he continued, getting the ejector and spring loose now, collecting them in his palm. "Better for the gun."

Ellis frowned a little, his hand sliding down to his glock. Nick caught the motion but didn't comment on it; the hick spoke up on his own soon enough anyhow. "Think ya could show me how tuh clean mine?" he asked.

Nick eyed him with a touch of curiosity. With the mechanic's initial skill and lack of hesitance to pick up both pistol and hunting rifle, he was a little surprised he didn't know how. "Haven't before?" he asked casually, no condescension to the question, dipping a swab into the supplied tin of solvent.

"Naw… my Pa use'ta do the cleanin'," he explained sheepishly.

Nick brought the gun close to his face, squinting at the mechanism of the gas cylinder as he started to dab the wet end of the q-tip into it, twisting a few good times. Briefly he considered pursuing the subject of the kid's father, but decided to settle for another time further down the road. "Yeah, I can show you," he told him, turning the swab around to stick the dry end in to finish the area.

Ellis nodded with a smile, his blue eyes still very much on him and what he was doing, watching intently.

Nick didn't mind one little bit.

"So why'd'ya hate the foothills?" Ellis asked a few short minutes later, segueing.

Nick regarded him carefully, unsurprised the topic from the bridge had come back. He made a reach for the lubricant and another q-tip. "Boring as shit," he summed up in three words, twisting off the cap.

"Really?" the hick asked with a touch of incredulity. "I would'a thought there'd be plenty tuh do that close tuh L.A."

"Yeah, maybe with transportation," Nick cast him a sideways glance before committing himself to the piston.
Ellis scratched his head sheepishly. "I guess yer parents didn't let'cha use their car, huh?" he reasoned out.

Nick let a grin spread across his jaw. "Let me? No. Able to stop me from stealing my father's Porsche?" He tipped his head, "Also no."

"Oh man…" Ellis' face screwed up into a lopsided grin. "You stole his Porsche??" his voice twanged, clearly interested.

"About once a week. Whenever the hell I felt like it really," he shrugged, the statement quite truthful; at least, as soon as he figured he could get away with it was when he'd make off with it again. At first it had been a matter of learning where his father hid his keys in his desk or filing cabinet, after that figuring out how to pick the lock on his safebox, until finally it became a simple tactic of 'hotwire and go'. He'd tampered with the wires of the luxury vehicle too many times to count and it had given him a foundation to work from to hotwire other cars later on. He'd technically been underage as well, no driver's license to his name, though that too did little to stop him.

The hick folded his arms with subtle amusement. "So once ya had it, what'd ya do with it?" he inquired.

Nick chuckled and momentarily studied his lap, pausing in his cleaning. Ah, now there was the interesting question. He lifted his gaze to the waiting blue eyes. "Drove it out into the Mojave desert until it ran out of gas."

Ellis face twisted with even greater curiosity, brow pulled far down over his eyes, ever so slightly scrunching that cute little nose. "The desert?" he wondered aloud, trying to make sense of it. "What was there tuh see in the desert?"

Nick smiled, his look rather distant. He could see the painted plains, still as fresh in his memory now as they had been before, spread out in front of him more than twenty years ago. The endless horizon, the sagebrush and cacti the only relief to a barren flatland. And the sunsets. Oh the sunsets. When the air was still sharp and dry and hot, but no sun bore down upon him to burn his skin, its dying rays disoloring the sky in a gradient of blue to gentle orange. He shook his head, coming out of the reverie, focusing back on his weapon. "Nothing," he revealed to the mechanic.

The hick took a quiet moment to study him and parse his response, but when he spoke again, the kid was far more perceptive than Nick would have guessed he would be. "Jus' wanted tuh git away from it all?" he more stated than asked.

He gave his chin a gentle bob. "In one, kiddo." He rewarded the kid with a pearly smile.

"So how'ja git home?"

Nick quickly touched up the barrel and slide, two of the easiest components. "My parents had a pretty good insurance policy," he shrugged, discarding yet another dirty swab. "I just called up a tow truck."

That was the brief version. He'd usually spent a good few minutes walking to the nearest callbox to punch in the number he had by then memorized— that of the AAA office. He'd spent numerous hours under the stars, waiting for the trucks to come pick him up. And when they showed up and found out he was a minor and not the owner of the car, the very next call that was made was always to his father, who by that time was hopping with rage, screaming at him through the little holes in the speaker, his voice so loud he could hold the earpiece at arms length and still hear him.
clearly, and then Nick dutifully handed off the phone to the AAA agent who required the man's verbal consent to tow the vehicle back to Pomona. And Nick rode in the passenger's seat, staring out the window, watching the scenery go by for the second time that night, in reverse, so familiar he knew which landmarks and roadsigns were coming a mile before passing them up, exactly how many miles were left to home, to facing his father.

The man had threatened more than once to leave his sorry ass out in the desert.

But he liked his Porsche too much for that.

"Man… that sounds like it'd get old," Ellis commented, shaking his head.

It might've. If he hadn't at a certain point met Al.

Nick wasn't sure he was ready to share his relationship with the fellow with Ellis just yet. He faltered a little as he began to reassemble his magnum, an ever so slight tremble to his fingers as the memories pooled. But it looked like he had little choice— the way the mechanic was peering at him made it obvious he was aware he was holding back on him. Nick ran his tongue over the back of his incisors contemplatively, mouth still firmly shut.

"I met a guy. Name was Al. He ran the night shift during the weekdays." He hurriedly returned his gaze to his gun.

Ellis chuckled beside him, not perceiving his awkwardness. "M'guessin' that's usually when you done ran off."

Nick pursed his lips at the phrase 'ran off', not that that wasn't what it had been, but of course he disliked thinking of it in said terms. Considering he always left with the intention of coming back, he didn't feel it really constituted classifying him as a 'run-away'. Not like he felt he would have been missed if he actually had. Perhaps that was partially why he did come back every time, to be as much of a pain in the ass as possible. He shook his thoughts loose, admitting to the hick's surmise with a "Yeah."

Ellis didn't seem to quite know where to take the conversation, then again, neither did he. He hurriedly got his magnum back together and clicked a clip back into it, and for a moment he just stared at its silver surface, contemplating how far to take this, how far to go with the hick, how much to share. He could just as easily keep to himself– it felt so taboo in hindsight that he'd never really spoken on it in any detail with anyone– yet Ellis was so non-threatening and unassuming, it disarmed his discomfort and made him actually want to open up.

Honestly, he hadn't thought about Al in a long time, a part of his deep past from a time when he was young and unstable and rebellious, and as such, he liked to keep it that way: buried. Like every other aspect of his life, it had had its ups, and its downs.

"We got to know each other pretty well," Nick murmured. "At least, as well as any two people who shared frequent car rides could." He chuckled and took a cautious glance over to the mechanic, who was patiently wordless, but expectant. "I dunno," Nick continued, his brow drawing down, "he was kind to me when a lot of other people weren't."

God, wasn't that the fucking truth. Al had recognized from the get-go that he was a 'trouble-maker' skirting the edge of becoming a delinquent, but rather than chew him out for it or try to tell him how and in what ways he was a screw-up like the other adults in his life, the man had instead gone for an entirely different tactic. His very first words to him after hanging up the telephone were so matter-of-fact and honest that it had unintentionally made Nick laugh out loud. Al had simply placed his hands on his hips, shook his head and said: 'Sounds like your dad is a dick.'.
The mutual understanding between them originated from those words, a kind of common ground. Even so, Nick had been sulky and broody and rather unwilling to talk about it at first, throwing his feet up onto the dash and slumping into the passenger seat of the tow truck with a grimace. But gradually the man coaxed him out, got him to start talking about why he had run away—honestly, he couldn’t even remember what it was that time, that night. Al just listened, his gaze on the road, his hands on the steering wheel, nodding the whole way. And Nick had been more than happy to spew as many venomous words as could about his horrible father and vent about his miserable home life and school life and harangue on and on until he was nearly blue in the face.

From that very first car ride, Al never once judged him for the times he chose to leave home, never once claimed he shouldn’t have and stayed home. He just listened, and nodded or smiled, empathized, and often told his own stories—events and happenstances in his life that were similar, and what they meant to him, what he had learned from them. It had made Nick roll his eyes at first, not interested in being lectured, but the man’s intent never seemed to be lecturing—simply sharing. It was weird at first, but Nick slowly found himself timing his 'run-aways' to purposefully coincide with Al’s shift, so Al could always be the one to tow the Porsche and drive him home. The guy even went so far as to sometimes let him hang out at the shop when he wasn’t feeling ready to return home just yet, and they’d chit-chat while Al worked on something or another after hours, earning his wage. Though he was fourteen and Al was clearly somewhere in the mid-to-late-twenties—Nick had never known what his exact age was—the driver treated him as an equal. Quickly Nick found he grew to respect him, and more and more he took those stories to heart and listened himself.

He hadn’t deserved Al’s kindness; Al had given it to him anyway.

The hick on the other side of the couch seemed to perk ever so slightly. "You use’ta talk tuh him?" Ellis asked, motioning a finger between himself and the conman, "like this?"

"Sort of," Nick frowned, studying his hands in his lap, not really thinking the two were all that comparable. After all, Ellis was neither misguided nor nihilistic like he had been in his youth, and he was considerably older than he had been at the time as well. And while Nick could truthfully admit he was a fair bit better at listening than he used to be, he was still undeniably the same selfish, self-serving jackass he had always been—nothing like Al at all. There was really only one aspect of it all that he thought bore any notable similarity.

His attraction for the other male involved.

He realized then with a deep frown that the distance between him and El now on the sofa was about the distance between him and Al had been in bench seats of the tow truck.

And he had never, ever gotten any closer to Al than that.

Nick’s throat seized up, but he kept his voice even. "He taught me a lot of shit…” he muttered, going on, "about life. More than my father ever did."

"S’really good he was there for you then," Ellis spoke.

Nick rounded his green-eyed gaze on the hick, the words cutting deep in a way Ellis couldn’t know and hadn’t intended. He nodded, then forged a smile, motioning his hand at the kid’s gun. "C’mon over here," he spoke softly, "I’ll show you how to do this."

Ellis scooched over onto the middle cushion, holding the weapon out eagerly to him with the biggest smile on the planet.

His heart thrilled at the nearness.
But it hurt to not tell him the rest of the story.
He awoke to the sound of insane, high-pitched laughter. And though it was muffled and very clearly outside the walls of his bedroom, outside the walls of the fencing, it didn't keep it from lifting all the hairs up on his arms and the back of his neck as he shot upright in bed.

Nick stood and quickly fastened his holster to his thigh, depositing the magnum he had kept on the bed stand to it. He slipped on his shoes, knotted them quick, and warily emerged from his bedroom. Movement caught in his peripheral vision to his right– Ellis shifted awkwardly in the hall.

"Ya hear it too?" the hick asked upon seeing him standing there.

Nick gave a nod, but not sure how visible the gesture was in the low light, also supplied a "Yeah."

Together they proceeded out into the front room where Coach and Rochelle sat up on watch, both men naturally inquisitive to learn more about the late-night nuisance. Rochelle turned in her seat, hearing their footsteps behind her.

"The heck's that…?" Ellis asked them, blearily rubbing a knuckle into his left eye as he rounded the back of the couch.

"Not a clue," Coach frowned heavily, his grip, Nick noted, tight on his auto shotgun. The maddened hysteria continued outside, unabating.

"Only started a couple of minutes ago," Rochelle informed them. "But I swear it's been getting louder and louder every second. It's driving me crazy."

All four survivors went quiet at an additional sound… of sharp scratching– claws dragging across wood– somewhere on the east side of the house.

"Kin we maybe shut it up?" Ellis suggested.

Rochelle looked to Coach who looked to Nick who looked back to the hillbilly.

Because they had all been very adamant about staying indoors during the nighttime hours, only traveling during the day. Because fighting flesh-hungry zombies in the pitch dark, when they couldn't properly see, seemed more than foolish– it was goddamn stupid.

But oh the laughter. The horrible, brain-racking, tormenting, unrelenting, demented laughter.

Rochelle flattened her palms against her ears; Ellis looked about ready to do the same.

He and Coach seemed to come to about the same decision at the same time; the big man standing from his armchair with his weapon. "Okay," Nick said, grabbing his magnum from his thigh, his expression stern, "let's just go out there quick, put whatever the hell it is down, and get back inside."

"Sounds fine to me," Coach nodded with assertion.

"Lemme git mah boots," Ellis said quickly, turning to hasten back to his room for said footgear.

"I think there was a flashlight in the cabinet," Rochelle stood to go fetch it. Once she had it she came back into the living room, clicking it on and off a few times to make sure it was working
reliably and wouldn't go out on them. Coach dropped a few more loose shotgun shells into his khaki pockets. Ellis successfully secured the laces on his boots and picked his pistol up off the table. They all moved for the door.

Not knowing the size or potential abilities of their threat, they would all go together.

"Y'all ready?" Coach asked the other three.

They gave him a nod.

He pulled the bar from its mount and pushed open the red door, stepping out into the night. The creature must have heard them too because it gave a loud gleeful neigh and the banging and clawing hastened with equal measure of enthusiasm.

The thought of trying to shoot the thing through the fence occurred to Nick, but there wasn't really any good way to do that without heavily damaging their barrier. Coach unlocked the gate and they exited their little sanctuary, all eyes and ears, scanning the street for stray infected, guns at the ready. Rochelle flicked on the light and briefly waved the beacon about on the ground, getting her bearings, finding the sidewalk and the unlit streetlamp. It could have been darker; at least the moon was half full. A frown tugged at the corner of Nick's lip, unable to shake the feeling that this was a bad idea.

Carefully they made their way around the corner to the east side, keeping their footfalls silent.

And sure enough they found the culprit—throwing itself at the fence and flailing its scrawny arms, screaming girlishly. At the sudden flood of light its attention was instantly drawn to them, snapping its head around to peer at them.

It was no more than three feet tall. Nick grimaced at the sight of it. At its sickening little hunched form, jutting vertebrae, and beady black eyes glaring hard at them; maw a row of teeth clear back to its molars because the flesh had stripped away from its cheeks, exposing them in a hideous sneer. From the gaps of said misaligned teeth came the perverse cackling that had kept them awake.

With way more pep than its ugly thin back legs suggested, it leapt into the air before any of them could even get a shot off.

Its trajectory landed it right on top of Coach's head. The creature squealed with glee, immediately latching its arms about the man's neck, grotesque little body curled around his face and thighs tensing about his shoulders, tiny hips jerking back and forth into his chin.

Nick and the other two held their fire for fear that if they took a shot, they'd hit the man as well as the beast, momentarily stunned and at a loss for what to do, staring.

"GET IT OFF!" the big man yelled.

And Nick really wished he hadn't. The night lit up with screams.

Ellis' eyes went round as dinner plates. He leapt forward to make a grab for the creature on Coach; it squealed its displeasure and didn't let go, but it got them both closer to the ground. Nick settled the matter with a quick crack to the back of the little monster's skull with the butt of his magnum. It gave a dying whinny and crumpled, going flaccid as Coach shucked it from his shoulders with a disgusted grunt.

"Back inside…!" Rochelle hissed at them all, her feet already carrying her towards the gate, leading the way with the light.
They hurried after her. She bolted inside, followed closely by Coach and Ellis; Nick took a few shots at indistinct forms moving in the night, eyes darting to and fro in attempt to detect movement, backing himself into the gate. Coach slammed it shut and bent to bolt it.

Which was when an arm shot through the bars of the wrought-iron gate and curled its fingers into the larger man’s forearm. He gave another shout as he was grabbed and they all gave a jump of surprise. Nick's instincts caused him to react first, but before he could pull the trigger, Ellis had blasted a hole into the zombie's chest, eliminating the threat for him. He blinked back minor surprise. "Getting dangerous with that little thing," he commented offhandedly and the kid gave half a snort.

The football player got the gate locked and they took a number of steps back to watch the horde amass, arms and limbs reaching and stretching through the bars, swiping at the air, fingers coiling, searching for purchase; to listen to the banging and thumping at the wooden planks, the screams of protest, unable to get through to them.

Coach took the honor of training his shotgun at the throng of undead and reducing them to a bleeding mass on the pavement, and in some way likely exacting his revenge. As corpses fell, more came to replace them, crawling over their dead compatriots for their own chance at swift death. A few limbs stretched up and over the fencing, clinging at razor wire, cutting their own flesh in maddened rage to attempt to reach them, and he and the other two took it upon themselves to plant a bullet in any that managed to peek its head over the top.

As the night became still once more, the four survivors shifted, waited, and surveyed the damage.

The iron gate hadn't taken any injury, like it was designed to, and the heavy mechanism of the lock was intact as well. A pool of blood, inky and black for the dark that surrounded them, was leaking out from underneath the littering of bodies, slowly crawling across the pavement, filling the cracks between the concrete slabs to run into the grass on either side. It sank through the blades, the ground gradually absorbing it, but the smell of the fresh carnage was already beginning to waft up at them– it was growing all too familiar.

"Back inside," Coach ordered, and none of them were about to disagree with him.

Nick came in last and took it upon himself to get the heavy red metal door back shut behind them. He put the horizontal restraint back across it with a frown, now rethinking the former 'impenetrability' of their safehouse, his mind on the way the creatures had crawled up and over the fence… yellow eyes glowing with phosphorescence in the night. Jesus Christ, that shit was enough to give a person nightmares.

"You're bleeding!" Rochelle's voice rang out suddenly with alarm.

Nick turned on his heels.

The big man had his arm held out level with the ground. Four distinct gashes decorated his appendage, on the whole shallow but the flesh was torn and freshly bleeding. "Yeah," he mumbled, looking frustrated but not overly upset, "son of a bitch got me."

"Shit, man, we got'sta patch that up," Ellis said seriously, peering around his shoulder at the wound.

"With what?" Coach grumbled.

Nick’s eyes darted to the little 'emergency' room. Rochelle followed his gaze. "Think that's what they meant?" she asked perceptively.
"Whether they did or not, we're about to find out," he mumbled, striding over to it. They had waited long enough to discover what was inside. He snatched the little keyring off its nail and made for the padlocks, turning each key into its respective lock. Rochelle and Ellis joined him, waiting as he clicked each one loose. Finally he got them all undone and aside.

He swung the door outward.

And his eyebrows climbed up on his head.

Supplies all right. Medical supplies, specifically. And loads of them.

"Shit…" Ellis blinked, blue eyes scanning the shelves. There were medical kits of all sizes, numerous bottles of various kinds of pills, mostly painkillers of differing strengths, some antidepressants and anti-inflammatories; there were plastic packs of morphine, ready for drip injection, packaged blood of all blood types for transfusion, and tubes of adrenaline in 'shot' form; sprints and braces for broken limbs, even a couple of defibrillators. If you wanted his opinion, it looked like disaster waiting to happen, because Nick couldn't hardly imagine the average person having anywhere near enough medical knowledge to use half of what was presented to them there. The assortment made it feel like they had walked into a mini-hospital for Christ's sake, minus the stuffy staff and ass-less paper gowns.

And he didn't much like it. Sure, it made some sense, not everyone was bound to make it to evac without a few scrapes and bumps, they'd need medical attention for whatever wounds they had incurred on the journey. Any of them could've been in need of serious patching up had that tank gotten any closer. Or if the tongue-freak had managed to get the bite of him it had apparently so craved. Coach had just gotten to be the unlucky guy in their party to sustain the first injury.

It was just the sheer amount of supplies that caused dread to pool in the bottom of his gut... thick, heavy and sickening.

"Why the heck they need so much'a it?" Ellis voiced his opinion out loud for him, holding up a full bottle of Advil and shaking the contents.

Nick swallowed uneasily, setting his jaw. "I donno, but I think we ought to stock up before we leave here in the morning," he advised.

Rochelle quickly darted in past him to grab what was currently needed. Her brown eyes caught on his and the reporter gave him a tight nod.

"There were lots of reports of injuries when the flu first started cropping up, before people knew they needed to defend themselves," she shared. "A lot of people getting bitten or scratched by loved ones; that's one of the reasons attributed to this thing spreading so quickly…"

The way she trailed off made Nick slightly uncomfortable.

"I don't know," she said, her bottom lip stiff. "There was also a lot of talk about some people being 'immune' to the infection. People who got bit but nothing happened. CEDA started recruiting as many of them as they could to aid with the containment process in the first couple weeks or so, since they knew they weren't going to 'turn'. But most of all this is speculation anyway," the girl frowned as she recalled the little information she knew. "The facts aren't certain."

Nick gave a grunt. Leave it to the media to turn disaster into full-blown panic. 'Immunes', 'non-immunes'… way to create a schism.
He was liable to bet that the four of them fit the first category. But until 24 hours had been put between Coach's injury and now, he wasn't going to make any assumptions. He grimaced.

"I'll keep an eye on him," Rochelle said, reading his expression. He nodded.

Their brief conversation at an end, Rochelle promptly turned to head back and attend to Coach, who had reseated himself on the couch, arm still aloft to discourage blood loss. Ellis gave a worried fidget as he followed her and Nick couldn't blame him, shutting the door to the supplies behind him, not bothering to re-secure any of the padlocks until after they pilfered it in the morning. Wearily, and feeling more stressed out than before, he made his way back to his bedroom, magnum close at hand, hoping to God he wouldn't have to use it to reduce their count to three.
"Ellis, sweetie… go get some rest, Coach is fine, we're all fine."

Ellis nodded at the threads in the rug and gave his third "Yeah, okay." to the floor.

Even though he had agreed to the female survivor's words, he didn't move from the armchair; he didn't feel tired at all. He knew by every right he should be, tromping around all day, shooting zombies and shit, and only having had three hours of sleep, but he just wasn't. His thoughts were keeping him awake and in half a panic and they refused to settle. Ellis frowned hard at the softly smiling reporter. He wanted to ask Rochelle how she could be so sure, so confident that Coach was okay.

Or if she was just saying it to try and get him to stop worrying about what she had said in the storage closet.

Ellis fiddled with the brim of his hat. He just couldn't shake the feeling that because of him, because of his moronic suggestion to go outside and try to shut that little piece-of-shit, face-humper up, Coach had gotten scratched. Sure, Coach had been the one to yell and summon the horde… maybe Rochelle could've been a little quicker about leading them back to the gate… and Nick had been slow about getting inside at the end before it was shut, but none of those things would've happened if they had all just stayed inside and toughed the noise out; it came back to him. Not to mention he had seen that approaching zombie before it had stuck its hand through the gate; Nick may have complimented him for his quickness to kill it, but he knew he'd shot too late, that if he had just raised his gun a second earlier, it might have been avoided.

But for all they knew now, the oldest member of their party could soon be turning into one of the mindless fuckers, hungry for flesh, by morning...

How long did it take for a person to turn anyway? Ellis' eyes riveted on Coach with mild distress, pupils constricting, unable to blink or turn his gaze away. He seemed okay. It had been over an hour, almost two. Maybe Ro was right. Ro would know, wouldn't she? She'd seen reports, stories.

It was racking him with guilt that was far too much to bear, but he didn't dare bring it up with either reporter or football player.

He furled his hands into his hair.

"You're no use to us tired, boy," Coach said, adding to the girl's line of reasoning that he should go back to bed.

If he didn't go back soon, three hours would be all the more he'd be getting, he'd already burnt through the 'extra' time they'd permitted themselves. They'd be heading back on the road in the next three hours or so-- dawn was fast approaching.

Ellis rose to his feet. "Alright, I'ma gettin'," he relented, giving a small sheepish grin that fell from his face more quickly than he had meant for it to. He holstered his pistol and wiped the palms of his hands on his thighs quickly before proceeding around the back of the couch. "See y'all in the mornin'," he tipped his hat at them both as he left the living room, praying he wasn't jinxing it.

"See you then," Rochelle smiled.

"Night, youngin'," Coach returned.
Ellis nodded and left them. Honest to God truth, he wasn't particularly happy about leaving Rochelle alone with Coach— which was partially why he was still up in the first place. But he reminded himself forcefully that the girl could handle herself— she'd proven it out on the road numerous times; Ellis just had a natural inclination to be more concerned about 'the gentler sex', that was just part of being a gentleman, how he had been raised. But Rochelle knew what to look out for— perhaps better than the rest of them when it came to this infection shit. If Coach started to turn…

Well, she'd find a quick solution.

He traipsed his way down the hall as quietly as his heavy boots would allow, not wishing to disturb the gambler who, by now, was likely sound asleep once more, unlike him. Nonetheless, Ellis paused at the door to the man's room to listen a quiet moment outside it. Of course there was no sound from within— he'd found out that the gambler's slumber was silent from times he had woken in the middle of the night, either to sounds outside or his own restlessness. Nick didn't snore, or mumble, or shift around, or any of that, he just slept breathing through his nostrils, slow and steady, regaining strength.

Ellis nibbled at his bottom lip and pressed his fingers to the wood of the closed door longingly. Oh what he wouldn't do to talk to the man now. To let him ease all the fears and troubles away with that soft voice of his. Nick would know just what to say, and how to say it. Reassure him all this wasn't his fault. Distract him from all the shit going on around them. They'd just talk about something from their lives before... memories, family, hobbies, it didn't really matter, it never did.

Ellis let his hand slide away from the door. Nick had shared so dang-awful much with him today, so much he couldn't scarcely believe it. Yet here he was, at his door, insatiably wishing for more, wanting to knock… wanting the man to accept him into his bedroom… sit and talk the rest of the goddamn night away with one another like they didn't have somewhere to go in the morning, like they weren't fleeing for their goddamn lives to be evacuated to God-knew-where. And he knew he was just being selfish, to want so much of his attention, that he probably ought to give the guy a little more space… but he just couldn't help it… he was irrevocably attached.

He'd clung to the first thing— the first person— that had had meaning to him in a long time. He wasn't altogether sure what all Nick meant to him, just that he meant a lot, and that every day he seemed to mean a little more. Sure, he looked up to him— he was so fucking talented, who wouldn't?— sort of like a big brother he'd never had— Dave, by blood his half-brother and seven years his senior, hadn't gotten together with him frequently enough to fill that place once their Pa died. And he felt like he could tell Nick just about anything, what a best friend ought to be— a role Keith had never been particularly good at filling for his alleged claim of the position; whenever he wanted to go to the bar, it wasn't to talk, it was to feel a buzz and Ellis always ended up dragging his ass back home; they'd never had a heart-to-heart conversation the way he and Nick seemingly had on more than one occasion now.

But even still those two things combined didn't account for everything he felt for the conman…

Ellis glanced down the dark hall, at the white-washed door of his own bedroom, waiting for him at the end of the house. He dropped his gaze to the floor, not wanting to return to the space that was his for the night— it felt far too secluded, all alone and separated from the rest like that. Sure, he ought to appreciate the privacy it offered after so many nights in shared spaces with his fellow survivors, but the thought— the thought of being actually alone— that it resultingculled into his mind was far from pleasant.

Probably because he was finally coming to grips with how frightening of a reality it truly was. Even if they made it to evac, his family might not be there waiting for him. He hadn't gotten a
postcard like Ro did. Of course, he couldn't even remember if he had checked his goddamn mailbox before leaving either.

His three compatriots might be the only family he had left. And of those three, now one of them might not make it.

He clutched at his own shoulders, hugging his chest with mild despair.

Ellis gave a shake his head, snapping himself out of it. He leveled his eyes at the door again, shifting his weight between his feet. Part of him hoped that if he stood here long enough outside of Nick's door, somehow the man would awaken and let him in, but he knew how ridiculous that was. Nick was asleep, and unless he committed his knuckles to the wood, he was going to stay that way. And Ellis wasn't the type to be rude and wake someone up in the middle of the night just because he was having trouble sleeping; Nick certainly didn't deserve that sort of mistreatment. He huffed a little sigh and pressed his back against the door, moving to sit leaning against it, removing his hat to squeeze the bill absently.

Well, Nick may not be conscious to hear it, but he supposed he could talk to him anyway, sort of.

Though he was out of earshot of Coach and Rochelle, Ellis felt a little silly when he struck up a conversation with the piece of wood that separated him and the dozing cardshark. "M'really worried, Nick…" he whispered to the darkness. "This whole thing's so goddamn crazy, I can't hardly believe it. People gettin' sick an' shit…" he prefaced with a shake of his head, letting the words flow. "I mean, what the hell? Ain't none of it right, none of it." He drew in a deep breath and contemplated his lap, realizing the things he was saying probably weren't things he would have said to the gambler's face, that the fact that he was talking to no one but himself were bringing out words he might have otherwise repressed, kept hidden. "Guess that's not really for us tuh understand anyway," he dismissed it quickly. "It's jus'… m'scared we're gonna lose Coach…" he hung his head, "all cuz'a me." He blinked back tears that were threatening to fill his eyes. "Ya think he'll be okay, right? We all been exposed tuh all this infection shit fer like a week now an' ain't nothin' bad happened." He heaved a sigh. "I jus' dunno, man."

He paused and gave a weak chuckle. "Y'know, it reminds me'a mah buddy Keith– m'sure yer tired'a hearin' about him. Y'see mah younger brother, Emmett, he got the chicken pox at school, an' me, well, I dun already had the chicken pox years ago when I was in grade school, so naturally I didn't catch 'um." He smirked and shook his head. "But Keith, see, I dunno how he managed it, but I guess he missed it when he was young, an' a'course I was carryin' it around without knowin' it, so when I dun went tuh visit him, I ended up givin' it tuh him! An' since he was older an' all, it ended up turnin' intuh the down-right nastiest case'a shingles I ever seen mah entire life. I swear tuh God– no exaggeration– chicken pox over ninety percent'a his body. I tole him not tuh itch 'em, but a'course he wouldn't listen tuh me an' tha' jus' made it worse…"

Ellis blinked rapidly, realizing he had divulged the entire story, and rather exuberantly, to absolutely no one.

He gave a heavy sigh and deposited his hat back to his head, standing to head back to his room. He trailed his fingers over the smooth wood one final time, imagining— though he couldn't explain why— the sheen of white paint as the gambler's silky jacket, and he pawed his palm down the imaginary pane of Nick's left breast with the smallest of warbles in the back of his throat.

He retracted his hand, furling it into a tight fist. "Night, Nick," he mumbled, trudging away.

He closed his door and sat to bend down and loosen his laces before kicking his boots to the side. He slung his cap over the far bedpost and peeled off his socks, draping them over the footboard in hopes of airing out some of their stink before he had to commit them back to his feet in the
morning. Honest to God, he ought to do it with all of his clothing, but he wasn't much one for sleeping in the buff. He relinquished his baggy coveralls, then considered the bed wearily.

Ugh. He could already tell he wasn't going to get any sleep like this.

He sat and pressed his forefinger and thumb into his eyelids, massaging his eyeballs gently though them. They felt so heavy… and yet having them closed brought no sleep.

Maybe he wasn't closing them for the right reason.

Ellis dropped to his knees, pressed his elbows to the mattress and bent his head, clasping his hands together. "Dear Lord," he started in a meek whisper, "I know yer doin' what'cha can… that'cha've got an awful lot t'uh look over right now, an' an awful lotta people prayin' fer yer help right now… but please, Lord, would'ja look over Coach tuhnight?" He shook his head with conviction. "He's an awful good guy, awful good– been good tuh us all– an' he's got a lot more tuh do here on Earth a'fore ya take him; I think ya'd agree."

Ellis licked his lips, eyes still firmly shut, though they had suddenly threatened to pool with tears once more. "An' please look after mah Ma, an' the rest'a mah family… i-if they're okay…” He swallowed firmly, with conviction, moving on. "I wanna thank'ya fer lookin' after us as we been on our way t'uh New Orleans… s'long way, but I think we kin make it wit'cher help. An'…"

Ellis hesitated hard, fumbling over a dozen different ways to word his next sentiment, the possibility of not even following through or mentioning it crossing his mind, but he continued resolutely. "Thanks fer bringin' me Nick– I… I dunno what I'd do wit'out him. I really don't." He swallowed and hastily made to finish up his prayer. "Tha's it, really… In Jesus' name, amen."

He opened his eyes and lifted his head. His heart beat a little harder, but his body tingled with a renewed feeling of hope from the simple action. Feeling significantly better, he crawled back under his bedsheets and soon found himself drifting off into peaceful, uninterrupted slumber.
Chapter 20

He awoke when the light of dawn came filtering through the cracks of the boarded up window of the bedroom, falling across his face. He grimaced as he sat up, holding up his palm at the window to block the light.

Morning. Already.

Nick grumbled to himself as he threw his legs over the edge of the bed, not all that pleased to be woken, a dull ache throbbing in the back of his skull. He had sort of been hoping the ‘extra’ sleep would be beneficial, but apparently his body had grown accustomed to the shorter nights, and he was now experiencing the ‘grumpiness’ that came along with only partially sleeping in. He muttered under his breath as he reached for his magnum holster, bending over to strap it back to his leg.

And then he remembered something.

They had a shower.

He cast the gun strap aside, securing his magnum instead as he rose from the mattress to quickly stretch and hasten for the washroom. It occupied the space between El’s bedroom and his own and he gave the door a light rap with one of his knuckles just to ensure that the hick was in his bedroom and not using it. When he got no response from inside, he turned the knob and let himself in.

The tiling of the floor was cool on the bottoms of his bare feet and he rapidly made to undress himself, setting his gun on the counter and hanging his clothing on the supplied towel rack to keep it from wrinkling excessively. Ultimately it was a ridiculous concern in a zombieapocalypse and he knew it, but he couldn’t help but hold onto the little things like that—shit, if he ever found a working iron and an ironing board, he could guarantee he’d be flattening the lapels on his coat in a heartbeat. He knew it didn’t all chalk up to habit either– there was something about the illusion of normalcy within chaos what was psychologically integral to it all, that made him want to sustain routine rather than surrender it.

Goosebumps prickled up over his skin in protest to the cool surrounding air. They weren’t about to get much better either. Nick bent and turned the faucet, releasing a downpour of frigid water, which he readily stepped into— shocking his system into waking alertness.

Fuck that was cold. He shook it off.

His hair continued to stand on end as he rubbed himself down from neck to toe with soap, keeping his head out of the spray so he wouldn’t have to re-gel it. Though he couldn’t decide if he wanted to take the time to shave again… he ran his palms over slightly roughened neck and jaw and cheeks that had accumulated just a ghost of stubble in the night’s hours, gauging its severity. Inexplicably he wondered if Ellis liked stubble, only to laugh at himself for the very thought. Why should the redneck even give two shits about whether or not his jaw was clean?

He dropped his gaze to the bar of soap in his palm, lifting an eyebrow with chagrin. Seemed he was keeping up appearances in more than one way with the kid.

Ellis hadn’t shaved however, despite the option when he had taken his own shower. Not that what little the mechanic was seemingly sporting was at all objectionable. It had taken the kid three days to accumulate what he was now sporting overnight. He rubbed his jawline again. It was sort of
cute really.

And Nick had to admit, he liked stubble.

He could only imagine what it would be like to prick his fingers on El's, feel the blondish nubs against his skin, against his own jaw, against his lips, against his neck...

Despite the cold shower, he felt stirrings in his groin.

He frowned a little, but didn't bother to stop his body from doing what it was doing—quickly stiffening as he now imagined Ellis standing beneath the shower's spray, wet curls slicked over his face, damp ends dripping; water running off those brawny hairless pectorals, cascading over the blush of semi-dusky nipples standing pert in the midst of the cold mizzle...

Oh, the kid should not have taken his shirt off yesterday.

Nick gave a moan and pressed his erection into his palm, rocking his hips as he pressed his back to the wall. Shit, he had no self control. Not when it came to thinking about the younger man… Ellis smirked knowingly at him from across the shower, stepping closer to take Nick's unused hand and press it firmly to the side of his face. Nick's eyes widened as the kid closed his eyes and dropped his head back, purring, guiding his palm down the thick bar of his throat.

The circle of his hand and the whim of his mind gave him plenty enough stimulation to find release within a couple more minutes.

Nick gave a shudder as he committed his seed to the porcelain of the bottom of the tub, watching breathlessly as the viscous substance swirled the drain and disappeared from sight.

He soaped and re-rinsed his crotch before shutting the shower off, choosing to forgo the shave after all.

There wasn't anything to towel off with, so he slicked off what water he could with his hands, and waited for the air to dry most of the rest. It was freezing, but the cold— and the orgasm— had drastically aided in waking him for the day ahead.

Nick slipped on his clothes when he was dry enough they wouldn't cling to him and exited from the bathroom.

"G'mornin', Nick," the hick's voice sounded to his right. He turned his head; Ellis had been waiting for the bathroom, leaned patiently against the wall while he showered.

"Morning, sport," Nick smiled, tempted to reach out and ruffle the hair that so infrequently escaped the confinement of his cap as it did now. "She's all yours," he inclined his head back at the room.

"Thanks," Ellis said, starting to move for it before a grin cracked across his features. "Ya always take yer gun wit'cha tuh the bathroom?" he teased.

Nick fiddled with the device in his hands, suppressing a laugh. "Hey, be prepared, right?"

The little spoken motto seemed to throw the hick off a moment, causing him to falter. He shook his head and chuckled. "Yeah, I reckon yer right." He gave him a smile before continuing into the bathroom and Nick took his leave, going to fetch the rest of his belongings—suitcoat, holster, and shoes— from his bedroom. He wandered out to the front area, fully put back together, and Rochelle greeted him with a pleasant "Morning."
Nick pulled up a seat at the dining table where Coach was already sitting and returned a "Morning, sweetheart."

The reporter plunked down a couple containers of canned fruit in front of him for him to choose from– he went with the pears over the peaches and mandarins. Ellis joined them just a short while later and was supplied a similar assortment, but readily went for the oranges. Breakfast ended up being short and mostly wordless, consumed quickly to keep mouths full and avoid too much conversation.

Nick suspected he knew why because, like he, both Ellis and Rochelle kept glancing to the larger man's bandaged arm. Nick studied the football player cautiously. The rest of the night's hours hadn't seemed to change anything about him– certainly outwardly the pallor of his skin hadn't changed, his eyes were just the same, anything telltale they had noticed about the infected wasn't present in the man. Coach didn't seem to detect their added gazes, nor anything out of the ordinary, adamant about 'setting out' and 'hitting the road' and 'getting a move on', even as he finished his third tin of fruit cocktail.

Same old Coach, which was relieving.

They rounded up their belongings and readied for departure.

Ellis found some twine, which they used in conjunction with their emptied tin cans to create makeshift 'holders' for their molotovs– rinsing out the sticky interiors and puncturing holes in the sides with a nail to string the cord through and onto their belt loops. That way they would each have one, and they wouldn't tip excessively, and they'd be at the ready in case shit went down again. The others they lined up neatly on the kitchen counter in plain view for later survivors, though personally he couldn't imagine there would be too many behind them following in their footsteps. But if there were, they'd need all the help they could get.

Rochelle also scrounged up an old travel duffel in the closet of her bedroom and made to fill it with medical supplies from the emergency closet before they left, mostly medical kits with gauze and antiseptic and pain relievers and a splint or two– not enough to weigh them down any, but enough to treat minor injuries like Coach's own. They relocked the storage room, which, after thinking about it a little while, was no doubt under such heavy guard as an extra precaution to keep infected out. Coach offered to carry the bag for her, despite his injury, saying 'it weren't nothing', and she thanked him politely for being so considerate. Probably better they have their arms free anyway, Nick thought. Just in case. He wasn't willing to drop his guard of the older man just yet– that twenty-fourth hour was still a while yet in coming.

They left the duplex as they had found it, minus some provisions, plus a few explosives. A fair trade in his book. It felt like a bit of a shame to leave, considering how vastly superior it was than all their previous safehouses, both in fortification and comfort, and Nick hoped subtly, though far from expected, that they might be blessed with more like it further down the road– he could use a few more good showers like the one he had just taken...

Getting the exterior gate open after the night's previous carnage turned out to be an ordeal. The blood had congealed like a glue and the mass of twisted shredded bodies was sticky and didn't want to budge from where it had started to meld with the concrete overnight. And the smell it exuded as they finally forced the gate open with their combined weights... Nick hadn't been sure if he'd ever stop gagging. Not to mention he thought he might have stepped in some internal organ or another, because the smell carried with them for a good couple miles down the road.

Rochelle sought to take the lead the moment they hit the street; Nick couldn't tell if the extra rest was what had bolstered her conviction, or if perhaps there was something else he was unaware of
affecting the reporter, and he certainly couldn't discern it from the back of her bobbing head as they retraced their steps to the freeway. He of course couldn't help but draw worrisome connections between it and Coach's injury— that perhaps her desire to move quickly was to gain as much ground as they could while the man remained lucid and 'on their side'— but as Nick subtly watched the heavyset football player from afar, keeping perfect plodding pace, steady and unwavering, his concerns lessened. Seemed the big guy was going to make it just fine.

Ellis, naturally, hung back loosely with him, relatively quiet considering his usual propensity to get some sort of dialogue started, either musing out loud or looking to have some casual conversation. Though when they were clipping along at a goodly pace like this it made it more difficult, so perhaps the kid had simply caught on to the unspoken desire for haste. Nick would have preferred Ellis say something, he honestly found the southern drawl calming— well, except when it got all high-pitched and excited, on the verge of cracking. He frowned. Something about the kid just felt 'off' today.

It all caused Nick to wonder if he was out of the loop on something else between the three, besides their little 'peace treaty' Ellis had mentioned. A discussion perhaps, while he was in the shower last night, or after he had gone back to bed. What had El's tongue?

He didn't have a whole lot of time to continue to spend studying his compatriots or mulling it over in his head though because by the time they had gotten off the little residential strip of road, he was kept more than busy plugging off zombies ahead and behind and to the sides of them as they made their way back towards the freeway. Ellis dutifully aided him, the smaller handgun firing beside him with even more than usual unfaltering accuracy. He certainly wasn't wasting any shots to sloppiness that morning, and it made Nick all the more curious about the behavior of his younger compatriot.

The overpass loomed ahead. The big man stretched his limbs out into the cool morning air, duffel balanced on his good shoulder. "So, anymore surprises we oughta know about before get too far out, Nick?" Coach asked, his question decidedly somewhere between light-hearted and serious, his gaze training on the conman.

"Yeah, definitely the same old Coach. Apparently it hadn't escaped the older man's attention the prior morning when he had carted along an AK— like a little red flag of bad omen. Nick couldn't even blame the guy for asking— in his place he would have been just as inquisitive."

Rochelle laughed. "Yeah, I'd rather not have any more 'holy-shit-that's-a-big-zombie-am-I-gonna-live-through-this?' moments." She gestured with an arm, bangles jingling on her forearm. "One's enough for me."

Nick allowed himself a grin, actually rather happy to be maligned by the older fellow if it meant he wasn't one of those zombies. Better to be bossed around than be gnawed on. He flourished his magnum show-offishly. "Hey hey hey, I saved your guys' bacon. You ought to be thanking me," he grinned coyly. "What I wouldn't do for a couple strips'a that," Coach shook his head with a smile, momentarily not acknowledging the rest of his words in favor of daydreaming of the thinly-sliced, grease-covered pork. His expression hardened again, not unkind but serious. "But we need to work as a team."

There was a brief moment of silence, Nick mulling over a possible retort, and then the kid finally spoke up.

"Nick had it under control," Ellis drawled, nodding his head coolly. He shot at something in the distance. Nick studied his affect carefully. The hick wasn't necessarily defending him, so much as
seeming to comment in order to douse the potential flame war waiting to happen between football player and card player.

"He seemed to know what he was doing, I'll give him that," Rochelle said, siding with the remark; her brown eyes settled on Coach– Nick could perceive the curious hint of warning in that glance... as if reminding him to 'keep the peace'. It was an interesting dynamic to witness from the outside, now that he knew to look for it.

The older man remained serious however, unwilling to back down, even to the girl. "All I'm sayin' is, a little forewarning might be nice in the future, so the rest'a us can know what we're doin'." His chin bobbed as he made his point to the conman. "If you see anything," he added.

"You'll be the first to know; how's that?" Nick settled. He aimed his magnum off to the west and buried a bullet in the skull of a drooling common.

"Sounds fair," the man agreed.

Ellis looked to him semi-questioningly. Nick was quick to supply him a lazy smirk that conveyed 'after you, of course'. The mechanic lit up with a grin and gave him a quick punch on the arm. He resumed his vigil of their surroundings.

"Hey, Nick," the mechanic re-sought his attention almost as soon as he had looked away; Nick glanced over. "I bet'cha I kin git jus' as many headshots as you today," he boasted, still wearing the grin as he gestured his gun over at the prone infected whose brains were slowly spreading out across the sidewalk in a pool.

Nick scratched the scruff overtaking his jaw, amused at kid's sudden interest in being competitive with him. "You're already about six behind," he smiled in gentle reminder.

It didn't deter the kid in the slightest, his grin only broadening. "S'okay, I kin catch up. Plenty'a zombies to go 'round," he laughed.

Nick grinned, brightened by Ellis' change in attitude back to his more enthusiastic, carefree self. "Alright, kiddo, let's play," he agreed. Being a gambling man, he sought to suggest a prize for the bet– no point in betting if there wasn't something to gain after all. "Winner gets the better sleeping arrangements, whatever they happen to be."

Ellis snorted. "Sounds good tuh me." He grinned a second longer before quickly plugging off a couple more distant infected, both clean and efficient headshots. "Hope ya dun mind sleepin' on the floor!" he joked.

If it weren't for present company, he would've grabbed the scampish hick and knuckled his head again for the jibe.
Chapter 21

Ellis was, naturally, the first one to start up a conversation to fill the silence as they went along the major road. They were passing a nice eight car pile-up when his mouth was spurred into action, triggered by the spectacle. "So what'd y'all use tuh drive pre-infection?" he asked the entourage.

Rochelle chose to be the first to reply to the question. "A silver Jetta," she smiled.

"Tha's a good car, tha's a good car," Ellis gave a bob of his head; Nick watched the tousled curls beneath his hat mirror the motion.

She laughed as she fiddled with the mechanism on her gun. "Aren't they all good cars to you, Ellis?" she asked with just a hint of teasing.

The mechanic eyed her. "Well yeah, but some are still better than others, Ro'," he pointed out matter-of-factly. "A Jetta's a decent car. Reliable."

"I never had trouble with it, it's true," Rochelle went on with a smile. She paused for a second to consider her statement more deeply. "Well, except for the rear defroster never seemed to work."

"I bet tha' was a pain," Ellis continued conversationally. "Don't Ohio get a lotta snow in the winter?"

It seemed he and Coach had fallen out of the loop on the discussion. But that was okay. Nick turned to scan their rear in case anything was trying to get the drop on them, his gaze shifting lazily between North and East as he shot off a couple dazed commons in the distance, tallying them in his head.

She nodded. "Yeah, we do." Nick rubbed an arm casually, lowering his weapon. He found it curious that the female survivor had chosen to speak as though her former Ohio residence was still home, as though she would be returning, and possibly soon. He wrinkled his nose and briefly wondered how Vegas was holding up… if any of this shit had managed to cross the Rockies yet… if they were evacuating people in the west just the same as they were here. The maps in the stations hadn't indicated as much, but who knew how far out of date they might or might not be. Rochelle continued to converse with the hick. "Unfortunately it wasn't until my warranty expired that it broke, and I wasn't willing to pay the full cost to get it fixed; they wanted an arm and a leg for the job."

Ellis chuckled. "Well a'course. You try takin' it to the dealer, they'll stiff ya." He set a hand on a hip matter-of-factly. "Tell ya what, ya bring it tuh me," he poked his chest with a finger, "I'll fix it fer free. An' I'll even throw in a set'a snow tires, on the house, jus' cuz I like ya." He gave the girl a wink.

She tittered with amusement at the offer. "Thanks, sweetie. I'll get right on that. After I survive this apocalypse."
Nick gave an amused snort.

"Whatta'bout you, Coach?" Ellis now turned to address the elder fellow, apparently intent on polling each of them.

"A rust-bucket, that's what," Coach laughed, lifting a thick black eyebrow. "Just an old station wagon, was losin' her paint pretty bad towards the end. I kept meanin' to replace her, just never had the heart to do it. She got me around just fine though, so it weren't nothin'." He shook his head and scratched at his beard. "I hate to say it, but I already miss ol' Betsy."

"You seriously named your station wagon Betsy?" Rochelle laughed.

"Previous owner did," he explained, "I just kept the name. I remember the day I picked her up off the used car lot… sittin' there, all alone. Another couple weeks an' she would'a been sent off to the scrap heap– no one wanted the poor girl."

"Aw, always feels good to rescue a vehicle like that," Ellis nodded. "I bet she was a fine car in her hey-day."

"Oh, for sure," Coach agreed immediately. "Weren't actually nothin' wrong with her, just outta 'style'." The big man reached up to wipe an eye that threatened to suddenly weep. "Aw, now look what'chu've done, boy, ya got me all teared up."

Ellis laughed and scratched his head. "Sorry, Coach."

"Nah, don't be," he waved him off with a gloved hand, "they's good memories."

A small silence followed.

Nick could sense that it was now his turn to share with the group.

"An' you, Nick?" Ellis peered over at him.

The gambler licked his bottom lip slowly, decisively. He let his eyes scan the horizon once before dropping his guard to enter the conversation. "A mustang," he offered.

"Aw man, yeah…" the mechanic grinned, eyes half-lidded. "An American classic!" he responded exuberantly, obviously taking more immediate interest in his vehicle over the other two's. "Trucks ain't the only thing Ford does good, they sure as hell kin make a real nice coupe too."

He could feel enthusiasm literally oozing off of the hick; Nick decided to reel him in a little harder for fun, to see his reaction. "Wasn't a coupe," he corrected off-handedly. "It was a hard top convertible."

The hick's eyebrows rose with further pleasure. "What year?" he became inquisitive, leaning forward.

"1990."

The mechanic's eyes defocused briefly, no doubt counting out the years to figure out what his age would have been at the time of purchase. Which was sixteen. Nick remembered the day distinctly– the compromise he'd had to strike with his parents, which included, but wasn't limited to, never stealing the Porsche again. "You git it new?" Ellis asked.

Nick nodded. "Yeah, my parents didn't believe in buying used cars."
Coach gave a derisive snort but kept his mouth shut.

Ellis just laughed. "I can't say m'msurprised." He flashed him a crooked grin. He blinked an instant later. "Almost a good twenty years old now..." he wondered aloud, "ya still drive it?"

Well of course he had kept it. Fuck. Could he ever sell his first piece of true freedom? The car that had granted him personal responsibility? Supplied him an escape from that hell hole that he was forced to call 'home' for eighteen years of his life? Yeah, no. It was safe and sound in the storage garage, under lock and key. Shit, if he managed to squirm out of this zombieapocalypse thing alive he'd be going back to repossess it. Nick tested his tongue on the roof of his mouth. "Sometimes," he responded, "for old time's sake."

"Oh, so ya got a new car," Ellis followed up.

"Well... yeah..." Nick faltered briefly, not really having even stopped to think about his other vehicle in comparison to the older one. "For commuting and shit," he shrugged because it wasn't important. He drove the stupid thing where he needed to go and that was that. And when he went traveling he got a rental car— though admittedly he usually sprang the extra for whatever was fanciest on the lot.

Ellis' jaw was cracked in a delighted smile, apparently keying on to the fact that he'd stumbled upon a discovery in the conman's past. "But the 'stang," he spoke reverently, knowingly, "she was yer baby."

Nick seized up uncomfortably. He did the reading of people, not the other way around, and Ellis' insight on the matter was uncanny. Coach and Rochelle, thankfully, weren't paying terribly too much attention to what had become a discussion solely between he and the hick. He relinquished the tiniest of nods to the southerner's statement. "Tell me more about her," Ellis insisted, his eyes practically shining. His grip had loosened on his weapon, no zombies to take aim at to up his count— which was impressively close to his own as it turned out— and all his attention was on Nick. "What was the interior like?"

Nick obediently let his eyes close... sitting himself in the driver's seat in his mind's eye... leaning back and rolling his shoulders into the cushioning, soothing his hands over the wheel a couple of times before taking a firm grasp, fingers sliding into the supplied notches— the smoothest ones worn by his grip over the years. "All leather," he murmured. "White. Heated seats. Climate control." He ghosted his left hand over to the door in his mind, pawing at the little inset tabs. "Power windows, power locks." His right drifted to the dash, petting towards the center until his hands fell upon the dial of the radio and cassette deck. "Full sound system," he opened his eyes to grin smartly, "including a sub-woofer." He could feel the subtle tha-thump of base now, of all the shitty 80's music he'd listened to, though his tastes at the time were typical of the era and someone his age.

The hick was practically drooling now. "Shit, yer car was decked! What was under the hood?"

"Well, V-8 engine, of course," Nick swept out a hand as if it were a matter of the obvious. "5.0 liter. Manual transmission."

"Must've been a dream," he drawled in amazement, no doubt partially at the concept of owning such a joyride at the tender age of 'sweet-sixteen'. The hick only had one remaining question for him, positively intent on wringing every last detail out of him. "An' the color?"

Nick bit his tongue awkwardly. Ellis waited, positively beaming, and he couldn't deny the face the
information it sought. "Baby blue," he admitted under his breath.

That got the other two survivors' attention again. Rochelle turned to give him an incredulous, wide-eyed look; Coach outright laughed aloud. "Nick drivin' around in a baby blue convertible..." the man said, considering it, eyeing him up and down as he scratched his chin. "Somehow that seems right."

"Oh mah God..." Ellis did a motion that could only be described as a swoon; Nick lifted an eyebrow. "Like yer shirt?" he pointed quickly to confirm the color of the paint job.

"Sort of..." he mumbled, trailing a couple of fingers down said button-up. "A little lighter, and brighter."

"Oh, so like mah eyes," the mechanic clarified, practically batting his eyelashes over said pools of vibrant blue.

Nick stared at him. His response was slow. "Yeah."

Ellis tapped his lip. "I didn't think mustangs came in that color," he wondered aloud. "Least, I can't ever recall seein' one."

Nick was quick to reassure him that his memory was correct. "They didn't, it was a custom paint job." A number of things about the car had been. It was unique. One-of-a-kind. And his. He'd earned the money to make those modifications himself. He'd even hung a pair of those chincy fuzzy dice of the same color on the rear view mirror.

The mechanic gave a whistle. "Hubba- ding, the ladies must've liked that ride," he grinned and gave him a teasing elbow to his arm.

Nick supposed they would have, if there had been any. Certainly all the girls attending his high school had immediately gotten more flirtatious with him– as if they weren't already a nuisance in that regard– and he'd gotten a ridiculous number of offers to go to the prom, even from the upperclassmen, but seeing as that wasn't what he was interested in at the time, he didn't take the opportunity. And his wife– arguably the 'only' woman in his life– had held a mild interest at very best while they had been together.

"I'd take a spin in it," Rochelle threw in her input as the available female representative. She yanked her thumb at him. "Even if I had to sit next to Nick to do it."

Nick dropped his eyes with a mild grin. "Thanks, sweetheart."

"No problem," she chuckled, folding her arms.

"Well, yeah, you'd hafta be puh-urdy crazy tuh turn down a ride in sumthin' like that," Ellis said, grabbing for the brim of his hat. "Goddamn would I like tuh git under the hood'a that. Or behind the wheel," he added. "Shit, jus' callin' shotgun would be good 'nough fer me."

Nick chuckled. He would love to take Ellis for the spin he desired in it. His mind filled in the blanks of the memory with smooth ease.

...Pick him up from the garage just as his work shift ended. Drive him out to the desert, shifted all the way to the fifth gear, pushing ninety-five, the hot wind ruffling their hair. When they were far enough out... pull over and park somewhere on the shoulder.

Climb into the backseat together. Share a little glass of white wine he'd stolen from his father's liquor cabinet, toast to the night that they had met. Kiss him softly as the sun went down.
Slip off one another's clothes. Throw them rumpled to the dash. Tangle into one another arms.

And make sweet passionate love together under the dark cover of night, under the blanket of the stars...

Nick blinked. He'd planned that 'date' out nearly twenty years ago, only to have it shattered in a single agonizing heartbeat. He'd been rejected before even completing step one. But it wasn't Al in that little broken fantasy now. It was El. He let his gaze drift to the hick curiously. He never would have guessed at the beginning of all this that he'd be re-living those old memories ever again. He shook his head with chagrin, almost laughing at himself with the utter ridiculousness of it. What was he? Sixteen all over again? Crushing now like he had crushed back then?

It had taken him almost a year after getting his mustang to even summon the courage to ask Al out, their visits together less frequent after the bargain with his parents, but his infatuation stronger than ever– the old 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' shit playing with him, pulling his strings. And he should've known better, he should've, except he was young and dumb and romantic, so when he finally fucking outed himself, Al hadn't even been surprised… the kindest, most sympathetic and apologetic smile dancing on his lips.

'I love you too, Nick. But not like that.'

He'd driven further than he ever had before that night– all the way out of California– until he hit the Strip. Inadvertently he discovered a few new 'passions', mainly for gambling and high-quality Scotch– a couple of extra bucks here and there solved the troublesome age-restrictions– but also for the city itself. The first time he had seen those lights– flashing, blinking, sparkling, shimmering, glittering– he'd known he'd one day live there, in the city of sin. Not that it filled the gap; It took him years to get over that man, even when he thought he had left it all far far behind.

Dimly he realized that maybe he never had. Nick blinked, focusing his eyes on the mechanic trodding along beside him in dutiful pace. Did he somehow think that Ellis could repair what Al had broken...?

His original feelings for the kid had been almost entirely motivated by lust– a simple physical reaction to the hick's good looks… because shit were those lips plump and that waist thin and those muscles… oh, don't even get him fucking started. But he couldn't deny that over the past couple of days, those feelings had deepened into much more than physical desire.

"Nick?" the mechanic's voice broke the stretching silence.

The conman visibly faltered and looked back up to him. How long had he been lost in thought? Ellis took a couple of shots at something; his eyes snapped back to attention, tilting at the horizon rapidly to assess for a danger that was no longer there, that the hick had already eliminated. His nerves gave a jitter as he relaxed again and shook off the feeling.

"You okay, man?" Ellis asked, concerned, pressing a new clip into his pistol.

"Yeah," he let a grin form its way across his features. "I was just getting nostalgic and shit. I have a lot of memories attached to that car."

"I bet," Ellis nodded understandingly. "'s the same way with me an' mah truck."

Coach chuckled. "Well, I ain't used to agreein' with you, Nick, but you have that one dead-on. We all got good memories attached to our cars." Nick nodded, actually giving the larger man a heartfelt smile and nod.
Rochelle shook her head, Shouldering her weapon with a roll of her eyes and a large smile. "Boys."
Unfortunately, the brief good-will amongst them was short lived.

He should have known the argument was coming before they even left the safehouse that morning. Should have known better than to think they were possibly done with the hang-ups, the snags, the bickering.

Of course, they had to have saved it for the junction of highway 200 and I-95 too, right there in the middle of the goddamn road, open and unprotected and sitting ducks to anything that might be interested in a nice juicy meal of four survivors. The former road would skirt them around the large city of some million former inhabitants, branch them over to I-10 through a couple smaller bergs like the ones they had been hitting, and take them on their way west towards New Orleans—towards their goal.

The latter would take them straight into the heart of Jacksonville.

He stood firmly, resolutely, unmoving at the divider of the offramp, his magnum clenched hard in his palm. Ellis stood nervously off to his side, Rochelle directly in front of him, Coach floating somewhere in between, all four balanced carefully between the white lines on the asphalt in blaring standstill. The road sign above them proclaimed "Junction 200 West to Callahan" and that it was only fifteen miles to said destination.

Honestly, the path they should take was so fucking obvious he couldn't even believe he was having this conversation with the reporter who had been leading for the good first hour.

"The red X's meant those cities had fallen," he attempted to explain again to the woman, growing very short with her very quickly.

"It was just one map," Rochelle contended with him, crossing her arms.

"It was two maps-- two." Nick held up index and middle finger to emphasize his point. Savannah and Brunswick. They had both had the same map. And on both those maps, Jacksonville was definitely crossed out.

"And they could have easily just been speculating," she continued.

"Speculating?" he hissed, losing his cool. "Speculating what? That the world's going to go to hell? Because I'm pretty sure it already has." He swept out his right arm, indicating the wreckage around them that stood as solid proof.

The reporter was unphased by his gesture. "You really think the Jacksonville Naval Air Station--the third biggest naval installation in the United States--" she rattled off the statistic readily, "has actually 'fallen'? You think they'd actually abandon four thousand acres of military space??" Her hands folded over each other on her chest, her jaw set. "There's going to be evac there."

"The girl's right, Nick," Coach threw in from the sidelines, though it hardly seemed necessary ganging up on him like this.

He could have frothed at the mouth. Or torn out his hair. Something.

Even Ellis had forsaken him.

"We really oughta go check it out, man," the hick imputed, though the blue eyes flashed with
apology for saying the words. "If there ain't nothin' there, we'll jus' keep headin' fer New Orleans."

He pinched the bridge of his nose painfully. Yeah, and that detour would cost them a day. If not two. Or, you know, their lives.

Nick tried to calm himself, tried to shake the feeling that they were all about to be brought to their doom simply because three morons couldn't read a fucking map. But he had agreed back in Savannah that they should check each of the evacs along the way, regardless of X's; they had detoured in Brunswick to find it empty, Jacksonville was just the same, except, in his opinion, far more dangerous a look-see, not worth the time, not worth the effort, not worth the goddamn risk.

"There's going to be an onslaught of infected," he argued, his last ditch effort to get them to understand, to get it through their thick skulls. This was why there had been that little room stockpiled with medical supplies, he was sure of it– there wasn't any other feasible explanation. You didn't supply people with things they didn't need, that would be wasteful and an unaffordable expense on the military's part– he could only imagine how big a check must have been cut for all the munitions, and he knew well enough that packs of blood were never cheap. Anyone in Yulee was bound to be expected to head to Jacksonville as their evac, thus the stockpile to prepare them for braving the larger metropolis. Nick pointed north. "You thought what we encountered up in Kingsland and Yulee was bad, but you ain't seen nothing yet. I guarantee you. A million people don't just vanish."

"We're going to have to keep our wits about us, it's true," the heavyset man admitted rigidly, though it clearly didn't change his opinion in the slightest. "We been good this far. I think we got it in us."

Nick frowned, the gash on the older man's arm seeming to indicate otherwise. Enough cuts and scratches like that and it wouldn't matter if they were immuner than shit, they'd still be lying in the road fucking dead while the crows and bugs picked out their eyeballs, assuming the zombies left that much on their corpses to be had by the filthy scavengers.

"We'll be good, man," Ellis nodded, "we'll watch each others' backs an' all keep an eye out; don't'chu worry, you'll see." The dirty blonde eyebrows lifted with a kind of optimism that could never be doused, a smile gracing his features. Nick wanted to agree with him that it would be that easy, but he couldn't bring himself to.

"It could save us… days," Rochelle chipped in again, throwing in her two cents, trying to convince him. "We could be home-free by tomorrow morning."

"God willing, baby girl," Coach reminded her. "God willing."

Nick frowned, giving a sigh. The NAS could truly be their way out, he supposed he was willing to admit that much. It was difficult to believe such an immense set-up could possibly have been over-run, even with the maps and X's as evidence. They might have to fight through horde upon horde to get there, but whether by airplane, helicopter, boat or whatever the hell else, a government-run naval airbase was sure to have something to transport them out; the only real question was if there were personnel still stationed to pilot said crafts, or if they could find a way to get in touch with someone who could, via a long-distance radio or something. And to be fair, New Orleans was just the same, their one-way ticket out of zombie hell, albeit a more long-term goal that still loomed a couple of weeks down the road.

He hadn't stopped to think about that aspect until now, that their journey may well be approaching its end– it was difficult to think much further ahead than a few hours to what your next meal might be or whether you'd be the meal of something else. But it was with that realization that he
suddenly realized something entirely else.

Once this was over and done with, he may never see Ellis again.

His gaze dropped to his feet as the thought took over his mind. It had to end at some point, didn't it? He'd enjoyed their short time together, the week and a half that their paths had crossed, but he'd have to say goodbye, and they'd both resume the lives they'd led before this point. He'd always been decent at 'moving on', casting aside old feelings and emotions-- thirty-five years plus a failed marriage had, to some degree, made him a master in that regard.

Just once he wished he didn't have to.

Ellis seemed to internalize his quiet distress from afar. He shifted back and forth on his feet once more before speaking up assertively. "Hey, could'ja guys give Nick an' me a minute?" Ellis asked the other two survivors, hitching his rifle to his back.

Rochelle's face quirked but she gave a nod, likely knowing as well as Ellis did, and as well as Nick himself knew, that the hillbilly would be the only one able to 'sway' him. "We'll wait for you," she confirmed; both she and Coach turned to move further down the I-95, weapons at the ready.

Nick wondered subtly what the mechanic planned to say-- obviously he'd already been defeated and all the more he could do now was drag his heels all the way to Jacksonville; they locked eyes briefly, waiting to be out of earshot.

Once enough distance had been established, Ellis addressed him. "Nick, man, what's wrong?" he asked honestly. "I kin tell sumthin's really eatin' ya.'

He winced. His hands began shaking; he pinned them aggressively to his sides to stop the involuntary movement. He drew a deep breath and gathered his wits before attempting to speak. He needed to ask. He needed to know. Nick regarded the young man seriously. "Ellis… what happens after all this?"

The mechanic tipped his head with confusion. "Ya mean once we git evac'd?"

"I guess…" Nick licked his lips cautiously, meaning just that.

"Well, I dunno…" Ellis scratched the side of his face, digging his nails into stubble, considering it for a long moment himself. "I reckon it'll take a long while fer things tuh go back tuh normal… An' who knows about them internments…" He frowned a little, clearly not sure what he was getting at by bringing it up. "Why d'ya ask?"

He chuckled with chagrin and let his cards fall to the table. "It's no big secret. I'm gonna miss you, kid," he admitted with a pained smile.

"Well it's not like we ain't gonna keep in touch!" Ellis reassured him with a grin and a slap on the back. "What'chu think, man– m'gonna up an' forget about'chu after all we been through??"

He could have lied and said no, but even his poker face wasn't that good. Nick dropped his gaze to the ground wordlessly, biting his own tongue for fear it would betray him somehow, that he'd say something he'd truly regret. Like he'd done eighteen years ago.

Ellis faltered for two blinks, registering that he had accidentally hit the nail on the head. "Shit, Nick… no way. No way," he reaffirmed with a shake of his head. He removed his hat as if to reinforce his sincerity, placing it to his chest, his other hand settling against his bicep tenderly-- the touch made him look up into the young man's blue eyes.
"Nick, I dun think ya know this," he spoke, his voice soft, "but… ya mean a helluva lot tuh me, man."

No, he hadn't known that.

Nick blinked, struck dumb by the words.

Ellis seemed to hesitate himself as he continued uncertainly. "I wanna… I wanna keep up our relationship." His face quirked awkwardly at his use of the term, seeking to clarify immediately. "I mean– like, we've gotten real close…" he laughed uneasily, "real fast. An'…" He swallowed, drawing his hand away to fiddle with the hat at his chest, eyes downturned. His voice became small. "I dun wanna lose that."

His heart hammered like a piston. Nothing had given him a reason to expect he'd receive reciprocation to his own admittance, or furthermore, that the mechanic had any real desire to… further their relationship beyond the apocalypse. After a few moments Nick allowed himself to breathe. "Me neither," he spoke; Ellis gave a nod.

They stood there for an inordinate amount of time, not speaking, a mere arm's length between them. Everything made him want to close that gap, to reveal his feelings towards the hick, but he resisted. He wasn't going to fuck this up. Not this time.

Ellis chuckled sardonically, kicking at a rock. "Ya never know, ya might be right, Jacksonville may be closed. Like Brunswick was. Like Savannah was…" he seemed to trail off.

Nick blinked at him, trying to discern what he was saying. "We might be stuck out here a real long time yet," Ellis elucidated. He gave him a weak smile. It was a very bittersweet sentiment on the hick's part.

"Kid, I…" he opened his mouth to apologize.

Ellis held up a hand and shook his head. "S'alright, Nick, I understand."

And Nick knew that he did. But furthermore, he knew their ways didn't have to part when all this shit was over. That they'd still have a relationship. Whatever kind of relationship that was.

And that was important.

He wasn't going to ruin it this time. He wasn't going to sever ties, run away. He wasn't going to lose him like he had lost Al.

"Let's get to Jacksonville," Nick asserted, shouldering his weapon and setting his jaw.

A warm pressure descended upon his shoulder. Surprised, he looked up to a smile from the mechanic, one that pulled either side of his lips equally– not that lopsided maneuver they typically pulled– curling them delicately upward without the display of teeth, a smile that could have melted the heart of even the hardest of people. The fingers squeezed reassuringly… lovingly.

His lips parted staring into that gorgeous face.

"M'real glad we met, Nick." The hick plopped his hat back atop his head with a genuine smile. "An' I jus' want'cha tuh know… there ain't anyone else I'd rather be goin' through this with."

"Thanks, El," he murmured, grinning.
"Mah pleasure," he tipped his brim.
Chapter 23

The day's trek was blissfully uneventful in terms of zombies. Ellis had no trouble keeping up with Nick in terms of the bet he had made that morning, mostly thanks to his hunting rifle which was far more accurate for the long-distance shots than the conman's long-barreled handgun. He still utilized his pistol for the closer targets, and in that respect the man definitely had him beat, but it didn't discourage him any, especially since Nick so readily supplied little tidbits of advice to help him out. Don't yank the trigger, squeeze it gently. Don't anticipate the recoil, keep the muzzle up. If your target is moving, try to track it slowly, not snap to where you think it will be.

It was interesting because he had never been a bad shot, even as a kid, but the pointers helped. Ellis could only dimly remember the last time he and his Pa went out to the range just for fun—shit, he could have only been nine or so, certainly not in the double digits. Mostly they had shot at coke cans and coffee tins, a few fancier targets too for precision practice with the little .22 rifle that had been bought just for him, so he could have his very own gun. He knew that shooting at zombies wasn't supposed to be fun, that what they were doing was an act of self defense rather than a fun day at the range, but he couldn't keep the nostalgia from creeping up on him as they went along. Ellis tried to keep all of Nick's suggestions in mind as he practiced, eager to improve and, to an extent, hoping to impress as well.

As it was, there were few commons to even really headshot, making keeping track of their counts easy—Rochelle had even gotten into the action, offering encouraging words at his better hits, which made him practically beam. Ellis made sure to as precise as he could each time because if he missed, Nick usually managed to pick it up for himself. The gambler's aim was still faster than his own, but Ellis was deadset on refining his gunmanship after what had happened the night before; next time an infected got the drop on one of them, he was going to be prepared—nothing would lay hand or claw on his friends, he'd make sure of that.

They didn't meet with anything 'special' either, like the tank, or the smoker, or the thing, that after a random, and lengthy, discussion about horse-racing and why a person shouldn't sink half a month's pay on a 36:1 odds thoroughbred past her prime as Keith had done in the spring of 2007 in hopes that with the winnings he could buy his own horse and feed and stable her for racing, they decided to call a jockey. It's midget-like diminutive stature and awkward hunch seemed to fit that bill right fine and would make it easy to identify if they ever happened across one in the future.

Meanwhile, the man beside him was actually smiling, something that filled Ellis with elation greater than his steadily improving gunmanship. It seemed that since their talk, Nick's mood had drastically lifted. Shit, if the man had just let on earlier that he wanted to stay close friends after the apocalypse, he would have reassured him sooner how willing he was to do so. He had never been one to reject friendship when it was asked for, and considering how much quality time he and Nick had been spending with one another it just felt right. In fact the opposite applied even better, not doing so would feel down-right wrong.

Honestly, Ellis was flattered Nick thought enough of him to want a friendship with him. If nothing else the class difference between the two of them was enough to make them an odd pair, not to mention the difference in age. And after all, what did he really have to offer the older man, besides a kind ear and an open heart? But maybe that was all Nick needed, why he wanted that friendship. The guy had obviously had it rough growing up, in a completely different way than Ellis himself had, and it showed in his demeanor, the way he acted and spoke. The more thought Ellis put to it, the more he realized how much he had meant the words he had spoken to the gambler, and he solemnly resolved to himself that he'd be the best damn friend he could, he wouldn't let Nick
down, no matter what.

All of that, along with the fact that Coach was still trucking—like his prayers had indeed been answered—had him in excellent spirits, and their journey south was swift and harmonious, and multiple times he and Nick exchanged smiles and conversation while they kept tally.

Nothing, however, had prepared them to find a twisted, broken rubble heap, half-submerged, in place of the I-95 bridge into Jacksonville.

At least, Ellis couldn't say he had seen it coming.

After winging their way swiftly through the northern outskirts of the city, small clumps of infected the only resistance to their progress, they had made it to the river that divided the Florida metropolis into neat thirds: north, west and east. And they had all been feeling pretty good about their progress too, the sun still a good few outstretched hand lengths away from the horizon—about three hours from setting, plenty enough time to settle in to whatever provided safehouse there was waiting for them when they made it over to the west side as recent signs along the road had proclaimed there would be. They'd eat, restock their ammunition, bunk down, and finish the remaining five miles to the Jacksonville NAS in the morning—and maybe, just maybe, there would be evac.

The lack of bridge had quickly sunk those plans however. No part of it remained intact for them to attempt to clamber across. And swimming across the wide cove, especially with their supplies and guns, certainly wasn't a viable option. It didn't look all that far to the other side…but distances on the horizon like that could be awfully deceiving—what looked like half a mile could be more like a full mile. And he didn't know about his other compatriots, but he had never been much of a swimmer—he could, he just wasn't all that great at it, too much muscle mass gave him the propensity to sink rather than float and he certainly hadn't gotten any formal lessons growing up. Drowning in a zombieapocalypse would be one of the lamer and less glorious ways to go, Ellis had to admit. They all four stood wordlessly on the bank, lost in their own thoughts, staring into the formidable churning waters of the St. Johns lapping at the wreckage below.

"Well shit," Ellis frowned, a touch flabbergasted by the set back.

"Fucking assholes bombed our bridge," Nick spat.

The conman was right. The destruction had clearly been caused by deliberate human means—not the work of mindless zombies what with thousands of tons of steel and concrete shredded and crumbled into ugly clumps that stuck up out of the water—not even a dozen tanks working in conjunction could do such a thing, nor would they have a reason to do so. Most likely, if Ellis had to wager, heavy explosives had been involved. Nothing else could have done such a messy, though admittedly effective, job.

He wondered briefly if it had been detonated on site with TNT or if the bridge had been bombed by aircraft missiles. He tilted his chin to briefly glance at the clear sky above. It wasn't discernible from the way the wreckage had settled. Or maybe it was. A specialist on the subject could probably tell them, but he sure as hell didn't know. No number of bad action movies supplied enough factual representation of debris and explosions to give him the credentials, he was pretty sure, especially when it was all CGI and shit anymore. Shit, he'd watched a bridge be destroyed in X-men III on an IMAX screen, but it sure as hell was no comparison to actually standing before the wreckage itself. He gave a whistle, touching the brim of his cap.

"I can't believe this…" Rochelle whispered, her posture incredulous, brown eyes wide.

"Yeah well, you better, sister, because it's right there in front of us," Nick scowled. His ire wasn't
directed at her, but rather the display before them, at what had been done and was keeping them from what have should have been an easy checkpoint. Ellis chuckled wryly. And after the two of them had spent the time arguing about going this way too. It was more than a little ironic in his opinion.

"This ain't the only way into Jacksonville," Coach reminded them gruffly, his own irritation apparent though he tried to keep it at bay and put a stoic face on the situation. But he wasn't really succeeding any better than Nick this time around. "We'll just have to go 'round to the next one," he asserted. "We sure as shit can't stand here gawkin' all day."

Ellis pondered the situation. Highway 17, a decidedly lesser road, ran basically parallel to their current route just a few miles east. But if one bridge to Jacksonville was blown out, the rest were sure to be as well. There wouldn't be sense in leaving a job 'half finished'. If the military wanted to lock off an area, they were going to lock it off. He shook his head at the big man. "I'm a bettin' there ain't gonna be any bridges fer us tuh take," he said solemnly, though he didn't like being the bearer of bad news. They'd be stuck going the long way round, backtracking up to 295, which they had passed a couple hours before. The only problem with that was that it would press them for time in terms of daylight– the only other safehouse was at the international airport another mile or two northwest of the freeway. If last night had taught them anything, it was that the dark was not their friend. Ellis frowned.

And even after they had spent the night there, it would a full nother day making it the long way round into the west side where the NAS lay. Maybe Nick was right, maybe they just ought to skip it. Lay course for New Orleans and not look back at the 'what if's of the X'd-off city.

Staring at that destroyed bridge made Ellis incredibly uneasy about the original plan to go to Jacksonville himself. Sure, they hadn't had any trouble getting to this point– the days skirmishes had been easier than pie, certainly easier than their original escape from Savannah. There hadn't even been any rush of horde to deal with– but maybe this was the explanation why. If the infected were trapped, partially water locked by the St. James, and unable to spread out of the city, of course they wouldn't have much to come across besides what wandered out of rural areas. His adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. The military would have to have a pretty good reason to start bombing their own major cities, their own multi-million dollar bridges; there weren't many feasible explanations. His forehead wrinkled beneath his cap. It didn't make sense.

Ellis' throat constricted, wondering if Savannah, at this point, had received a similar treatment. God, he prayed not. He shivered at the thought of the destruction of the Talmadge memorial bridge… or the worse the 100-year old city hall that overlooked the river just a short distance away– both landmarks, monuments of his hometown, ones he had visited, that he was proud of. He frowned and shouldered his hunting rifle to peer through the scope towards the landscape in the far distance, but unfortunately he couldn't make out much on the other shore even with the magnification.

"Well, it's a naval air station, sitting on the banks of a river," Rochelle wondered aloud, a couple fingers rested on her chin in thought; the reporter clearly hadn't given up on the idea of getting there herself. "We should be able to boat in," she suggested.

Coach grunted. "We'd need a boat for that," he said, not rejecting the idea, but pointing out the fact that they had no such vessel to do as such.

"Well I reckon there'd be a marina or sumthin' further upstream," Ellis imputed; though he was undecided on the issue of actually continuing into Jacksonville, he couldn't help but be helpful regardless. The numerous coves the St. Johns offered were excellent for boating from what he had heard– one of those trips Keith had taken that Ellis had had to politely decline tagging along for, funds not allowing. Keith had spent part of his visit at the section of the river that was apparently a
designated manatee refuge, managing to get thoroughly mauled by one of the angrier seacows when he had decided to go swimming with them, regardless of the strict prohibition against doing just that; all of which made Ellis wonder if his friend had any clue how ironic it was that he'd nearly been killed by 'endangered' creatures. The mechanic scratched his head, leaving the story unspoken to return to the conversation at hand. "We kin maybe find one there."

"Good thinking, sweetie," Rochelle nodded smartly. "We'll head west and see what we can't find."

"Sounds good to me," Coach nodded, clapping the action of his shotgun.

Nick couldn't help but interrupt the cute little dialogue, his tongue thus far withheld as the rest of them threw ideas back and forth. "Did any of you stop to think that maybe the bridge was blown out for a reason? Like, we're not supposed to go there? Or that they're trying to keep something locked in so it doesn't get out?"

Glances passed among them. Ellis rubbed an arm anxiously. They'd all thought of it, just none of them had wanted to voice it out loud quite so frankly as the pessimistic conman had done. The air felt heavy for two long beats.

"It's a risk we're gonna have to take," Coach asserted.

Nick's eyes rolled dramatically. "Fantastic. Fine." The man was apparently beyond arguing by now, and Ellis couldn't really blame him. He shifted a little closer to him. "So let me just get this straight: we're going to look for a marina that may or may not exist to boat into an evacuation center that may or may not be open?" he summed up.

Coach gave a snort to his attitude. "Get your ass movin', Nick."

The conman shot him an angry glance, but they all did just that, racing the descending sun.
Chapter 24

Ellis was relieved when his instinct turned out to be right. They’d chosen to use Broward Road, a little two-lane that skirted close to the St. James its length, figuring sticking close to the body of water would be their best bet. And not even a mile down it they stumbled across a little joint whose sign out front proclaimed their saving grace as 'Beck's Outboard Inc'.

"Well, it ain't no marina," Coach nodded, placing his hands on his hips as he admired the sampling of boats fenced in behind an outdoor lot, a mixture of motorized and not, "but it'll do just fine."

The four of them were quick to fan out and explore the store and surrounding area. Ellis, of course, kept close to Nick as the conman meticulously made a couple rounds. From the way he seemed to measure his steps, his green eyes darting back and forth, Ellis wouldn't be surprised if he was constructing a little map up in his head, putting it into temporary memory for use later if need be. He wasn't quite as diligent himself, but he helped his elder compatriot clear out the commons that infested the place, continuing to add to their tallies that at this point he was slowly lagging behind on.

Really all it amounted to was a small independent boat sales shop, but since they didn't need anything fancy, that worked. Beck's was composed of a little brick front office for customers to make their used boat purchase in comfort, a larger metal shed no doubt for storage and repairs, and the boat lot itself, which was surrounded by chicken-wire fencing. The lot still housed quite a selection of little vessels that they would be making their own choice from, even if the weeds overgrown in the cracks of the concrete tried to suggest poor Beck's might have been put out of business before the zombieapocalypse had even hit. A small inlet of water ran alongside the shop and under the road, granting access to the larger St. Johns. Convenient would have almost been an understatement.

There were a couple of other run-down looking window-front stores next door to Beck's as well, namely a cigar shop, laundromat and 'food store', though unfortunately the latter turned out to be heavily pilfered. He and Nick took stock of what was left on the shelves– they'd be able to make due for dinner that night and breakfast the next morning, and that was all that was really important, though lunch for the next day might have been a nice commodity as well.

The conman picked up a stray can of ravioli, weighing it in his palm. "We spending the night here?" he asked the hick carefully.

"Can't boat in 'til morning," Ellis reasoned, "so I reckon so." He eyed the affect of his compatriot warily– he seemed to be lost in thought. "Nervous?" he wagered a guess.

A grin slowly spread across Nick's face. "Well, it's not a safehouse," he neither confirmed nor denied, leaning up against a waist-high shelf.

"Too late to find one; it'll be dark in another couple hours," Ellis scratched his head, grabbing another couple cans to gather them on the counter. It would be nicer if they had found one of the government-modified safety rooms, it was true, but he doubted it was going to be much of an issue with as little infected as they had come across. As long as nothing swarmed– or anything bigger came along– the fortification of a ordinary shelter should suffice. "'Sides, this way we kin set straight out in the mornin', not lose any time," he reasoned.

Nick nodded. "Yeah."
Ellis flushed suddenly, feeling a little bad for bringing up the subject again, but he was just anxious to know whether or not his family was okay. Though part of him didn't want to find out, too fearful of potential bad news as much as he was excited for good news.

In that case it would almost be better not to know. His heart gave a little palpitating flutter.

Nick remained silent. Ellis guessed the man really had meant it when he said back in Kingsland that there was no one he'd be looking up when he got to evac. He hadn't really believed him at first, chalk ing it up to a desire on the conman's part to appear and remain solitary. But he and Nick had grown much closer since that talk, he'd learned a lot about the guy, and he'd slowly come to realize that he really was pretty much alone. Except for that Al guy he had mentioned the night before—what had happened...? Had they lost touch? In fact, did that have anything to do with Nick's desire to remain friends with him?

He stared at the older fellow across the narrow aisle with mild curiosity and solicitude.

Ellis had his entire extended family and a few friends and co-workers he'd be checking the charts for. And while he really truly hoped that they were all alright, he also acknowledged that in all likelihood, a few of those people might not have made it, that he'd probably be missing a few relations who he'd be upset to learn were gone. Nick, however, simply didn't have the worry, the burden of all those people's lives weighing on his shoulders— and to be honest, that was somehow even more heartbreaking.

What was the old phrase? 'Tis better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all? Getting to Jacksonville was the same as not getting there for Nick; the only difference was the company Ellis supplied him on their nightly shifts.

Nick needed him. Now and after the apocalypse.

Neither of them moved from the inside of the shop, preferring the brief respite from their other two comrades, preferring each other's presence. Ellis peered at the cardshark under the brim of his cap, testing his tongue on the roof of his mouth. "How ya doin', man?" he couldn't help but ask; it was probably a stupid question, but he asked it nevertheless.

The gambler laughed. "I'm fine, El."

"Jus' makin' sure," Ellis chuckled back, looking away.

Shit, why did he suddenly feel so awkward? They'd just agreed to be friends was all; that didn't change anything. Or was he just looking, hoping for some way to console the older fellow? Let him know he was there for him? He did want him to know that. He felt his eyes wander back to Nick involuntarily and the relaxed, half-slumped position he had taken against the shelf.

The urge to wrap his arms around the man's waist... slip himself between his legs... press his body up against him... was both overwhelming and unexplainable. His breath hitched and his eyes lifted, and for a fraction of a second blue met green met in curious exchange.

The door rattled, breaking the moment in half sharply. Ellis gave his head a violent shake as Rochelle's voice followed, calling into the confines of the store. "You boys in here?"

He opened his mouth, vocal chords waiting for the air to give him speech, but it refused to come, rendering him dumbstruck.

The man folded his arms, turning his head towards the entrance. "Yeah, we're in here, sweetheart," he responded, easing her concern as to their location.
"Oh good," he heard her say. "They're in here!" she called back, no doubt out to Coach. The bell chime hanging on the door sounded as she pressed inside and quickly found them between the aisles. She eyed them both expectantly. "Find anything?"

Ellis grabbed for the canned pasta, holding it aloft. "Dinner," he surmised succinctly.

"Well, that's good!" Rochelle smiled, offering to take the tins from him which she then cradled in an arm. "We're going to stay in Beck's overnight," she informed them– apparently she and Coach had explored that section a little more thoroughly and therefore made the decision. "The office has a couch and a couple of armchairs, probably as comfortable as its going to get. Plus we figure we can prop the door closed with the desk so we don't have to worry too much overnight. The walls are all brick and cinderblock so the door is the only real vulnerability." She paused a moment, looking back and forth between them, obviously weirded out by their overall silence and lack of comment to all her information. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" she asked suddenly, voice already semi-apologetic.

Ellis opened his mouth, half a mind to tell her that she had. But Nick responded first, shaking his head. "Nope. Overalls here was just telling me about the time his buddy Keith filled a bathtub with ravioli."

Ellis felt an eyebrow tweak on his forehead. Interesting cover. Not that they had needed cover for what they had been doing, talking about… did they? And uncannily close to something Keith had in fact done– though it was with tomato juice after a run-in with an entire family of skunks roaming his uncle's property. When he'd been advised to bathe in it, he apparently hadn't been told he didn't need an entire jacuzzi's worth to get the job done. His uncle had nearly killed him; it took forever to get all the juice out of the spa's bubbler pumps, not to mention the size of the grocery bill he brought home.

Rochelle laughed out loud. "It would be." She smiled and reached out to give Ellis' hair a doting ruffle in the back, which he allowed her to do. "Want to help us pick out a boat, sweetie?" she asked, a large white smile spreading across her lips.

He reckoned they should probably both be in on that decision, so he gave a nod. "Sure, Ro'."

They made their way to the lot, dropping off the cans of pasta inside Beck's before meeting up with Coach. The large man had managed to lever the gate open with an oar and his own brute strength to gain access to the locked lot and now had his hand tucked under his chin, studying their options. Ellis contorted himself through the gate to come to Coach's side; the big man's brown eyes immediately locked with his. "What'chu think, boy?" he asked, no doubt wanting his mechanic's expertise on the subject. Boats weren't really his forte, but as long as it had an engine, it was basically all the same.

Ellis rubbed an arm, eyes quickly scanning the lot, his initial sweep hasty. "Well, we got two options, y'all. We kin motor it in, or we kin take a couple'a canoes."

"Oh great," Nick rolled his eyes, "now not only can my legs and feet be sore, but so can my arms and shoulders."

Ellis snorted at his sarcasm. "I guess tha's one vote fer a speedboat."

"Normally I ain't one to shy from a little physical activity," Coach said, giving his top half a flex with the words, "but ten miles is quite a row. We had a rowing team at my University, but I weren't on it. I think it'd be best if we went with something with an engine."
Ellis nodded in agreement. Not only was it a good ten miles, but there were other factors involved with paddling in that needed to be taken under careful consideration. While the first half would be easy, traveling with the current, once they rounded the bend and headed south, they'd be fighting upstream. Last thing they needed was the potentiality of getting caught and swept out oceanward. And if there was wind, it would only make it worse. Sure, navigating the debris from the destroyed bridge would be easier, less perilous in canoes, but that was the only thing really 'going' for the latter option. The canoes would be more prone to tipping and losing their precious cargo as well.

"I'm with Coach," Rochelle made known.

"Alrighty, lemme take a closer gander then at what we got," Ellis nodded and he moved to make his determination on which vessel would be their best bet for the excursion. It didn't take him too long to narrow it down, culling out what was obviously a beefed-up speeder designed to make a hell of a roar, along with a few of the lesser sea-worthy looking vessels with little puttering engines meant for relaxed fishing trips and didn't have enough spunk. He finally settled on a medium-sized water skiing boat, capable of going fast if they needed it to, but also fairly maneuverable if they needed that too. It seated four– and an optional fifth– but had a goodly sized storage compartment for all their supplies, so it seemed just about perfect. Plus it was open on all sides, save the windshield, much like a convertible, so if they needed to defend themselves, they'd be more than able– though hopefully they wouldn't need to.

"This baby should glide over the water," Ellis determined, patting the side of the engine with his palm.

Nick's green eyes darted the length of the runabout twice. "Quiet?" he immediately asked.

"She won't do more than purr," the mechanic assured him, completely understanding the voiced concern about volume.

"Then that's our boat," Coach nodded firmly, chin bobbing. "Don't need to bring any more attention to ourselves than necessary."

Ellis smiled, relieved the football player and card player were seeing eye to eye for once. They could stand to have that happen a little more often. Nick seemed to catch that his gaze was lingering upon him and grinned before folding his arms and leaning back on a hip. The pose immediately resulted in an odd shiver that Ellis had a bit of difficulty shaking off, the weird feeling he'd had in the mini grocery returning if only for a couple of fleeting moments– almost like a little flutter in his gut.

"Well, we have a boat and food," Rochelle summed up, placing her hands to her hips with satisfaction. "Pretty good."

Nick frowned at the ground. "Now if only we had more ammo," he muttered, pointing out the deficiency.

Ellis shifted. Reporter and conman both had good points; they'd had luck in every other respect, but Beck's was not a safehouse, and as such there was no supplied ammo dump for them to replenish. Ellis found himself wishing that he had grabbed another gun from that McDonald's in Kingsland– sure, it would have been a bitch to carry another eight or so pounds this entire way, but somehow he acknowledged that having the extra rounds now could be a life-saver.

From the grimace on Nick's face, Ellis was pretty sure he was feeling the same way about his discarded AK he'd left back in Georgia.
Thankfully, they all still had a decent amount of ammunition left. Especially Coach and Rochelle since he and Nick had taken the brunt of the infected that day. Ellis could bum a few extra rounds off the reporter for his hunting rifle considering they both wielded the same model, and if need be they could all fall back a little more heavily on Coach's shotgun. If worse came to worst there was always his machete, dutifully hanging from his hip. Ellis pondered the situation a little longer in his mind, nibbling at his lower lip. Since their destination was a military space, it ought to have munitions galore, so as soon as they hit the shore and found the cache, he reckoned they'd all be stocked and fine. Just getting there was the trick.

"Let's get a little food in our bellies; I am starving," Coach said, supplying a distraction from the troublesome thoughts, which was more than welcome.

Rochelle nodded and they all followed her back to the front office.
They searched high and low for a way to heat their dinner besides the old-fashioned possibility of lighting a fire, but unfortunately, there weren't any other options.

Rochelle frowned, picking up one of the cans with resignation. "Looks like it's cold Spaghetti-Os for dinner..." she murmured.

Nick scrunched up his nose with distaste. "Fine dining," he commented sarcastically.

"Food is food," Coach asserted, making it clear he wouldn't tolerate any of his complaints.

Ellis made a quick glance over at the little shared company microwave next to the coffee machine. They may not have electricity from the plugs, but that wasn't the only place to get power. A car battery should be enough current to run a microwave, at least for the short time it'd take to heat macaroni. Might have to run the thing in spurts, seeing as that's what car batteries were more designed for, rather than a constant draw of power. He chewed at his lower lip, still in thought. Of course, the battery would be DC and the microwave ran on AC, but if he just found an inverter that wouldn't be a problem. More likely than not he could scrounge one of those off of one of the boats– lots of people liked rigging up their crafts with accessories that required such a device. He addressed the female survivor. "It don't hafta be cold," he said matter-of-factly.

Rochelle turned a can over in her hands, lifting an eyebrow with curiosity as she absently peeled at one of the torn labels. "Oh?"

"Well, if ya jus' give me a few minutes, I should be able tuh whip us up an operatin' microwave," he nodded with a jerk of his thumb at said device.

"Really?" the girl perked. "That would be amazing, sweetie. You could really do that?"

Ellis' face rearranged into a large grin, a touch of pride filling him. "A'course I can! Jus' lemme assemble a toolbox from the garage an' I'll git right tuh work," his bobbed his head with enthusiasm at his proposed task. "Shouldn't be anymore than half an hour, tops," he estimated.

"Well, damn, that sounds good to me," Coach said, obviously impressed.

Nick shifted on his feet. "Want any help?" he offered.

"Sure, y'kin help," Ellis smiled at him. He wasn't sure what, if anything, the conman would or could do to help him out per se, but he sure as hell wasn't about to turn him down, eager to have him at his side and... alone... again. "If nothin' else y'kin keep me company. Or watch mah back," he laughed.

Nick nodded; Ellis was sure he intended to do both of those things.

They proceeded out the door and to the shed. Ellis bent down to unhitch the large metal entrance, standing and pulling with his arms until it got a little momentum going and rolled itself the rest of the way up above them. Both men stepped inside warily. Nick quickly began casing the joint, magnum at the ready; Ellis peered about as well, a little more cautiously than his elder. Obviously the large hutch was where all the boat repairs were done at Beck's– a dismantled vessel stood in one of the corners, looking as though its hull may have been damaged due to an accident of some kind. Ellis turned his gaze to the rafters. It was fairly dark inside, the only other source that allowed light to filter in besides the large door was through the segmented pane window glass well above their heads towards the roof. Still it only took a couple minutes of scrounging for Ellis to
find all the tools he thought he needed—mainly a couple of screwdrivers, a couple wrenches and some wire, collecting them on the workbench in the lid of an old cardboard box. Naturally, all the while, his thoughts were on the man behind him still exploring their surroundings.

He was still trying to sort out up in his own head why he had wanted so desperately to press against the older fellow. What made him crave such an... intimate kind of closeness to him. Absently, he reached up to open a cabinet, forgetting to be cautious, and a paint bucket full of screws, which had apparently been leaning up against the door, tumbled right on out.

Ellis managed to snatch it mid-air, but that didn't stop a number of the fasteners from tipping out of their container; he winced as the little pieces of metal rained down onto the workbench in an awful din. Nick peered at him once the noise had finally stopped echoing and all the screws had come to rest. "What are you trying to do, sport? Wake the whole neighborhood?" the man teased him playfully, no alarm or malice to his tone.

"Not if I kin help it," he chuckled, hefting the heavy bucket back into the cabinet—less precariously than it had been left. He scratched his head with a touch of embarrassment for having caused such a ruckus.

And then they both heard a muffled sob.

Ellis seized up momentarily. "Shit," he blinked rapidly, "maybe I did wake someone up. Where's it comin' from?" he asked his compatriot.

Nick looked distinctly uneasy. "Further in," he mumbled. Ellis followed him as he led the way, finger tight on the trigger of his weapon, his dress shoes click-clacking on the hard concrete. They trailed the subtle crying, the volume increasing as they proceeded deeper into the hutch. The cry was definitely feminine; Ellis couldn't help but wonder if a girl had decided to take refuge inside the little shack—though why she would choose the deepest, darkest corner the little river outpost had to offer he couldn't quite fathom. Wouldn't she have boarded herself inside the store proper where the food and a bathroom was?

The sounds led them to a broom closet. Whoever was crying was most assuredly inside from the forlorn weeping muffled inside. Ellis gave a nervous shift on his feet. A distinct red glow emanated from the cracks in the doorframe, its cast most visible on the floor in front of their feet.

That was really fucking spooky, no two ways about it.

Maybe the girl had found a flashlight? One with one of those little red filters that weren't as harsh on your eyes so your night-vision wouldn't be inhibited? Dave had brought one of them along when he took him stargazing once a long, long time ago in Crawfordville—man, had that ever been a beautiful clear moonless night. They'd managed to identify at least a dozen different constellations in the night sky. It'd been just a few short weeks after their Pa's death, and he could remember lying flat on his back in the grass, Dave a couple feet away, as they both reminisced on the father they shared. They'd bonded significantly that night, but whether it was awkwardness about only being half-brothers or Dave being kept suddenly busy by his job, get-togethers were few and far between afterwards.

Which made Ellis even more thankful for Nick's request for continued friendship. And the nights they had spent together, sharing.

Ellis shook his wandering thoughts loose. "You okay in there?" he tried in his gentlest accent. He didn't want to frighten or disturb the girl in case she hadn't heard them yet, but at the same time he wanted to communicate their presence and that they weren't hostile.
All he got in return was a louder sob.

Beside him Nick was obviously growing impatient. "Listen, sunshine," he said to the door, and Ellis wondered if the conman could have used a more ironic term of endearment, "we'll give you to the count of three to come out on your own."

"We ain't gonna hurt'cha none," Ellis tacked on, hoping to ease his fellow survivor's harsh words.

"One," Nick started, drawing it out like a parent might to a child, motioning his magnum in a lazy circle. "Two…"

"Two an' a half," Ellis threw in an additional count for the girl to take advantage of, but it didn't help because the door remained closed.

"Fuck it, three," Nick grumbled and seized the doorknob. He opened the door outward and they peered into the tiny enclosed space. The female had her back to them and was rocking back and forth as she cried, clutching to a sack of something. Her clothing was torn and tattered from what had originally probably been a nice little mid-thigh length skirt and matching halter top. It was difficult to discern in the low light, but it looked perhaps like her hair had been bleached blonde—though it was clumped and messy without recent care or washing. Granulated—was that sugar? it smelled sweet—was scattered about the floor underneath her. At their breach of her space, she gave a gasp and quickly jerked her head around.

The wide glowing red eyes explained that former mystery to the hick and conman. She raised to her feet with a low growl, baring her sharpened teeth and flexing elongated fingertips. Shit—Ellis felt his eyes widen—each was near a good nine inches long.

"Of course," Nick rolled his eyes. He raised his magnum lackadaisically to plug her off. She gave a wild scream and lunged. Neither man had expected the sudden burst of frenzied energy from the infected.

Perhaps she was a little more intelligent too, because she batted the magnum right out of Nick’s hand before he could even get the shot off. The gun went literally flying and landed somewhere in the cockpit of the craft under repairs, out of quick retrieval. "Fucking shit!" the gambler exclaimed as he just narrowly dodged a swing of those sharpened talons aimed for his unprotected torso; the girl screamed again, pissed that she had missed.

Ellis backpedalled lickity-split, whipping his pistol free of its holster. She hissed at him, sensing he was a greater threat and turned for him, arms extended and swiping the air as she ran at him full tilt. Ellis took aim and fired, but he found that in her crazed, flailing, unpredictable pursuit she was virtually impossible to target, and all he ended up doing was unloading, the only resulting inflictions a few nicks to her wire-y frame, not enough to slow her down any and only adding fuel to her apparent rage.

He dashed around the front of the boat, hoping to buy a little time as his fingers frantically worked to get his machete loose, silently cursing the way he had attached it. He wasn't looking forward to going toe-to-toe with those claws, but he didn't have time to reload and—shit!!

Ellis sped his heels into the pavement as she rushed around the vessel at break-a-neck speed, missing a rake of claws down the length of his back by a whisker. He darted past the aft of the boat, scrambling to keep some distance on her.

And out of nowhere, Nick—shit, he had practically forgotten the man in the frenzied seconds he’d spent engaged with the bitch—jumped out, and Ellis practically collided with him, managing to
duck and roll as the gambler took a forceful horizontal swing of his own impromptu weapon.

The side of the oar smashed dead-on into her face and stopped all of her momentum. Her body crumpled instantly on the spot, legs knocked out from under her, and her skull slammed into the pavement with a second sickening crack.

Ellis caught his breath while he watched blood ooze from her head.

"Well, that was unpleasant," Nick commented. He threw the oar down. "What was that you were saying about watching your back?" he grinned. Was it just him or did Nick seem to always be doing that after close encounters together?

"Thanks," Ellis heaved, still a bit winded, "that bitch was really out tuh git me, I tell ya." He laughed and drug a wrist across his forehead, wiping away the thin sheet of sweat that had collected just under the brim of his hat. "Goddamn. S'what I git fer showin' a little courtesy, huh?"

Nick was climbing up into the boat to reclaim his lost weapon. "I'm the one who held the door for her," he backhanded; Ellis laughed again at the joke. The man shuffled around for a bit and managed to secure his magnum once more, committing it to his holster with a flourish as he clambered back down.

There were the sounds of two pairs of rushing feet. Ellis turned towards the entrance to the work shed. Coach and Rochelle both paused in the entry, weapons raised; no doubt the sounds of gunshot had beckoned them.

"Are you two alright??" the female survivor asked, though clearly from the way they were both standing there unharmed, they were. Her wide eyes darted about the inside of the garage to access if any threat level remained.

"Yeah, we're okay," Ellis nodded anyway.

"Just had a run in with little miss PMS," Nick gave the girl's body an unceremonious kick with his shoe.

"She dangerous?" Coach seemed to ask with a bit of incredulity, leaning down to inspect the body. Yeah, it seemed like two full grown men ought to have a bit of a leg up on an emaciated teenage sugar-high freak-show, no matter how hormonal. Ellis gave a small cough. He was already feeling bad about wasting fifteen shots.

"She's a little more quick on her feet than she looks," Nick informed him; the football player gave a grunt in response. The conman folded his arms and gave a slight tilt of his head. "For future reference," he conveyed deadpan, "she was bawling her eyes out in the closet over there. I'd suggest leaving anymore crying women we hear alone."

"Noted," the big man gave a nod.

Rochelle hunkered down by the body. "Look at those nails!" she admired aloud. "I know a couple of women back in our receptionist's office that would have killed to get those 'did'." She laughed and Ellis felt himself snort along with her.

"If only we had some polish and pajamas," Nick seemed to slacken with a sneer. "We could have had one great big sleepover and gossiped about our boyfriends."

Ellis laughed a second time, Rochelle following suit. "Yeah, an' we could'a played Truth or Dare," he added to the growing list of jokes. He'd always been partial to 'truth' on those at-home drinking nights with friends that led to such games, himself lucid and not afraid to reveal truths
that his friends surely wouldn't even remember in the morning anyway, but hell if Keith had ever picked anything but 'dare'. That was how his friend's head ended up stuck in a toilet once… while he was wearing the beer hat that had gotten him drunk no less, and after numerous swirlies, Ellis had to mess with the bobber inside the tank to keep it from filling up and drowning him until they finally managed to get him loose of the porcelain trap. What a way to spend forty minutes, with your head in the john.

"Or Spin the Bottle," Nick leered.

"Ew, no!" Rochelle laughed harder, even in protest.

Ellis flushed. Was he the only one who began to imagine where such a game could possibly lead them?

What… what would it be like to kiss Nick…?

His heart gave a pitter-patter.

Coach's belly laugh brought him sharply back to reality; even the big man unable to keep from cracking a smile at long last. He shook his head with his arms folded. "You crazy, youngins. I swear it's like I'm back at Freedom High all over again. Can't keep no peace for even two minutes."

Ellis chuckled sheepishly. "Alright, well, m'gonna git back to it, y'all," he said, turning to go grab his box of tools. Nick obediently made to follow him; Rochelle, Coach.

"Holler if anythin's the matter," Coach said in departure.

"Will do," Ellis responded, willing the blood in his cheeks away before Nick's sly green eyes could discover it.
Chapter 26

Nick had watched the young man work at first, prying loose his desired 'inverter' from the clutches of one of the many boats sitting in the lot, before Ellis set him to the task of getting their chosen vessel fueled. His only tool for the job was a long length of coiled hose, which he dutifully strung from the parking lot to the tank of the boat. It wasn't a lot of fun knocking on the bottom of cars to determine if anything remained, nor was sucking on the end of the damn hose to get a siphon going between either tank, but he did it out of partial responsibility—after all, he had volunteered to help, though he ended up distinctly regretting it the time he had very nearly gotten a mouthful of gasoline.

Only two of the seven vehicles sitting in the lot had anything to offer them in the ways of fuel, and it would have to do. He didn't really know what kind of mileage Ellis' little runabout speedboat got, but the distance they'd be traveling couldn't be more than ten miles to the air station, so with any luck they'd make it.

Nick just wasn't a big fan of leaving things to luck.

He added a couple of paddles to the storage compartment of the boat just in case, though it was the last thing he wanted to resort to. Job complete and obligation fulfilled, he recoiled the hose, returned it to the shed and traipsed out to where the mechanic had his head under the hood of a Dodge Neon. He lifted a supple eyebrow at the momentary glimpse of bent-over tush, admiring cautiously and redirecting his eyes to more appropriate heights when Ellis pulled the battery loose of its mount. He sauntered over as the mechanic placed it on the asphalt next to the inverter; Ellis noticed him. He pushed the bill of his hat up and wiped his hands quickly on his pants. "Ya git her fueled?"

Nick nodded. "She's ready to go."

The hick gave a reciprocated bob of his chin and hunkered down, immediately committing to getting the two components wired together. It was a process Nick couldn't say he understood, even as he watched. Sleight-of-hand was his forte, not minute manual labor such as electrical wiring.

Between the way that the mechanic currently worked with meticulous swiftness and their conversation earlier back on the road, Nick found himself compelled to ask something he had been wondering for a while. He leaned into the side of the compact, folding one leg over the other. "So, how'd you get 'into' cars?" he questioned.

Ellis brightened rapidly at the initiation of dialogue, his mouth happily and eagerly taking off. "Oh! Well, a'course I took autoshop e'ry semester it was done offered at mah school, but really, s'Keith's uncle who I'd hafta thank fer the most part." He paused to motion his screwdriver at him. "See, he was in the renovatin' business—like, classic American cars an' shit from the 1950s an' 60s. He'd buy a fixer-upper an' convert it tuh a thing'a beauty, I tell'ya, inside an' out." Ellis whistled and shook his head, committing to twisting one of the screws back into a panel of the inverter that he was done with. "He was goin' tuh various car shows an' whatnot almost e'ry weekend, all around the country—" he swept his hands out suddenly to indicate the man's distant travels, but they immediately returned to their task. "He'd go wit' one car an' come back wit' another, that was jus' the way he was. Never kept a finished car too long—didn't wanna git 'attached' so tuh speak."

Nick nodded his understanding.
Ellis continued, briefly tipping his hat upward to keep it from falling over his vision as he bowed over his work-in-progress. "Made a pretty penny off'a the whole deal too, I reckon, judgin' from his house..." He lifted an eyebrow. "Big. Real big. Big as they come in Savannah. Though ya can't say he didn't have his priorities, what with it bein' attached to a five-car garage. A'couple'a those ports even had hydraulic lifts built intuh the floor," he pointed at the ground, "so he could jack 'em up an' work underneath easy– was purdy slick really."

"Yeah, sounds like he was fairly well loaded," Nick commented, recalling other tidbits the mechanic had given him about his buddy's uncle. Not a guy he would have felt bad about swindling in all likelihood.

Ellis chuckled and shrugged. "Well, he was doin' what he loved. An' what he loved was fixin' up cars. Guy didn't have no kids though– or a wife," he added quickly, "so tha's prolly why he dun shared his hobby wit' Keith an' I. He used tuh let us help him on various projects– lesser ones a'course. Taught us how tuh do everythin' from body work tuh suspension tuh fuel injection– you name it!" Ellis gave an absent scratch to his chin. "Acshuhly, it was 'bout the only thing he ever trusted Keith wit'," he laughed loudly. "Sometimes I think he jus' wanted tuh keep him outta trouble. Definitely wanted tuh make sure he got himself a respectable job, tha's fer damn sure."

Nick gave the statement a moment's pause. "Thus the auto shop," he guessed with a flick of an eyebrow.

Ellis paused to nod very slowly. "Yeah... thus the auto shop," he murmured. He gave a thinly veiled smile.

Nick hesitated, catching the expression that seemed a little off for the hick's usual effervescence. He gave a cautious lick of his lips. "You did want to run that auto shop, didn't you?" he asked with seriousness.

"A'course I did!" the hick proclaimed cheerfully, perhaps a little too much so. His face seemed to hitch briefly, but he shook it off, tightening the battery's left bolt over the wiring with a couple of quick full arm motions, re-distracting himself effectively.

Nick drummed his fingers across the metal of the hood, considering leaving the subject alone. He was unsure if his line of questioning would be breaching the young man's privacy or not, but by now it stuck out like a sore thumb. He swallowed and chose to follow through regardless. "What did you really wanna be, El?"

Ellis seemed to seize up from head to toe and he actually physically fumbled his screwdriver to the ground. He gave a somewhat hoarse chuckle, avoiding his gaze for a number of long seconds, shaking his head, not responding, pretending to concentrate on his project.

Nick waited a couple of ticks.

Eventually Ellis caved, unable to hold back. "I... I wanted tuh be a doctor," he breathed, daring to look back up at him– the blue eyes were ever so slightly glassier than usual, a thin sheen of wet coating the surface. "Surgeon, spuhsifically," he tacked on. Nick considered the answer impartially. It certainly wasn't the most surprising answer he could have expected from the hick– actually, pretty far from it. Ellis swallowed hard and grabbed his tool back up from the ground, setting his jaw and returning to his task. "But it ain't like I don't still git tuh help people as a mechanic. S'all the same really."

No, not really.

Nick's lip quirked rigidly at the mechanic's odd form of denial. How long had he been telling
himself that? Or had someone else eventually convinced him of it? Obviously studying to become a surgeon would have been a financial impossibility— but Nick had to wonder if anything else been an issue as well, holding him back from that career, or if it was just the money? Surely he could have applied for some loans or borrowed from the bank or something to get through. Nick bit at his bottom lip, trying to reason it out. But becoming a surgeon required more than just going to college for four years— shit, kid would have had to go to graduate school too, not to mention the internships and other related hoops to jump through; he'd probably still be studying now. And his family situation was probably what made that unrealistic, completely out-of-the-question. Nick licked his lips and opened his mouth to speak. "I bet you'd make a great surgeon," he said honestly, gently, "you're really talented with your hands." Not to mention the eye-hand coordination the kid possessed, and his warm, friendly demeanor. Yeah, there was no doubt in his mind that the kid could be a literal life-saver with proper training and education. Though he had his cynical doubts about what good a degree would be now, in the aftermath of a zombieapocalypse.

Ellis stared at him speechlessly. Nick was well aware that he had phrased his words in such a way as to suggest the occupation was still a possibility. The hick didn't respond, he just dropped his gaze again and made sure he couldn't be seen beneath the brim of his hat, his body language rigid and stiff.

He sensed he had indeed crossed a boundary. Or at least, trodden into territory the southerner did not want to discuss with him. Nick turned himself away, frowning hard, leaning against the car with his hands folded, listening to the sounds of Ellis' work, a little rueful he had brought it up.

The wrench faltered against a bolt.

And then the mechanic stood and hurtled it at the side of the building. The tool made a loud clang as it hit, reverberating in the still air like a note of finality.

Nick blinked with minor shock at the outburst and glanced to the hick.

Ellis' shoulders heaved with rage. He quickly brought a hand to pinch the brim of his nose, glowering into his palm, trying to calm down amid pent-up emotions. "M'sorry," he spoke lowly. His eyes fluttered open. "Thank you, Nick. Fer sayin' that." His voice was a little shaky. He lifted his gaze and gave a weak, apologetic smile.

"Yeah, no problem," he said, not wanting to make any big deal out of it. He wouldn't have guessed he'd strike a hot button in the kid– that one even existed.

"I mean it," the hick insisted. He reached over and Nick stiffened as his hand descended upon his own, the mechanic's rough palm brushing the bumps of his knuckles gently. Ellis looked him straight in the eye. "Ya always know jus' what tuh say, an' I appreciate it."

Which was kind of fucking ironic, because he certainly didn't know what to say at that instant in time. He managed to release the breath he had been holding in when Ellis pulled his hand back away and re-bent over his project, severing eye-contact.

"S'almost done," Ellis informed him. "Jus' gotta tighten a few last things, then we kin take her inside, plug in the microwave, an' eat."

"Sounds good," he said gently, nodding. Internally, he wondered what else the hick had given up for his family and friends, what else life had unfairly denied him.
Chapter 27

They each heated up their meals individually– Ellis took to breaking open the can lids with his pocketknife, careful not to cut his fingers on the sharp edges the metal left, plopping each serving into some microwave-safe tupperware they had scrounged up around the office.

Ellis watched as his meal of beef wrapped in pasta and tomato sauce turned round and round inside the microwave, the device humming complacently as it drew power off the car battery. The set-up had worked even better than he had hoped it would– he barely had to pulse the system at all to serve their needs.

His three compatriots had gathered themselves around the large desk, drawing up whatever they could find to sit on– for Nick a rolling chair, Coach a crate, and Rochelle a stool. When the microwave gave a ding, Ellis was quick to remove his dinner and join them, pulling up a folding chair and sliding himself quite comfortably between Nick and Rochelle, nearly close enough to the conman to bump elbows with him while they ate. Coach quickly blessed the food– even though he was a good halfway through his own can and Nick and Rochelle had both started eating as well– but Ellis supplied a swift, spirited 'amen!' and began digging in himself.

They didn't share much in the way of conversation– perhaps there wasn't a lot to say, each knew what the next day held in store for them, in terms of travel, or maybe they were afraid that if they spoke they might end up in another argument, but Ellis didn't altogether approve of the silence that hung over the desk that was their dinner table. His blue eyes fell to Rochelle, who had removed her clipboard from their travel bag and was absently rifling through it. Coach and Nick paid her motions no mind, but he watched her subtly. Her fingers paused between two pages, and Ellis knew then that she was yet again staring at her postcard.

He decided to use the topic to break the silence. "Ro', why didn't'cha evac wit'cher family?" he asked. It had been something he had been asking himself from the moment she had mentioned them being safely evacuated– why, if she had had the opportunity, would she have skipped out on going with them? Why would she be here now?

The reporter looked up at him with a sort of chagrinned smile. "I got offered a huge advance," she consigned, thin black eyebrows arching over her eyes. "By the news company I was working for."

"Money," Nick lifted an eyebrow of his own. "I can relate. Hard to pass up a good gig."

Coach mumbled something and stuffed another forkful of pasta into his mouth.

Ellis gave a little frown, slightly incredulous that the catch of wealth would be the only allure for girl, her reason for hanging back. There had to be more to it than that he was sure. He glanced back to her inquisitively.

Rochelle gave a subtle shake of her head as she swallowed another bite, continuing to give explanation. "WTTQ actually even covered my expenses for airfare and put me up for a nice room at the Vannah so I could do the story on CEDA and what was going on in the area. If I did well enough I was also going to get a full-blown promotion to full-time producer. I couldn't hardly say no; I was working my ass off back in Cleveland and not getting anywhere."

"Tough break," Nick commented with a hint of snarkiness.
"Ha ha," she responded with a roll of her eyes and a small laugh. Her eyes fell as she shuffled through her papers again, a little melancholy, though understandably in Ellis' opinion. Here she had just been trying to get ahead with her career, only to have it backfire in the most spectacular and unexpected of ways—she could somewhat relate. No wonder her ma had wished her luck on the card, it made sense now. Shit, now that things had escalated, he reckoned Rochelle's mother and brother were very worried about her, and why she hadn't shown up and joined them yet when her gig was over and there was nothing more to report. Ellis felt a frown tug at his lips. Sure, the severity of the infection caught everyone off guard, but...

Rochelle shifted on her stool, wondering aloud. "I guess I know why they sent an underling like me now. All the big-wigs pussied out and packed their bags, got clear." She sighed. "I was really looking forward to doing that scoop..."

"Well, yer probably gettin' about the most up-close scoop'a anybody, when ya think about it," Ellis was quick to try to cheer her up, a smile on his features. "Maybe ya kin do one'a them documentaries later, y'know, that'cha see on the tv."

A large smile pulled across the girl's lips.

Coach laughed at his suggestion. "The boy does got a point, girl. You got more facts than you can shake a stick at— and we ain't hardly been outta Georgia." He leaned back a little, the crate underneath him creaking in mild protest as he folded his arms. "Just think, by the time we get evacuated, you'll have loads to report on. All those big-shots, they won't have nothin'; they'll get their dues."

Nick chuckled. "Bastards are probably hiding with their tails between their legs, scared shitless."

"I guess I ought to be taking notes," Rochelle tittered, obviously enchanted by the whole proposition. Ellis didn't think it was a half bad idea—people who lived through and wrote about this kind of thing always got famous, didn't they? Like that one book he'd read in high school—what was it called, Alive? Though thankfully they weren't stuck eating one another like in the nonfictional account. He popped another ravioli into his mouth, mulling over how cool it would be if his friend were to become renowned. Wouldn't that be something?

Coach scratched at the gauze around his forearm—no doubt the wound was getting itchy, a good sign considering that meant it was healing.

Rochelle noticed the motion. "Oh, here," she said, bending down, "I'll change that out for you." She plopped their medical duffel on the desk, unzipping it quickly and pulling out more supplies. She reached across the table to start unwinding the dirtied material on the football player's arm, casting it aside. Ellis watched her work, cleaning out the scratches and applying antiseptic; within just a few minutes she had the man redressed with fresh bandage, lickety-split.

"Thanks, baby girl," Coach nodded appreciatively.

"Oh, don't even mention it," she smiled and waved his thanks off readily. She brought a hand down on his gloved one. "We're... just really glad you're okay," she breathed.

Ellis nodded in steadfast agreement.

Something seemed to flash in the elder fellow's eyes, perhaps it was the realization of the depth of their concern or maybe it was something else altogether. Still and all, the oldest member of their group seemed genuinely touched, studying them over the table with gentle affect.

Nick shifted, almost uncomfortably. Not because he disagreed with Rochelle's statement, Ellis was
certain, but more likely because it revealed that they had been worried about the possibility of the older man becoming infected. Because each of them had steeled themselves for the possibility of losing him, of being down a teammate and a comrade, of continuing without him. Nick's mouth opened at last. "Yeah, we'd be pretty boned without you kicking our asses into gear," he admitted, semi-begrudgingly.

The bigger man chuckled, looking the gambler up and down. "Well, Nick, I imagine, if forced, you could do an okay job yourself."

The respect that had just been swapped between either man was practically palpable; Ellis held his breath, the two men's gazes remained locked for a long while before Coach broke the line of sight, shifting on his crate and looking back to he and Rochelle. "Thanks, y'all. But don't'chu worry, Coach's doin' just fine." He bobbed his head. "I ain't gonna leave you all behind."

Ellis felt his heart swell, the comradery between the four of them stronger than he had ever felt it before. Really, together they were all like the transmission on a car. Coach was the engine, their driving source, supplying power and locomotion; Rochelle was the driveshaft, connected to the wheels, to look ahead at what lie beyond and move them forward towards it; Nick was the brakes, just as important, slowing them in warning of obstacles, keeping them from running headlong into danger; and he himself was the clutch, what connected those pieces together and allowed them to mesh and work as a single unit harmoniously. Maybe it was a silly comparison and assessment, but Ellis couldn't help but think that as a team like this, they were strong. They all spent a couple more minutes in surreal silence, chewing their meals.

Coach was the first to finish, naturally, clunking his can down on the table, empty. "Time to hit the sack," he concluded. "Thanks for the dinner, boy."

"Ain't no problem at all, Coach," Ellis grinned. "Anytime." The big man pushed himself from the desk, rising to lumber off towards the back room.

Rochelle stood as well a moment later, leaning down to give him a quick peck on his forehead underneath the brim of his hat. Ellis took the affection with a smile. "Thanks, sweetie," she spoke, brown eyes locked on his, though he knew perfectly well she didn't mean for the food. The girl gave a squeeze of his shoulder and departed, clipboard clutched tightly to her chest.

Nick gave a cough and shifted, the rolling chair giving a squeak.

And Ellis realized that they were finally alone again. His heart pumped a little harder as he shifted in his seat, turning sideways to look at the man.

"Just you and me again, huh?" Nick asked with a half-smile.

Ellis nodded. "Yup. You an' me."

The gambler just sort of nodded, a brief silence hanging between them. He shifted his thighs, pivoting the rolling chair back and forth a couple of times. "Listen, I'm sorry for bringing up what I did earlier," he said, sincerity in his voice.

"Naw, man, don't be," Ellis assured him, laughing it off. Emotions had gotten the best of him at the time, caught off guard by Nick's ability to dissect his past with seeming ease, but since he had calmed drastically. "Ya know, good things an' bad things happen tuh a person– s'all part'a life."

Nick grinned sardonically. "Ain't that the truth."

"Honestly..." Ellis chuckled again rather breathlessly, giving the subtlest of shrugs, "I'd rather share both wit'cha."
The former grin on the gambler's face was replaced by slightly parted lips. He didn't know if what he said had just come as a surprise, or if Nick just didn't know what to make of it. Ellis quickly took to studying his hands in his lap— the butterflies in his stomach had returned in full force, despite the nice warm meal within it, stirring up emotions.

So he couldn't help but ask another question that had been tugging on his brain.

Ellis licked his lips cautiously. "Why don't you look up Al when we git to evac?" he suggested in a whisper.

Nick was quiet for a long moment, lightly drumming his fingers on the tabletop. "He won't be on the list," he stated simply, giving a flick of his wrist.

Ellis nibbled at his bottom lip, scratching the side of his arm absently. "Oh, cuz he lives on the west coast still, ya figure?" he inquired further, not sure how Nick could be so unequivocally certain of the other man's absence from the charts.

The gambler seemed to steel himself; it took him a while to open his mouth to reply. "No," he eventually murmured, his tone almost without emotion, "because he's dead."

The hick recoiled. "H-he… what? Nick-" his voice took on a distinctly higher note, throat restricting as he spluttered. All the things Nick had told him about Al, about how important he was to him came flooding back in a wave. He shook his head. "M'sorry, I– I didn't know."

"I didn't tell you, why should you know?" Nick lifted an eyebrow, neither offended nor upset and apparently seeing no need for Ellis to be either.

"Well, shit… no reason really, but I didn't mean'ta bring it up like that when… when..." he dropped the words mid-sentence, guilt wrenching his insides. "Nick… m'so sorry, man," he apologized again, wishing to convey his consolations.

Nick's affect remained unchanged, calm in spite of the dialogue. "It happened a long time ago. It's okay," the gambler reassured him.

Ellis seized up for a second time, nearly hitting his knee on the desk. A long time ago…? How old had this Al guy been? For some reason when Nick had described him Ellis assumed he was perhaps mid-thirties or so, maybe around the age of Nick's own father as a maximum— not that he had any way to actually know unless he asked Nick straight up. Still, for such a thing to have happened 'a long time ago', it seemed unlikely that it had been a… natural death. Ellis swallowed. "How did… he pass?" he asked hesitantly, his voice slightly meek for how personal a question it was.

Nick frowned and dropped his head a little. "Car accident," he murmured. Something in the pale green eyes seemed to flicker and change, but the man didn't look up from the hard stare he had on the desk's surface, right under where his left hand lay. "He was towing some asshole's sports car off a freeway median in the rain and some fucker in the oncoming lane hit his SUV into his truck, head-on."

Ellis felt his mouth drop open. "Oh… oh mah God…" he breathed, eyebrows knitting, at a loss for words. Keith had gotten in a hundred-fold accidents, half of which landed him in the hospital, and half of those which had resulted in surgery, but Ellis had never lost anyone close to him due to a sudden accident.

"Yeah…" Nick's voice was tight, partially strained.
Ellis stared at him, chest slightly aching– he could only imagine how much worse the conman felt, regardless of his stoicism. Sure, it may have happened a good while in the past, but that didn't make it any less tragic. Garnering his courage, he slowly slipped his hand over to rest atop Nick's where it sat on the tabletop, clasping it lightly.

The older man looked down but remained close-lipped, offering no comment to the physical display of consolation.

Ellis gently caressed the oddly smooth knuckles, hands that, until the whole zombieapocalypse thing, had obviously been well pampered. He blinked. It was weird how Nick's hands sort of felt like a woman's… save their large size and thickness, of course, but in every other respect feminine. He eyed the two rings on his fingers– pinkie and middle– gold bands inlaid with jade and he had to wonder now if they had any significance to the gambler, or if he simply wore them to wear them. Ellis didn't know many guys who wore rings– at least not on their fingers, after all Keith was sporting one in his lower lip for a while before it got torn out by a rather angry chihuahua. Maybe it was just flair to add to the rest of his fancy get-up, for show. He'd never really looked at them closely before, acknowledging their existence, sure, but beyond that little more. The bigger of the two bore resemblance to a wedding band, but considering its location on his middle finger, it clearly was not. He imagined whatever Nick'd had from his previous marriage was long gone, pawned off along with the memories. Funny how little he talked about that.

Ellis' forehead wrinkled a little while he continued to pet the man's hand gently, his fingers lightly tracing the webbing between his fingers and those rings. He found distinct pleasure in the touch, and Nick didn't draw them apart, didn't flinch or shrink away though Ellis half expected him to. Instead the gambler chuckled and smiled at him somewhat sorrowfully.

"I... never really got to say goodbye to him..."

In that instant, it finally made sense why Nick was so frightened of losing their friendship.

His other hand joined the first, both now cupping the gambler's hand. The older man looked up, joining their gazes, and Ellis blinked, seeing the dampness ever so slightly ringing the lower lashes of the pale green eyes. He had never seen Nick like this, so close to tears, so melancholy. Flashes of it at very most, various slips in his countenance, glimpses of what lie beyond the cool collected exterior he exhibited. Ellis almost... almost... reached out his hand to touch the older man's face, but before he could, Nick let his eyes drop.

"I went to his funeral," he said. "Played hookie to do it because my profs wouldn't give me a pass. It was closed-casket, because, well..." he trailed off with a shrug.

Ellis swallowed hard and nodded.

"They had pictures though." The corners of Nick's lips tugged upward. "Lots of pictures..."

Ellis shifted, noticing the flicker that crossed the conman's features. "What'd he look like?" he prompted, hoping the remembrance of the man's appearance would cheer him if just a little.

Nick closed his eyes and tipped his head back ever so slightly in recollection. "He had this beautiful smile." Ellis watched as the gambler's face was overtaken by one himself, sort of lopsided with chagrin. He continued. "The kind that was infectious. That made you want to smile too, even if you were unhappy." The man paused, opening his eyes again, seeming to study him for an extended moment. "He had brown eyes and brown hair– kept it short." The way the man's eyes danced over Ellis' own face made the hick wonder if Nick was comparing him and Al. "He was tall though..." he murmured, "well, taller than me. Almost six foot, and slender– he didn't look like he had put on weight since high school or something," he reminisced aloud. Nick
chuckled sardonically, shaking his head as his gaze fell to his lap. "Sorry, I must be boring the shit out of you."

Ellis lifted one of his hands to look at the gambler's hand beneath it. "Naw. If... if it's important tuh you, s'important tuh me," he admitted.

Nick at last withdrew his hand out from under the mechanic's. A grin tugged at his features as he folded both his arms across his chest and threw his legs up onto the table, crossing them neatly at the ankle. "The good and the bad, you said?" he murmured; Ellis nodded.

And like that the ghost of mourning that had hung over the gambler dissolved and Ellis sat looking upon his confident elder, as if the dialogue had never passed between them—his affect and air so drastically altered that Ellis had to wonder if it actually had, or if he had just simply imagined it.
Chapter 28

Nick scrubbed at his molars with the miniature toothbrush, making sure to reach it as far back as he could to get at every enamel surface and plump of gum with undying diligence– he was not about to lose his teeth to the apocalypse, thanks. If he ended up dead on the side of the road somewhere, he wanted to be found immaculate and in fine fashion.

Ellis had finished the same chore quite a bit more spritely and surrendered the bathroom to him to wash up before bed. It definitely wasn't the nicest of restrooms– only a toilet, a sink, and a rather dulled mirror that only gave him a view of about a third of his person, ignoring the graffiti that had been carved into the lower half of it. The walls were naturally a little grimy, the soap dispenser was cracked, broken, and empty, and a spent air-freshener lay on its side near a well-used-looking plunger. He wasn't very happy about it, but at the same time he counted his blessings for having that much– the water was running after all, thanks to being right next to the bay so at least he could freshen up.

No shower though. Which was a goddamn shame but he'd deal with it as he'd dealt before.

He spat in the sink and twisted the faucet to rinse out his mouth, gargling the liquid.

Of course he wasn't looking forward to crossing said bay tomorrow. Abandon land briefly to head for uncharted territory, with no way to retrace their steps or retreat, and with a shortage of ammunition no less. He supposed he ought to have a little more faith in his compatriots, and himself, after all they had faced so far– but his fatalism was good at second-guessing his egotism, keeping one another in check.

Nick caught his own green-eyed gaze in the mirror, oddly… Coach's words being the ones to ring through his head. He wondered now if the big man had been lost to the infection if he truly could lead the other two… if he could take that responsibility, to make end-all decisions, to be held accountable when they walked into shit, avoidable or not, to risk, not just his skin, but all of theirs.

Gambling was his thing, but the analogy held no place here; money could be made back, lives could not, and the 'game' was all skill, luck non-existent because in the real world, outside of mathematical contexts and principles, everything impacted something else, almost deterministically. Nick ran his tongue over his lower lip, still staring at his reflection contemplatively. He'd lived his life to the rules– for the most part– and done well enough for himself– though truly, it was just himself; he hadn't carried anyone up or drug anyone down during his time on the world, not more than a few shady cons and scams. Leadership was one job he definitely didn't want, not now, not ever, and in a way, he admired the football player's gruff aloofness that came with his command, that he could distance himself and not get hung up on fears and regrets.

And he wondered, way in the very back of his mind, what qualities Coach had seen in him that made him think that he could possibly ever take such a role.

He sighed thoughtfully, dismissing the judgement on his character, as he stowed all their toiletries away and zipped the bag shut.

Nick wandered out of the bathroom, closing the door behind himself, and lifted an eyebrow when he saw Ellis setting up to sleep on the rough carpeted surface that was the ground of the office. The end tally had been a close 64 to 59, granting him the couch as the victor. He smoothly made his way to the slightly ratty piece of furniture, sitting and beginning to unlace his shoes, watching the hick with a touch of amusement. "You don't actually have to sleep on the floor," Nick
chuckled. "We agreed the winner gets the better sleeping arrangements, not that the loser gets the worst arrangements."

Ellis shrugged sheepishly, setting cap and glock on the nearby coffee table. "I can't really sleep sittin' up so well," he said, explaining his reasoning for not occupying one of the armchairs as he kicked off his boots.

Well fine, he'd take one of the armchairs and let the kid take the couch then; screw the bet, he just wanted El to be comfortable. He shifted to get up.

"Unless ya want me tuh sleep wit'chu," the mechanic said suddenly.

Nick stiffened at the words, sure the hick hadn't meant them that way, that he really meant offering to share space on the couch with him, so they'd both get the comfort of the larger piece of furniture. Nonetheless, it took him a couple seconds to find his voice and to slow down the blood pumping through his system at the suggestion. "Yeah, sure," he cleared his throat and rolled onto his side, scooching his back into the backrest of the couch, making room for the smaller male on the limited surface. He waited with bated breath as Ellis grinned and stood to move to the sofa. He rather quickly made himself comfortable, resting his neck on the crook of the armrest, his front pointed towards the ceiling. He wriggled his shoulders into the cushioning beneath them, bumping them unintentionally into the conman's chest a number of times.

Well, so much for the old 'head-to-toe' maneuver that typically got pulled in this sort of situation.

They lie for what, to Nick was, a few heart-pounding moments. Ellis cracked open an eye. "Y'alright?" he asked, "Ain't crowdin' ya none?"

"No, this is fine…" he responded breathlessly, thinking that the kid could physically crush him into the backrest of the couch and he'd be more than 'alright' with it. Holy fucking shit, they were pressed so close that they were touching most of the length of their torsos. He moved as if to settle in, savoring the friction it created between them. Shit. So many things… so many things that he wanted to do… that he shouldn't do. Ellis closed his eyes again, looking for all the world as comfortable and at-ease as could be, like sleeping next to the gambler was calming, natural even. Nick squeezed his eyes shut. But it didn't help. If anything it made it ten times worse because his imagination blossomed with about a dozen different ways he could 'make his move'. He just wanted to sweep Ellis into his arms… seal his lips over him and press hot, needy kisses deep into his mouth… slip his fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck and tilt his head to wrap their tongues together with slick desperation… grind his hips and body against him… roll him over on top of him, body bucking, arching, keening up at him…

Oh God, he wanted it so bad. Only sheer force of will kept him from developing a hard-on right there next to the kid. Fuck, it really was like he was sixteen again.

He re-opened his eyes to stop the images. He cursed himself for not having found some chance to rub one out after their shift before bunking down-- in that bathroom… something. But it was too late now. Nick swallowed. He'd taken care of himself in the shower just that morning, but fuck it all if he wasn't already horny again. He exhaled slowly, hushed so it wouldn't be heard by the mechanic beside him as he desperately tried to quell the thoughts. It was beginning to get irritatingly inconvenient to be so easily aroused.

Though, with the kid lying there right next to him, having offered– no, asked– for the proximity, could he really be blamed?
He was lying right there… that muscular chest rising and falling, just the hint of nipple poking through too-tight shirt… Fuck… and lying on his back like that, his normally baggy overalls did nothing to conceal the bulge that was the hick's sizable package…

Nick nearly groaned aloud, biting his bottom lip to stop the noise from escaping as he smothered it in his throat.

He couldn't lie there and do nothing though. He needed to do something, even if it was just some form of minor contact. Nick licked his lips, recalling the way Ellis had touched him the past couple of times… the way he had simply put his hand over his own in soothing, yet oddly intimate, gesture. He could replicate that, though to a slightly greater degree… just offer a friendly touch in return to what the hick had offered him… that couldn't be taken wrong, right?

Nick bided his time with measured breaths.

He waited a good couple of minutes before he dared to place his arm over the southerner's rising and falling chest.

The kid gave a purr, a smile tugging his lips. Nick didn't know if the reaction was made in his sleep, or if El was fully conscious, but the mechanic lifted his own arm, formerly folded at his side, and wrapped it snugly over his, ensuring that the jacketed appendage couldn't slip away from where it lie on his chest, wriggling ever so slightly once again with a blissful sigh.

His breath hitched slightly and Nick had to force himself a second time to calm down and stay cool. He forced his gaze away from lower parts of the kid's anatomy and instead made to admire the face lying so near to his own.

He was so warm and beautiful. Nick ran his eyes over the peaceful face with reverent countenance, wishing he could dislodge the arm he had pinned beneath himself to run his hands through the curly hair that stuck up at all kinds of odd angles from the arm of the couch disrupting it. Ellis' face was so close, so near to his own that he could appreciate every little detail, every little feature— his cleft chin, the stubble upon it, his thick lips ever so gently parted in sleep, revealing the hint of white incisors lying teasingly beyond… his eyebrows two dirty blonde sweeps that complimented the jut of his brow, completely relaxed and free of any possible wrinkle of worry or doubt, eyelids folded neatly underneath them in the recess of his skull, eyelashes thick like the rest of his hair… the round of the end of his nose, his nostrils gently flaring as he breathed in and out, the dip of the bridge, his little scar notched so cleanly across the skin between his currently folded eyes… a little gouge of flesh that would never grow back and always be lost.

Nick wanted to kiss it.

Wanted to purse his lips, lean over, and kiss the little mar that graced an otherwise 'flawless' face…. though Nick thought it made him all the more beautiful.

He could probably study Ellis all night long if he let himself. But they had a big day tomorrow and he needed coherency, needed his rest. It wouldn't do him much good to pour over the mechanic now if they died tomorrow. But the longer he lie beside him, the more worry melted away, replaced by…

Hope.

Nick licked his lips. Maybe… if they did evac tomorrow… maybe he would get to bunk with the kid in the internments, get to share a living space. Maybe he'd get more nights… like this one… to talk to him, be close to him.
Yeah, and maybe the military would have a shortage of twin beds.

Fat chance.

Still… he could pray for something like that.

He pressed his face a little closer, his lips near to brushing El's ear. "I never want to lose you…" he whispered to the sleeping hick; the young man didn't so much as twitch in response. Nick closed his eyes, savoring the warm body against him, beneath his arm, and slowly drifted off into the comforts of contented sleep.

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