

**Disclaimer: I own nothing related to or part of Star Trek.**

### *Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic*

*As this was a city park, there were access roads, though limited, for cars leading into the depths of the park's 351-acres. How else would the main cast of the show have gotten an RV and all the other cars up here? Mobility was the key to surviving the apocalypse, after all.*

*Driving up, my omnitool was showing a large cluster of green dots near the highest elevation the park offered, near the quarry lake in the center of the park. Again, not a bad choice in the short-term, assuming you could prevent walkers from just, you know, walking right into your camp and eating you.*

*Driving up the hill, I considered getting out of the vehicle and approaching on foot to appear less threatening but decided against it in the end. I was a 6 foot 6-inch-tall man, who was extremely fit, and well-armed. I could smile with the best of them to put people at ease, at least under more normal circumstances, my Augment good looks helping in that regard, but in the middle of the apocalypse? With people dying all around them? Everyone distrustful? Threats all around? Constant danger? Yeah, it was unlikely to work.*

*As I got higher I saw a man, who I knew was Dale--as he had lasted for several seasons and was part of the main cast--standing on top of an RV with a rifle on his back and binoculars in his hand. It seems he had caught sight of me. As I wasn't*

*exactly trying to be stealthy, I'm glad he was vigilant enough to catch the giant silver Hummer coming up the road near their camp. If he hadn't noticed, I had been planning on driving even slower, to ensure my arrival didn't surprise or spook them.*

*From what I could see, he was yelling and gesturing to get people's attention. A small group gathered, their weapons in hand, but not yet pointing at me. Shane, the unofficial leader and strong man of the group, was at the front of them all, a shotgun in hand.*

*I tapped on my omnitool and deactivated the screen. To anyone that was looking, better they think that it was some kind of vambrace to prevent walker bites or a decorative forearm thing, rather than a piece of futuristic technology that this world could not yet produce.*

*Shane looked ready to bring his weapon to bear at any moment, so I slowly got out of the Hummer, leaving it running, keeping the still open door between me and the group. When they realized how tall and muscular I was, all of the men got decidedly more cautious as my threat level had risen significantly in their eyes. The women, only a few of which I recognized, looked decidedly interested and shy? If I had to put a word to it. The old Augment charm was working, at least a little, even now.*

*"Hi, I come in peace!" I said aloud, with a joking tone and a smile on my face, hoping to defuse the tension of the situation, but my eyes were scanning each of them, looking for any sudden movements.*

*My attempt to defuse tension had obviously failed as the men all brought their weapons to bear and I ducked down behind the door.*

*At least they hadn't shot at me yet.*

## **The Adventures of Augment Gothic**

### **Chapter 47**

**Flashback. Onboard *The Flighty Temptress*. In orbit of Earth. The Walking Dead Universe.**

T'Maz came to consciousness slowly, her eyes opening groggily, as if she had been hit by a phaser bolt set on stun. She scanned the entirety of the bridge visually seeing only the ship's Chief Engineer, B'Elanna Torres, who also appeared to be slowly coming back to consciousness. Captain Gothic, though, was nowhere to be seen.

Had something gone wrong with the dimensional transition? Or was this Q's intention all along? During the last dimensional travel facilitated with the being's power the Captain had been separated from the ship and placed on the planet's surface to awaken. Logic suggested that that had happened again, but logic often failed, or was inapplicable, to God-like conceptual beings that could change reality with a mere snap of its fingers. While not entirely without value, every logical deduction or conclusion therefore must be viewed with skepticism when applied to beings such as Q.

“Natasha, what is the location of Captain Gothic?” she queried the ship’s computer.

“Captain Gothic is not onboard the ship,” Natasha reported.

The computer or AI that Gothic had created, as she had come to suspect but could not yet confirm, sounded confused and frustrated. For a digital lifeform, whose very existence was governed by rules and logic, Q’s powers were likely more vexing to her than even to a Vulcan.

“We need to know where we are,” B’Elanna voiced. “Beginning scans of local space.”

“Activate main screen,” T’Maz commanded. The blue planet that filled the screen was familiar to her as the ship had been orbiting this same planet in the *Flight of the Navigator* universe as Gothic had called it. “We are in orbit of Earth.”

“What- Oh.” B’Elanna started then stopped as she saw the unmistakable image of Earth being displayed on the main viewer. “We appear to be following a theme here.”

“It would appear so,” T’Maz replied stoically, her fingers flying over the control panel, initiating a suite of standard scans for a situation like this. “There are no starships in orbit or within our scanning range, though there are artificial satellites in orbit of Earth. I can also not detect any subspace signals emanating from the planet. I believe we are again in Earth’s past.”

“Probably in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century again, if the last dimension was any indication,” B’Elanna speculated.

“Most likely,” T’Maz admitted. The engineer’s logic was sound. “I am initiating a link to one of the artificial satellites in orbit.”

The bridge was quiet as both women started running their scans.

“Curious,” T’Maz said as she studied her screen.

“What?”

“I am having difficulty finding an active satellite. Beyond those used for positioning, virtually all of the satellites in orbit are inactive or have entered a standby mode after losing contact with their ground controllers,” she reported. “Multiple satellites are on a decaying orbital trajectory, are on collision courses with other satellites, or their courses will cause them to escape orbit.”

“I’m not detecting any ground communications reaching into orbit to make the required regular course and altitude corrections,” B’Elanna reported.

“I am forcing a remote activation of one of the more advanced US military satellites currently in standby mode,” T’Maz continued to report. A ‘positive’ beep from the control panel indicated a good linkup, the native encryption of this time period being wholly inadequate at keeping out technology over 300 years more advanced. “According to the satellite’s onboard systems, the current date is September 15, 2010. This satellite last received orders from its ground controllers on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010, instructing it to enter autonomous standby and to make course corrections as needed.”

“Why is the planet so dark?” B’Elanna asked quietly, eyes locked on the main viewscreen.

“I do not understand your statement,” T’Maz admitted.

“It’s the year 2010, yet the portion of the planet currently experiencing nighttime, is entirely dark. Even from our position in orbit whole continents should be visibly illuminated by artificial light, but it’s entirely dark,” B’Elanna explained. “That shouldn’t be possible.”

“You are correct,” T’Maz agreed in surprise.

“Neela to bridge.”

“Go ahead, Neela,” B’Elanna responded.

“There is something very wrong with the planet. I’ve been running standard life sign scans, and I don’t understand the readings I’m getting,” Neela reported, sounding frustrated. “In the last dimension, in 1986, the population of Earth was nearly 5 billion. Based on the population growth progression for that universe, the population of Earth in 2010 should be nearly 7 billion, yet I’m not detecting that. In fact there is a great deal of interference that shouldn’t exist in this time period.”

“What kind of interference are you experiencing?” B’Elanna asked.

“Anaphasic energy,” Neela answered.

“Anaphasic energy is extremely rare and unstable,” B’Elanna quietly stated. “It shouldn’t be present on Earth in this time period. Even in the 24<sup>th</sup> century we haven’t been able to artificially produce it.”

“Our first priority is to locate the captain. He will likely have the information necessary to understand what is going on,” T’Maz pointed out. “Suggestions on how to efficiently determine his location with the present interference?”

“Gothic specifically designed his armor to resist scans, but his omnitool was never shielded in that manner,” B’Elanna pointed out while she created a scan to specifically locate certain materials. “It contains duranium, latinum, and several other exotic materials necessary for shielding the Collector micro-singularity power cell. None of those materials should exist on Earth in this time period.”

“Center the scan on Fort Lauderdale, Florida, United States, and expand from there,” T’Maz ordered.

“Initiating scan now,” B’Elanna reported, after nodding at T’Maz’s order. “The anaphasic energy field is interfering with the scan, but I believe I have adequately compensated for the interference.”

For several minutes, their scans did not detect the non-terrestrial materials that Gothic’s omnitool was comprised of.

“I’ve located him!” B’Elanna reported. “He is in Atlanta, Georgia, United States. Locking sensors on his coordinates.”

“Put it on screen,” T’Maz calmly ordered. A very high-level image of the area was put on screen. “10x magnification.”

Lying immobile and entirely still in the back of a ground vehicle common to this time period was Gothic. All around him were what appeared to be humans moving around the vehicle,

walking down a long-paved road, a highway she believed it was called.

“Why isn’t he moving? And why is he surrounded by those people?” B’Elanna asked, her eyes locked on the viewscreen.

“Initiating communication now,” T’Maz said. “T’Maz to Gothic, please respond.”

He did not respond.

“Ship-to-ground communications are non-functional. I don’t know why,” B’Elanna reported, bringing up information on the state of the communications systems. “Level 3 diagnostics on the communications systems show they are in perfect working order and did not suffer any damage during the dimensional transition. Neela, can you visually inspect the transmitter array?”

“On it,” Neela responded from engineering.

“I suspect that there is nothing wrong with the system. Q may not wish us to interfere with his fun,” T’Maz replied bluntly. “I am, however, concerned with the sensor readings we are receiving. The Captain’s life sign is strong and normal, heartrate is slightly elevated, indicating consciousness and alertness, yet he remains still, as if he is hiding from the people around him. I am detecting 113 people surrounding him, moving at a slow walking speed, but I am not detecting any normal life signs common to humans. In fact, these individuals appear to be the source of the anaphasic energy readings, each in producing a small amount of the energy.”



“That doesn’t make any sense. The anaphasic energy readings we’re getting are detectable from orbit and span the entire planet. It would require the cumulative energy output of billions and billions to produce these levels,” B’Elanna stated.

“Perhaps we are dealing with an offshoot of humanity that evolved to produce this energy naturally?” T’Maz hypothesized.

“Natasha, please change view and ground level and extrapolate,” T’Maz ordered. As the sensor output was not based on anything as primitive as optics, such a change in view was possible.

B’Elanna gasped in shock at what they saw. Some of the ‘people’, if you could even call them that, looked relatively normal, but others... Many were showing gruesome injuries that a normal human would not be able to survive. Chest cavities on some had been open, their intestines spilling out to the ground.

“I do not understand what I am seeing,” T’Maz admitted quietly. “These visible injuries are not survivable by humans, yet they are still ambulatory and capable of movement. This is not possible.”

“You’re right, they should be dead, but they’re not, at least not in the traditional sense, which might explain the unusual readings we’re getting on their life signs,” B’Elanna speculated.

“They appear to still be capable of responding to stimulus, though, which is maybe why Gothic is staying still and out of sight.”

In the next moment, one of these walking people stopped by the vehicle Gothic was hiding in and appeared to peer at him.

“Center image on the Captain,” T’Maz ordered.

Gothic moved, thrusting something into the skull of the one who spotted him, and it dropped to the ground, unmoving. Gothic jumped to his feet, weapons in hand, and began fighting the people who had previously surrounded him. These people began to swarm him, looking like animals trying to take down prey, their hands outstretched, teeth biting and gnashing.

“Natasha, initiate emergency transport, beam up the Captain,” T’Maz ordered.

“Emergency transport failed. Transporter system is non-functional,” Natasha reported.

“Can we beam a weapon down to him?” B’Elanna asked.

“Negative, transport from and to the surface is not possible at this time.”

“If we can’t use the transporter, maybe we can help him win his fight!” B’Elanna stated urgently. “Weapons are online, targeting the surface! Firing!”

Nothing happened.

“I don’t understand! Weapons are functional!” B’Elanna anxiously cried out. “I can’t target the surface!”

“I do not believe that Q wishes us to interfere, as such all our efforts are being blocked,” T’Maz quietly stated. “We must trust in the Captain’s skill and combat proficiency.”

They sat in worried silence, unable to do anything to assist, as they watched their Captain fight for his life, bludgeoning with

the weapon in one hand and stabbing deeply with the one in the other.

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**The Present. Westside Park at Bellwood Quarry. Outside Atlanta. The Walking Dead Universe.**

“Hey! Hey!” I shouted. “I come in peace!”

“Stand down! Stand down,” Shane ordered to his people. “Come up from behind there, slowly, hands up, fingers spread!”

“I’m happy to comply, but can you please have your people take their fingers off the triggers?” I asked, calmly, still not standing up behind my improvised barricade. I had carefully pitched my voice to convey the message that I wanted to comply, but was hesitant to, afraid to, making a request, rather than a demand. If I was forced to jump back into the Hummer and reverse out of here, I could, an Augment’s memory was ideal for that kind of thing, but they could get a lucky shot off and kill my ride’s engine...*or me*, in my diminished state. This Hummer was the civilian version and as such was not armored to withstand small to medium arms fire. “Forgive me if I’m not eager to trust my life to a bunch of scared civilians with questionable trigger discipline.”

“He’s right. *Stand the fuck down!*” Shane whisper/yelled at his people. From the sounds of it he was slapping down the muzzles of several of them.’

“You can come up now, slowly, there won’t be any accidents. We aren’t going to shoot you unless you give us reason to,”

Shane said in that growly, but calm voice that police often used when they were trying to deescalate a situation and calm a suspect.

“I’m standing up, hands up, fingers spread. I am armed, but my firearm is in my holster,” I warned, in case the sight of my holstered pistol scared them.

I slowly stood back up, still keeping the open door of my Hummer between me and them, my eyes darting back and forth amongst this motley group, hoping to spot it if someone decided to pull their trigger.

“Fuck, you’re one tall, jolly green giant motherfucker, aren’t you?” Shane joked, smiling and looking a little more calm at the situation now that it was proceeding how he wanted it to and I was complying with his orders.

“You’re not the first to say so,” I lied in a joking tone, but trying to be friendly and easy to get along with. The average height of a human male in the 24<sup>th</sup> century was significantly greater than in this time, considering the advanced medical technology available and how easy it was to create food customized with the exact mineral and vitamin needs of the individual to maximize their genetic potential. So my height wasn’t all that worthy of comment in the 24<sup>th</sup> century, especially when there were so many species with higher average heights. I was actually secretly glad being made an Augment hadn’t made me 7 plus feet tall, which was a possibility. There definitely was such a thing as *too tall*.

“What are you doing here, soldier?” Shane asked, looking smug.

I raised an eyebrow in question.

“I was a deputy sheriff before the world went to shit,” Shane explained with a smirk. “You can’t throw a rock in law enforcement without hitting a half dozen former vets.”

“My name is Gothic. I was a US Army combat engineer, multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. At least I used to be,” I admitted. “What gave it away?”

“Fuck man, it’s everything you did,” Shane joked, visibly settling down as I was turning out to be a very familiar quantity to him. “The way you slowly drove up here, giving us plenty of time to see you and prepare. Your choice of vehicle and how you left it running to make a quick escape if necessary. Ducking behind the door like you’re used to it being armored. And complaining about civilians and their lack of trigger discipline. There may as well be an American flag flapping in the wind behind you as you talk.”

I found myself chuckling at the vivid image he painted and his candid dissection of learned behaviors that were practically ingrained in me at this point, ones that had kept me alive back in the day.

“Old habits, right?” I joked, looking chagrined. “Didn’t think I’d need them anymore stateside. Those habits were what kept me alive when the world went to shit.”

My words were met with a lot of solemn nods, several of the people obviously thinking of what they’d lost when the world

had ended and probably how ill prepared they were for this new reality.

“Why are you here, soldier?” Dale asked.

“I’ve been on my own since it all fell apart. Kept myself alive by being smart, scavenging food and drink from abandoned houses, avoiding highly populated areas, but I know it’s not sustainable long-term, which is why I risked coming so close to Atlanta, hoping to find other living people,” I answered, carefully painting myself as someone competent, skilled, and knowledgeable, a valuable contributor to the group rather than a net drain in resources that they would need to protect. “I’m good, but I can’t continue on my own if I want to make it long-term; I know that. I need back up, a second, third, and fourth set of eyes, a support system and back up like I had with my former squad. One bad injury, like a bad sprain or a deep cut that gets infected, and I’m starving to death or zombie food.”

I was met with blank looks.

“*Zombie??* What’s that?” I heard several people ask quietly amongst themselves.

I know Robert Kirkman, the creator of the Walking Dead, never used the word zombie in his writing and it was never uttered in the show, but the implication that the word itself didn’t even exist in this universe was a shock to me. It lent credence to the fan theory that I had heard once, that posited the Walking Dead universe didn’t have any zombie lore and fiction whatsoever, which explained why no one had known from the beginning to target the brain of a zombie to put it down. In my former world

that would have been common knowledge given how many zombie movies were part of the cultural zeitgeist. We had George Romero and many others to thank for that.

“The undead, I mean, the dead that attack the living,” I clarified.

“We call them walkers, or biters,” Shane explained.

“Ah, well, I bet there are a thousand different names for the same thing, around the world,” I said. “Anyways, I want to be part of a group again, plus I was getting really lonely,” I admitted with a small shrug.

My casual admission of potential weakness predictably got some chuckles and maybe a little sympathy, as it made me, a complete unknown, at least relatable to them. Shane, too, chuckled, but he didn't look convinced.

“Why should we let you join our group?” Shane demanded.

“Shane!” Dale admonished. “We really could use all the help we can get, especially someone who was former military.”

Shane ignored the man, staring intently at me.

“Thank you, sir, I truly appreciate it, but he's right to ask the question,” I said, directing my words at Dale. “The walkers are dangerous and plentiful, a constant danger, but the biggest danger this new world has to offer isn't them, it's *other* people. Now that everything has fallen apart the worst impulses of mankind that society was built to curtail will be acted upon. I guarantee you that little dictators will rise up in the weeks and months to come, warlords who will kill, rape, and torture with impunity, maybe even worse. And then you've got the really

crazy and evil people who will just want the world to burn and they won't care what they have to do to see that happen."

"Surely it won't get that bad!" Dale exclaimed. "People are fundamentally good!"

"It sounds like you've seen some shit, soldier," Shane quietly observed, again ignoring Dale, which he seemed to have had some practice at.

"Some will hold onto their humanity, if they really work at it, but multiply the very worst I saw in Iraq and Afghanistan by a thousand and I suspect that that's what we'll see here in short order," I said, looking at Dale too, thinking of the horrors I saw in the show, but also during the Occupation. "You'll need strong, hard men like me if you want to survive in this world. And I need strong, hard men to back me up, as well as people to protect."

"Why us?"

"I like what I see, to be honest," I admitted.

At Shane's impatient signal to elaborate, I did.

"From what I can see in front of me," I said, glancing around at the quite varied makeup of the group, "you've got a large group, with a good cross section of combatants and non-combatants, kids and older people too. This is a community, rather than a gang of thugs or a cult of personality."

"This all sounds too good to me. What's the catch?" Shane asked, looking suspicious.



“Well, this jolly green giant motherfucker eats enough for 3 grown men daily,” I admitted, which was true.

Thankfully, everybody laughed, not yet realizing that I was, *unfortunately*, being completely honest. With 24<sup>th</sup> century replicators or my internal enhancements, my insane daily caloric requirements were easy to handle, here, though, it’d be a constant problem to deal with. Sigh.

“A big part of our group is currently on a supply run to Atlanta, but you’re welcome to join us on a test basis,” Shane said, still looking distrusting, but willing to give me a chance given how few fighters I could see.

“That’s all I can ask,” I said with a wide smile. “As a small thank you, let me provide tonight’s dinner.”

With that mysterious statement, I went into the back of the Hummer and brought out the large blue and white cooler I had stocked, placing it on the ground in front of everyone. Deftly kicking the lid open I showed the contents to everyone. There were several moments of shocked silence before the group cheered and crowded around.

“Ice cold beer, steaks, and seafood. Courtesy of the last house I found,” I explained with a smile. “It was like winning the lottery, my friends!”

“Ice, real ice?! But how?” Dale and many others said quietly. “I haven’t seen ice since all this started,” he said trailing off, sounding sad, his eyes likely looking into the past.

Contrary to my expectations, no one excitedly reached for a cold beer to drink, that's how shocked and amazed they were as this large group of people stood around my open cooler, looking down at the ice with complicated and forlorn thoughts clear on their tired and dirty faces. It had not been my intention to make them sad, or to make them realize just how much they had lost and would likely never get again. It was the little things, like ice, the conveniences of modern life that you routinely took for granted, that could affect you the most in the zombie apocalypse as the survivors remembered a much easier, safer, more comfortable world that they had once been a part of, maybe even thrived in. In times like these, the living may come to envy the dead.

Shane was the first one to break out of his ice-induced trance.

“Thank you, Gothic, that's mighty kind of you,” he thanked, his southern accent suddenly stronger. “We'll eat and drink good tonight.”

I gave a little nod.

“I saw on the signs that there is a water filled quarry in the park,” I observed, to which I got a nod from several folks. “I'd like to add to our feast with some fresh fish.”

Dale snapped out of his trance soon after with a bright, sincere smile; This guy seemed like a genuinely good guy, “Andrea and Amy in our group are fishing there right now in my canoe, but I'm sure they'd appreciate the extra help.”

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A water-filled abandoned quarry was artificial, true, but there was no denying just how pretty it was with the sunlight glinting off the water's surface. The water that filled the quarry was a bright turquoise blue, the kind of blue you'd only see in ads for travel to the Caribbean islands. It also reminded me of what awaited me on my island when I returned to the Star Trek universe. So far this little trip through the multiverse thanks to Q had paid off big time. The star charts from the *Flight of the Navigator* universe alone were worth it, but a part of me was still eager to get back home despite how fun this was.

Yet again I was struck with just how much beauty you could find in life, even in the most terrible and desperate of situations. While I had plenty of terrible memories from the Occupation, my mind often went to the quiet moments sitting with Kira and others in a picturesque valley in the untouched wilderness of Bajor. Or waiting for an ambush to kick off while waiting in an abandoned house on top of a hill, the sky filled with bright stars and the moons of Bajor. The Resistance legend of the pants-less sniper had been born that day I thought with a chuckle. I found myself wondering how Kira and Ro and Dax were doing back home.

Floating calmly and serenely on these beautiful waters, in the middle of the zombie apocalypse, one with a small blue and white rain umbrella to block the hot sun, were two beautiful blondes in a boat. There was a country song in the making there, I think. Sisters, I knew from my memories of the show and seeing how similar they looked now in person. Andrea and Amy, Dale said. Andrea I remembered, mostly, as she had

lasted/survived several seasons and was part of the main cast of the show. Andrea, her younger sister in her early 20s, though, had died fairly early in season 1, I think, because she certainly didn't feature prominently in my memories from the show.

'If I was going to do some fishing without rod or reel, best to make an impression and do it Augment-style,' I thought with a smirk before starting to disrobe to my boxer briefs.

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"I think you have a bite, even with the wrong knots," Andrea said jokingly.

"So much for the no crying rule," Amy replied with tears in her eyes, thinking of their parents that were most likely already dead. Was it a fool's hope to believe otherwise?

"I think that was more for dad than the fish," Andrea joked, thinking of her father's many good qualities, but also his limitations, before her thoughts were interrupted by an unexpected sight on the shoreline. "Wow," she quietly whispered in admiration, before a glint of fear replaced it.

"What?" Amy asked, sounding confused at the apparent non sequitur, Andrea just gestured at the shore, pulling her gun from the back of her pants, keeping it low and hidden in the boat.

Amy turned her head to look and thought 'wow' might be an understatement.

"Well, pull my hair and fuck me doggy style," Amy whispered in awe at a man honest-to-god taking his clothes off on the distant shore of the quarry's waters. The man was tall and cut

like an Olympic swimmer, just looking at him was making her panties wet given the dry spell she'd had since the world fell apart. "You'd have to pay good money to see a man that hot take his clothes off in a strip club."

"Amy!" Andrea admonished, but Amy could tell that her sister was fighting off a laugh, always playing the good little prude, but she knew better.

The man paused for a moment in his undressing and looked like he was laughing, looking at the two of them and throwing a wave that they hesitantly returned. There was no way he could have heard her; they were way too far away!

"Who is he? There ain't no one that hot in our group, I'd know, because I'd have snuck into his tent at the beginning of all this shit and made my claim," Amy whispered huskily, shamelessly, her eyes roving over the chiseled muscles and form that she could just tell, even from here, just screamed power.

That there was a man who in ancient times would have claimed a woman, or three, through sheer might, taken her back to his cave and had his way with her. Not a bad deal for the women involved considering he could likely offer protection from the many dangers in the world. There was no shortage of dangers these days now that society had collapsed.

"Amy! When did you become such a hussy?!" Andrea again tried to admonish, though, again, she could tell that her sister was amused.

“We all have our needs, sister. Even in the middle of the apocalypse,” Amy sassed back. “Don’t think I haven’t heard you trying to wear out your vibrator in your bunk every night. Better keep those spare batteries stocked up.”

“I-What-No,” Andrea tried.

The man paused for a second, his shoulders shaking, then climbed a nearby tree like he was a spider monkey, putting a pistol and a rifle in the branches and out of easy reach, then dropping to the ground like a cat.

“Take those boxer briefs off and I’ll come swim with you, handsome,” Amy whispered, eyes locked on the distant man.

“Amy! What the hell has gotten into you!” Andrea replied, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment at her nightly activities being realized. “Would you cool it, slut, we don’t know who this guy is or if he’s a threat to us.”

“Slut shaming in the year 2010, shame on you, sister!” Amy turned to mock her sister, the boat slowly rotating in the water.

The God-like man at the shore slowly walked deeper and deeper into the water before he ducked down beneath the surface and didn’t come up for over a minute.

“Where the fuck did he go?” Andrea asked, her gun in hand, searching the water.

A moment later a head surfaced out of the water like a sea monster rising silently from the depths.

“Hey ladies! Beautiful day we’re having, huh?” the beautiful man greeted.

“FUCK ME!” Andrea yelled in surprised fright, jerking up so quickly and abruptly, the boat rocked and nearly threw them both out and into the water.

It was only the man’s efforts, gripping the side of the boat to steady it and reaching up and pulling Andrea’s gun filled hand down, forcing her to sit again, that kept them out of the water.

The man just smiled brightly, “Sorry! Didn’t mean to startle you guys.”

“Who the fuck are you?!” Andrea yelled.

“Andrea! Be polite!” Amy sassed back with a grin, happy to throw a little shade back at her sister. She was a proud sexual being and would *not* be slut shamed, sister or not. Her sister’s scathing look was like manna from heaven.

“Hi, I’m Gothic. New member of your group,” Gothic said. “Just met Shane and Dale and all the others. I’ll be traveling with you guys for a while.”

The familiar name dropping made Andrea relax a little.

“What are you doing here, Gothic?” Andrea asked. “Going for a swim?”

The beautiful man let out a sexy laugh that sent trills of pleasure through both of them. This man was unfairly, *stupidly* good looking. While Andrea cursed the weakness of her libido, Amy

gloried in it. Finally, a hunk of man in the group that was probably unattached and not old enough to be her grandfather.

“Ha, I suppose I am,” Gothic admitted. “It’s the first chance I’ve had since all this began, but primarily I’m here to catch some fresh fish for dinner tonight.”

“You can borrow my pole,” Amy quickly offered with a bright smile. “Unless you’re hiding a big, long, *hard* fishing pole somewhere on you.”

Andrea threw her a disbelieving look that Amy decided not to acknowledge. Gothic only laughed more, sending a delicious wink her way, maybe telling her that he was enjoying her flirting.

“I do enjoy using a *big*, long, hard pole sometimes, but in this case I actually intend to do it a little differently than normal,” Gothic admitted slyly. “Be right back,” he said before ducking beneath the water and out of sight.

“Does he intend to outswim the fish and catch them barehanded?” Andrea scoffed, looking confused. “He certainly didn’t have a net in those boxers.”

“Did you feel the sheer confidence? The charisma. That just screams big dick energy!” Amy gushed; eyes locked on the water.

“It’s like I don’t even know you,” Andrea quietly replied.

Maybe 10 minutes later, far longer than most could hold their breath underwater, two hands came up out of the water with a



wiggling fish in each hand. They'd caught several good sized fish today, but these were, by far, the biggest of the catch by far.

“Do you mind if I put tonight's dinner in your canoe? There are quite a few more fish down here,” he asked, before going back under.

“Um, sure,” Andrea hesitantly replied, blushing again, looking surprised at the proof that he hadn't been full of shit and unearned swagger.

Amy scoffed silently. Call her a slut, huh. Amy knew her sister well and a man who showed that he was both competent and skilled was exactly her sister's type, especially in a situation like this where competence and skill had real fucking value, lifesaving value even. Things that mattered in the old world, like how much money you made, were worthless now. She and her sister were the most attractive women in the group, so that made Andrea her competition, sister or not, but maybe they'd be more attractive to a man like Gothic as a package, she idly thought. She loved her sister after all, and what red blooded man didn't like the thought of banging two hot sisters?

“Big dick energy, yep. I knew it!” Amy said knowingly.

“Oh, shut up,” Andrea grouched, now looking intently at the water too.

**XXXXX**

“Lord have mercy, you make a mean steak, Gothic!” one of the group's men, named Morales, complimented between bites. “I

haven't had a steak since this all started. It brings back some good memories.”

Several in the group offered their grunting happy agreement as they continued to eat like starved animals as we sat around a crackling fire, the sun having long set causing the area to be plunged into a level of darkness you'd normally never be able to experience this close to a large city. It did mean the stars were beautifully visible, though.

“Thank you! The secret to a great steak is to sear it on a piping hot cast iron pan where you constantly spoon the melted butter over the steak, with plenty of rosemary and other spices,” I answered.

“For me, it's the fish. I missed fish for dinner!” Jacqui added, a middle-aged black woman who was part of the group. “My compliments to our brave fisherwomen!”

Since I had come back from fishing, I had spoken with many of the group's survivors and my memory had been jogged somewhat, though the true main characters of the show, like Rick, Daryl, and Glenn, who were still alive when I had stopped watching the show, were still in Atlanta on their ill-fated mission. There were many in this group, though, that had never been named in the series at all, having not been part of the main cast, but were obviously real people with a story of their own. Many of them had died ignominious deaths to ratchet up the episodic drama, the audience never even learning their names before their ends.

“You’re welcome,” Andrea replied with a smile, in between her own bites, enjoying the flaky fish slathered in the butter and spices I had brought back with me from that rich yuppie house in Atlanta. “But we can’t claim all the credit, Gothic caught a majority of the fish and all of the biggest ones, actually.”

“He better have, I didn’t realize he was being honest when he said he ate enough for 3 grown men!” Shane returned with a smile, before taking a drink of his ice-cold Heineken, smacking his lips each time, like he was trying to savor each sip fully. “Somehow I don’t find myself all that angry about it as I’m drinking my first ice cold beer since it all went to shit.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you!” I joked right back.

“Gothic here has to be part shark,” Amy said. “He caught all the fish barehanded, in the water, no rod or reel.”

Many turned to look at me in surprise. I just smiled back.

“We all have our strengths,” I said, everyone content with that answer while their bellies were so wonderfully full of good food and drink.

“I’ve got to ask you man,” Morales said, turning his attention away from me and the steak, to Dale. “It’s been driving me crazy.”

“What?” Dale replied, contentedly sitting in his folding chair, next to Andrea and Amy, of course.

“That watch.”

“What’s wrong with my watch?” Dale asked, still smiling and happy, but confused.

“I see you every day, the same time, winding that thing like a village priest saying mass,” Dale clarified.

“I’ve wondered this myself,” Jacqui added.

“I’m missing the point,” Dale said.

“Unless I’ve misread the signs, the world seems to have come to an end. At least hit a speed bump for a good long while,” Jacqui continued.

“But there’s you every day winding that stupid watch, like keeping time to get to work on time or something,” Morales elaborated.

This was sounding very familiar for some reason. Was this canon dialogue?

“Time... it’s important to keep track, isn’t it? The days at least. Don’t you think, Andrea? Back me up here,” he asked of Andrea. She just smiled like she was humoring him. Seeing no help coming from her, Dale continued. “I like... I like what, um, a father said to his son when he gave him a watch that had been handed down through generations. He said, ‘I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire, which will fit your individual needs no better than it did mine or my father’s before me; I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you may forget it for a moment now and then and not spend all of your breath trying to conquer it.’”

Amy chimed in and neatly dispelled the sudden philosophical mood that had come upon this happy fireside dinner with friends, “You are so weird.”

“William Faulkner,” I stated after the group’s laughter had started to die down, recognizing the quote.

“Right! Exactly right, Gothic,” Dale said, looking surprised and impressed.

“Don’t sound so surprised, this ignorant soldier knows how to read the classics!” I said, joking right back. “Speaking of time, I once heard it said that ‘Time is the fire in which we burn.’ That person felt time was like a predator that stalked us all our lives. But I’d rather believe that time is a companion who goes with us on the journey, reminding us to cherish every moment, because they’ll never come again.”

A contemplative moment settled over the group before Andrea piped up.

“You totally stole that from Star Trek Generations!”

“And Captain Picard!” Amy chimed in. I leaned back like someone had slapped me, physically shocked to my core, my mouth falling open comically, gaping like a fish. “Don’t look so surprised, our dad was a huge Trekkie so we watched all the shows and movies growing up!”

The look on my face must have been hysterical because the entire group fell into uproarious laughter. This world had had the Star Trek shows and movies!! They knew all about Star Trek!!

“Star Trek: Deep Space Nine was always my favorite,” Dale added, further shocking me with his words. “A much more morally complex and comprehensive view of the Star Trek universe that Next Generation only delved into in the later seasons, once Roddenberry had been dead for a few years.”

*What. The. Fuck.*

Amy got up from her seat by the campfire.

“Where are you going?” her sister asked.

“I have to pee. Jeez, you try to be discreet around here,” Amy quietly responded, quickly glancing at me in embarrassment, before she walked off to the RV to use the facilities there. It was a smart choice, going into the woods at night was a very dangerous endeavor these days.

My churning existential thoughts at the idea of being in a universe where Star Trek was known were interrupted when my omnitool’s perimeter alarm went off, silently vibrating urgently against my forearm. The alert I had set up beforehand was to warn me should any walkers enter its limited detection range. I didn’t dare look down at it, or even activate the screen. The artificial light source would be really obvious in the darkness and there were too many eyes on me at the moment.

“Quiet, quiet!” I whisper-yelled as I stood up quickly, shutting up everyone, my eyes flitting into the darkness surrounding us.

The others got the idea right quick as everyone went totally silent, the crackling of the fire the only thing that could be heard, but I could hear shuffling movement in the trees and around the

RV. Everyone stood, readied weapons, and began looking out into the night, the fire they were sitting around fucking with everyone's night vision.

In the current alert silence, the RV door opening and swinging with a bang into the side of the vehicle was like a thunderclap.

"We're out of toilet paper," Amy said, looking confused at the silent, alert, and alarmed group looking back at her.

With my enhanced eyesight, I was the first to notice the male walker coming around the side of the RV, taking hold of Amy's hand on the RV's door, and lowering its mouth to take a bite out of her forearm thus condemning her to certain death.

As quick as only an Augment was capable of, I pulled my pistol from its thigh holster, brought it up to my eye, and sighted down the iron sights, a 9mm bullet screaming out of the barrel at over 900 miles per hour, the home defense rounds being higher power than normal. The back of the walker's head ballooned out as the round traveled through its skull, destroying its brain, dropping it before it could take a bite out of Amy.

My chaos meter, which I had kind of forgotten about, went up to 20%.

Suddenly, I remembered. This was the episode where Amy had been fated to die. And I had prevented it, at least for now.

Immediately, my gun moved smoothly and fluidly to acquire my next target and I headshot the other walkers that were suddenly swarming the group, attracted to all the noise that we were making.

The 21-round capacity magazine my pistol boasted allowed me to drop one walker after another, but the panicking civilians were shooting wildly, doling out body shots instead of the head shots that were required to truly put these bastards down, some even darting out to engage in melee combat and stepping directly into my line of fire. They were lucky I hadn't shot them by accident.

*Fucking civilians.*

Shane was the best shooter out of the bunch, having had proper training when the world was normal, but he and I could only do so much. I wished that I hadn't left my rifle in the Hummer, but with my nascent membership in the group and its trust in me so tenuous and delicate, I felt it would be a bad idea to be so openly and heavily armed at this point. Those two coupled magazines offering me 60 shots sounded might good about now.

Several named and no named characters who had panicked and left the safety of the group had already been killed.

"Mom!" Carl, Rick's son called out to his mother in fear.

"Carl!" Lori replied.

"Converge on me!! Back-to-back!! Children in the middle!" I roared commandingly, slowly moving to the large RV to limit the number of directions the walkers could come at us from.

"Keep your firing lanes clear!"

Whether it was the powerful, confident, command voice that demanded immediate obedience that I had unknowingly slipped



into, or the desperate need in them to have someone lead them in this desperate situation, everyone obeyed, even Shane.

The group huddled up together around me, children in the middle, as the stronger armed members of the group either shot or bludgeoned every walker that came close. Those that stepped away from the group to bash a walker's brains in immediately and quickly returned once the threat they were fighting was dealt with.

Emptying my magazine, I ejected the magazine, letting it fall, pocketing it in one smooth motion, before reaching into my right pants pocket and reloading my pistol. The military training in me cringed at the very idea of keeping ammo magazines in a fucking pants pocket of all places, but until we stumbled on a tactical vest with dedicated magazine holders, it was the best I could do under the circumstances.

Another large group was coming from the right as we converged on the RV but it turned out to be Rick, Daryl, and Glenn who began shooting the walkers, which quickly winnowed their numbers till there were none left, and the area was bathed in silence.

“Dad!” Carl cried, running to his father.

“Baby! Carl! Baby!” Rick greeted them desperately, clutching them close, their little family reunited.

“Thank you! Thank you!” he offered to me while holding them tightly.

I merely nodded back. Nothing more needed to be said.

There were cries of both joy and despair as people saw who had survived this attack and those who had been killed. Andrea, Amy, and Dale were hugging each other tightly, joyful that Amy had survived her near brush with death. Amy glanced up and saw me and separated from her sister and Dale, practically throwing herself at me in a hug. I quickly holstered my weapon to prevent any friendly fire accidents and caught her midair.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she sobbed into my chest, her arms wrapped tightly around my neck.

Andrea came up to the two of us and similarly hugged herself close to my side, “Thank you for saving my sister. I don’t what I’d do if...”

“You’re welcome.”

“I remember my dream now, why I dug the holes,” Jim said quietly to himself.

I was probably the only one who had heard it.

This night was probably good for something, I thought, as I saw my kill counter now read 288. It had also nicely solidified my place in the group. As my time in the Occupation had proven time and time again, there was nothing quite like shared adversity and fighting together against a terrible foe that could bring even the most distrusting people together.

**XXXXX**

The night of the attack had not been great for someone with enhanced senses like me. Unlike my brothers in the military and in the Resistance, who were used to relaxing after even the most

intense firefights, even after we'd suffered KIAs, the civilians had had a rough night. It was even worse for those who had lost loved ones.

After the danger had passed I had recommended that everyone get in the vehicles to sleep for the night as the area, which they had previously thought was a safe haven, was obviously not safe from the walkers and the tents many slept in nightly had proven to offer little in the way of protection against the walkers who never slept. Carol's husband had been discovered last night, his body torn up and eaten, probably the first to die. Better to be uncomfortable and hot than to wake up with a walker chewing on you in the middle of the night. Thankfully, the Hummer had proven to be quite comfortable with the seats down. I'd certainly slept rougher in the field on many occasions on both Earth and Bajor.

The bright light of morning was all about cleaning up the dead, both the walkers and the former friends and family that had once been part of the living. Daryl had his head on straight as the man started swinging a pickaxe into the skull of every downed body he saw, to make sure that they didn't get up unexpectedly and kill people.

"Unless you see a giant hole in the head or stabbed it in the brain yourself, assume it's still dangerous and capable of biting you," I advised, pulling back one of the no named characters from picking up a body that started weakly biting the air when it sensed us nearby. Walkers weren't exactly ambush hunters, but they had a primitive animal cunning, of a sort.

My chaos meter went up to 27%.

It had likely been shot in the spine, and thus was probably incapable of moving all that much but get your limbs close enough and it could still take a bite out of you. I used the toe of my shoe to flip the walker on its front, and thus put its teeth in the dirt, put my foot on its upper back, then thrust my knife deep into the back of its skull, stopping its movement forever.

“Oh man, thank you, sir,” the man said in a tone that spoke of recent loss and fatigue. “I’m just so tired. Last night was—” the man tried to get out before he started tearing up.

“I understand. Why don’t you take a break for a bit and get your head on straight. Carol made some fresh coffee,” I offered comfortingly to the man who had obviously lost someone last night. “I’ll take care of things here.”

I picked up the body with two hands and effortlessly threw the two-hundred-pound body onto the pile of bodies we’d made for burning. Not a bad idea in a vacuum but given the sheer number of walkers it might be a bit of a lost cause, especially with what else I remembered from the show, about how everyone was infected already. Unless the bodies were in danger of contaminating a water source I’m not sure I’d even bother with the precaution.

Daryl, who had seen and heard what happened, gave me a nod of mutual respect.

“You’re one strong son of a bitch, aren’t you?” he asked.

I shrugged, not deigning to not reply, neither confirming nor denying.

“You’ve been out there on your own for a stretch, haven’t you?”

I nodded.

Daryl nodded back and we continued on our gruesome, but necessary work. He recognized a fellow survivor in me. We worked side by side for a half hour before the next bit of drama revealed itself. It didn’t even jog my memory, to be honest.

“That blood is fresh. Were you bit?” Jacqui asked.

“No. I got scratched during the attack,” Jim suspiciously defended.

“You got bit.”

“I’m fine,” Jim argued back.

“Then show me.”

“Don’t tell, please,” Jim pleaded, realizing he’d been found out.

So, we had the first non-immediately lethal walker bite of the show.

“A walker got him. A walker bit Jim!” Jacqui called aloud, fearfully backing away from Jim, who merely looked resigned now that the truth was out. There was almost a look of relief, too, now that he knew he would soon be joining his departed wife and children in the next world. The constant burdens of survival were no longer his. I’m sure that probably felt liberating.

Everyone came running up, crowding in a circle around Jim.

Jim looked decidedly worried. Given how on edge the group was after the attack last night, he had every reason to be.

“I'm okay. I'm okay.”

“Show it to us. Show it to us!” Daryl ordered, weapon raised and ready.

“Easy, Jim,” Shane said, recognizing a man who was at the end of his rope.

“Grab him!” Daryl yelled, causing Jim to pick up the shovel and swing it violently around in a wide arc.

“Jim, put it down. Put it down,” Shane calmly demanded, his shotgun lowered but at the ready.

Having had enough, I stepped into the swing of the shovel and reached out my hand to stop it. Jim struggled ineffectually in my vice-like grip, but I gave him a sympathetic look, our eyes locked and I could tell that he knew that I meant him no harm. He nodded calmly and sighed, standing up fully and glancing meaningfully at the sunlit sky, as if it might be his last glimpse while alive.

“Jim, may I see?” I asked softly, allowing him to make the choice, showing my respect for him by not forcing it or demanding it with threats of violence. “Could you lift up your shirt, please?”

As Jim slowly lifted up his shirt, the group collectively gasped as a bloody bite mark was revealed. This might have been the

early days of the zombie apocalypse, but it was already well known that being bitten by a walker meant sickness, then death, then reanimation in short order, at which point he'd be a danger to them all, right in their midst.

**XXXXXX**

“I say that we put a pickaxe in his head and be done with it,” Daryl advised with the hard wisdom of a consummate survivor as we stood around in a circle debating what to do about this new danger to the group.

“Is that what you'd want if it were you?” Shane asked wryly.

“Yeah, and I'd thank you while you did it,” Daryl answered, which was probably not the response Shane had thought he'd get. I had little doubt that Daryl was being entirely honest in his response, he was just that kind of man.

“If the bite was on a limb, it could be severed to keep the infection from spreading, but with a bite to the torso,” I said shaking my head. “That's not exactly an option.”

Everyone looked shocked at what I'd just said, but interested at this new revelation that could offer them some gristly hope should they or someone they loved be bitten.

“Do you know that for sure?” Rick asked seriously, sounding intrigued, now that an option to save the bitten person, albeit with one less limb, was being offered.

I nodded with confidence, “I've seen it. But it's got to be relatively quick after the bite.”

Of course, I didn't explain that I'd seen it on a television show in another universe. Everyone mulled that one over for a while, wondering if they'd want their limb cut off if it meant survival. It could be the difference between life and death, after all. My credibility with this group was still new and untested, under normal circumstances they would never believe me this easily, but this was something that they all wanted to believe, wanted to be true, so it was. Humans were funny like that. A Vulcan would have required empirical evidence, or multiple trusted verifications if the exigencies of the situation were serious enough, no matter how much they might want it to be true.

"I hate to say it... I never thought I would... but maybe Daryl's right," Dale said.

"Jim's not a monster, Dale, or some rabid dog," Rick interrupted vehemently.

"I'm not suggesting..." Dale tried to finish.

"He's sick. A sick man. We start down that road, where do we draw the line?" Rick argued back, looking around at everyone, trying to keep hold of some semblance of the old world.

"The line's pretty clear. Zero tolerance for walkers, or *them to be*," Daryl rejoined immediately, which I thought was kind of eloquent.

"I agree, Daryl. In ancient times a danger to the community needed to be segregated to preserve the whole, no matter how hard that was," I replied, staring directly at Daryl, who nodded in agreement. "But I also understand where Rick is coming from



too, he's trying to hold on tight to what remains of the civilized society that we used to be a part of. We need men who think like both of you if we're going to survive this; we need to strike a balance. There will be more than enough savagery to go around, several years or decades of it probably, before organized communities start forming here and there for mutual protection and the sharing of labor and resources, just like it did in the old world."

I might be dropping a bit too many hints about the future of this world, or robbing them of their character development moments, but I really didn't care. I hopefully wouldn't be sticking around in this world for too long anyway.

"Dale, I have only recently gotten to know you, but I suspect that you were not truly advocating that we immediately kill Jim because he's a threat to us now. What was it you were going to say," I prodded. While I didn't remember this conversation in particular from the show, I know that Dale had been the conscience and heart of the early seasons, holding onto that even while Rick became more and more mercenary as the leader of the group to protect everyone.

"You're right, I would never suggest callously killing a man, but I was going to suggest that we ask Jim what he wants," Dale answered, "rather than decide for him."

The group looked shocked at that idea. They'd already bought into the us versus them paradigm, which, admittedly, during this lawless period in history, would probably increase their chances of survival overall.

“Well, let’s ask him then,” I said, before I abruptly left the impromptu council/tribunal to walk over to Jim who was looking resigned to his fate, sitting on a milk crate near Dale’s RV. Some called out to stop me, but everyone followed me as I went anyway.

He looked frightened at the group approaching him so deliberately, but he at least saw a kind smile on my face and my weapon holstered. I knelt down next to him and spoke softly, non-threateningly.

“Jim, I think it’s pretty obvious that we’ve been talking about what to do with you. I’m going to be straight and blunt with you because there is no room for bullshit here. Now that you’ve been bitten you’re going to get more and more sick, experiencing more and more terrible pain. You will eventually, but relatively quickly, die from that sickness, then shortly after you die you’re going to get right back up as a walker while you’re in the middle of our group. When you fully turn, you may be able to bite or kill one or more of us before we put you down for good; that’s why everyone is afraid and considering whether or not to kill you now. But Dale suggested, and I quite agree, that we ask you what you want given the scenario that we know is going to play out. So, tell us what you’re thinking and what you want.”

Jim looked visibly relieved to be able to speak for himself, that even in these final hours of his life that he would be allowed to choose how his life ended. I’d seen the same look on the faces of men and women I’d fought with during the Occupation, on the face of Resistance fighters who had been injured too severely, holding onto life only tenuously, and knew that they would soon

be returning to the Prophet's embrace, their injuries serious enough that they knew any effort spent on their behalf would weaken and endanger the rest of the cell. Almost invariably these brave men and women chose to go out with a weapon in their hands, trying to take out as many Cardassians as they could before their end, or when their injuries wouldn't allow even that, to tightly grip a weapon set to overload or a photon grenade, hoping to cover a retreat or to take out a Cardassian or two when their booby trapped bodies were found.

"Thank you, Dale. Thank you, Gothic," he said with emotion, looking both of us in the eye. "I know I'm a danger to you all. I'm ready to be with my wife and children. So, please, leave me behind to enjoy my last hours so that I won't hurt anyone."

"Are you sure, Jim?" Rick asked. "We may be wrong. Maybe there is a cure for you! I heard the CDC was working on a cure."

"Rick, thank you, but no. I want to spend my last few hours in nature, not fighting for my life on a hope that I just don't think is realistic," Jim replied instantly. "Let me die in peace, knowing I won't be putting any of you in danger."

That silenced everyone. What more was there to say really? This was Jim's choice, and no one was interested in continuing to engage in the previous conversation, whether to kill Jim or not, when the man had clearly made his choice and spared them the difficult decision. In some ways, it was Jim's last gift to the group. Many said their final goodbyes to Jim, some even giving him a hug despite their fear, as he walked off into the words to

find a nice spot for a last look. There was something to greatly respect in that.

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“What’s the plan guys?” I asked. “Because staying here is *not* an option. More and more walkers are going to make their way from the city to this area.”

“What if the CDC is up and running?” Rick asked.

“Man, that is a stretch right there,” Shane replied slowly.

“Why? If there's any government left, any structure at all, they'd protect the CDC at all costs, wouldn't they? I think it's our best shot. Shelter, protection...” Rick replied, but I could see what was truly behind the suggestion. Rick was trying to give the group hope when it was needed the most. We had lost multiple people last night and now Jim was slowly dying. Many wondered if they too would have to make their own choice like that.

“Okay, Rick, you want those things, all right? I do too, okay? Now if they exist, they're at the army base. Fort Benning,” Shane suggested.

“That's 100 miles in the opposite direction,” Lori pointed out, only glancing at Shane briefly.

I hadn't fully recalled that Lori and Shane had been fucking when she thought Rick was dead, but the stilted and uncomfortable glances between them, mostly coming from Shane who was having a hard time letting go, was hard to ignore. It was like the guy was recovering from a breakup, made

even worse by the fact that he had to see his ex happy with Rick every day. He really needed to bang someone new to get over Lori, but pickings were rather slim in that department. It was a little bit pathetic, admittedly, but the fucked up state of things made it 100 times more difficult than it otherwise would have been.

Rick was probably the only one at this point that didn't know Shane had been fucking Lori nightly before his reunification with his family. It was kind of a miracle that the secret hadn't come out, to be honest. I couldn't even blame the two, really. Lori was grieving her lost husband, the world was ending, and she had a little boy to raise and protect. Shane was a known quantity and an excellent source of strength and protection to see both her and her child safe during these crazy times. If only someone had just sat them all down and fucking made them talk about it...maybe Shane could have survived. Though I could certainly do without the come fuck me looks that Lori was sometimes sending me. But who could really blame her, really.

“You're right, Fort Benning is a trek. But it's away from the hot zone. Now listen to me. If that place is operational, it'll be heavily armed. We'd be safe there,” Shane argued.

“The military were on the front lines of this thing. They got overrun. We've all seen that. The CDC is our best choice,” Rick argued right back.

I sighed at this predictable argument. Why the fuck was I even here in this universe?? You'd think I would have a clue by now why Q had dropped me here. I had been a fan of the show, sure,

but I wasn't a fan of living rough without some obvious goal in mind, nor did I even have the childhood nostalgia the *Flight of the Navigator* universe had offered, nor the obvious technology that I could greatly benefit from acquiring.

Was it the combat experience?? He'd taken all my normal weapons and defenses away. Zombie, walkers, whatever the fuck you wanted to call them, were mindless. They were only a threat in large groups with no easy way to retreat.

Well, let's move this along, I thought. I raised my hand a bit and everyone quieted. My proposed solution with Jim had spared them all a terrible choice, so I had earned some goodwill and deference, I guessed.

"Both options, the CDC and Fort Benning, have unknowns attached to them. We have no idea if the CDC or Fort Benning have been overrun. We have no idea if either one of them will offer us anything valuable like resources, knowledge, or additional protection. Can we all agree on that?" I asked, directing my question at the two biggest personalities here, Rick and Shane, the true decision makers in this group. Both men nodded in reluctant agreement at my logic. "Let's talk about what we do know. We know that the CDC is right here in Atlanta and that it's much closer than Fort Benning. We have some experience with the dangers the city represents. We have most of the resources necessary to get to the CDC, we definitely don't have enough for Fort Benning and will have to stop many times along the way to search for fuel, water, gas, etc. Each time we stop to hunt for resources we will face additional danger. The 100 miles between us and Fort Benning is a much greater

unknown. If the choice is between those two, I vote let's go to the CDC. Going to the CDC first doesn't necessarily preclude the other."

The CDC is where they ended up in the show and was still, at this moment, well, probably, *functional*. The facility had one guy left to man the whole place, but its computers would have the most up to date and comprehensive scientific information on what was causing all this. If I had access to my ship's medical technology or even the full sensors of my omnitool or armor, I'd have far more information, but Q was really making me work for this shit.

"Gothic has a point," Dale acknowledged. "The CDC is right here in Atlanta. Let's see what there is to see."

Shane reluctantly nodded.

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With the decision finally made as to the destination, the entire group was filled with renewed energy as they now had a proper destination, a purpose, and a little bit of hope. All were sad to be leaving this place that they had lived in and sheltered them for weeks since the world had fallen. With the quarry nearby they had had endless fresh water and food in the fish they caught daily, but everyone packed up their belongings and readied their vehicles to leave. Food and water and other supplies were inventoried and distributed throughout the long convoy.

On the hood of Rick's vehicle, several of the main cast of the show were debating the route to take to reach the CDC safely. I

stepped up and listened, hoping to increase their chances with my knowledge from the shows and my recent experience getting here.

“See, we can take West Marietta Street NW to 10<sup>th</sup> Street, then hop onto 85 South. The CDC is right off exit 249D for North Avenue/Georgia Tech,” Dale pointed out, running his index finger over the path from the quarry to the CDC building. “It’s the quickest, most direct route.”

Everyone nodded their heads, but I sighed internally as they were failing to take into account the big picture.

“Taking the highway is a high risk, high reward option, but you have to go into this realizing that and act accordingly,” I interjected.

“What do you mean, Gothic?” Shane asked, sounding confused, but willing to listen.

“People were fleeing the city, most heading North, so the southbound lanes should be mostly clear. The high reward is that the highway is full of valuable resources just waiting to be found,” I explained. “It’s a graveyard, a tomb, but those abandoned vehicles were full of people fleeing for their lives, taking what they considered valuable enough to bring with them when the world was falling apart. That means fuel, food, water, weapons and ammo, you name it, can be found in those vehicles.”

“Now that’s more like it!” Daryl said, liking what I was saying.

“What’s the high risk?” Rick asked, ever the leader.



“There could be cars blocking sections of the highway. If the vehicles haven’t overturned, we’ll have to stop each time and move them out of the way to clear a path,” I explained. “That’s not the worst of it, though.”

I didn’t continue immediately in order to build up suspense. A great orator was a showman too and knew how to keep his audience asking for more.

“Come on, man. What’s the worst of it?” Shane asked, sounding annoyed.

“The highways are how herds of walkers get from place to place, moving up and down the roadways looking for prey. It’s probably where they died in the first place,” I answered to everyone’s shock. “I’m talking dozens, maybe even hundreds of them at a time, moving together as a group which means for long stretches you won’t see any walkers, or maybe just a few stragglers who move too slow for even the herd. When I was trying to find other people I took the highway, but that means you have to keep your head on a swivel. If you spot a herd, either you get off the road and hide in the woods, or bunker down in your cars and hide, trying to be as quiet as you can, waiting until they pass you by.”

“*Fuck*...that, that changes things,” Shane quietly said what they were all thinking. “But we could definitely use the supplies.”

Rick shook his head, as if he had made a tough choice.

“Yeah, we could use the supplies, but we have enough to get to the CDC. I don’t want to lose any more people. We’ll stay off

the highway for now,” Rick said, sounding resigned. “Gothic, thank you for the information and advice. We’re going to need your help and the benefit of your experience if we’re going to get through this. Thank you, truly.”

I simply nodded.

“Let’s get ready to move then,” Rick said, and everyone moved to get ready to leave.

As I walked back to the Hummer, Amy ran up to me with a bright smile.

“Hey Gothic, I was wondering if I ride with you instead of in the RV?” she asked, looking positively delicious, even as scruffy as she looked, a flirtatious and inviting smile on her face. How long had it been since I’d gotten laid? A couple of days? Well that was too long.

“Of course, I’ve got plenty of room for you,” I answered.

“Great! I’ll be right back,” she said and ran off to get her stuff.

I chuckled at her enthusiasm.

**XXXXX**

“So, any requests for music?” I asked the beautiful young girl sitting in the passenger seat of my looted vehicle.

Amy laughed a sweet, bright laugh, sending me a wink and a smile, her body mostly turned to face me. Had she foregone a bra? If those hard nipples showing through her tank top were any indication, I’d say so.

“Anything but country,” she answered.

“A lady after my own heart,” I said before putting in a CD filled with a mix of classic hits, the Mamas & the Papas, California Dreamin’ coming on.

“I love this song!” Amy said, waiting for the vehicle in front of us in the convoy to move, her youth and enthusiasm filling me with new energy. “Sing with me, Gothic!”

“Stopped into a church, I passed along the way, well I got down on my knees, and I pretend to pray,” we sang together.

“That’s just not fair, Gothic, someone as gorgeous as you has no right to have a singing voice that sweet,” Amy laughed. “God doesn’t love anyone that much.”

I laughed at the irony of that statement, considering God with capital G had had little to do with my current looks and singing voice. Our eyes locked, a heated connection forming between us as Amy licked her lips. Our quickly intensifying moment was interrupted by the back door of the Hummer opening up and another blond getting in, swinging her stuff heavily onto the floor of the rear cabin.

“Andrea! What are you doing here?” Amy asked frostily, obviously not liking that her alone time with me was now seemingly to be shared by her overprotective sister.

“I can’t bear to part from my sister, I love you too much!” Andrea happily answered, mockingly, with a smile I had seen on the face of many an older sibling trying to ruin the fun of their younger one.

“Uh huh, I’m sure,” Amy snarked back.

“You don’t mind, do you, Gothic?” Andrea asked, turning to me mischievously.

My smile grew amused at this byplay between loving siblings.

“Not at all, the more the merrier,” I said, before the many cars in our convoy started to move out and we began our journey. As I was well armed and my vehicle practically brand new with an extended fuel tank, I had been asked to take up the rear of the convoy, to ensure that we didn’t lose any of the frightened civilians on the way, as well to deal with any threats that snuck up on us.

**XXXXXX**

As I’d learned in multiple lifetimes, in three different universes, a large convoy like this, especially one filled with untrained and frightened civilians, didn’t really move all that quickly, especially when there were so many obstacles to deal with or move around, like abandoned vehicles that blocked the road at various points, or walkers, either alone or in small groups, that were in our path and needed to be dealt with if we were going to get through safely.

I had advised everyone prior to leaving to not attempt to run any walkers down with their vehicles, stressing that civilian vehicles were not designed for such a thing. I explained that in addition to killing the walker, *maybe*, they’d also probably do significant damage to their vehicle, damage that we were not equipped to fix and that they’d likely stop the whole convoy if the car broke down or some walker’s chewed up bloody body got caught in the wheel well. Thankfully, everyone seemed to accept the

advice after I had painted that gory picture. Their looks of disgust were an amusing sight to me.

In light of my advice and given how slow we were moving, Daryl, Rick, and Shane had had to get out multiple times to deal with the walkers in our way, which caused the whole convoy to come to a halt several times over. Thankfully, the three men were strong enough to deal with most issues without the use of their firearms which would have attracted even more walkers to the area. My rifle was ready and near me, actually lying lengthwise across the dash near the windshield. I doubt the manufacturers had ever intended it to be used for that purpose, but it worked.

At one such spot, Amy decided to question me about my past.

“So, Gothic, did you have a girlfriend or a wife before the world, you know, *ended*?” she asked with a smile, her body fully turned to face me as we waited for the convoy to move again.

I chuckled at the question but decided to give the question some thought and answer honestly.

“I wasn’t married, but I have/had a few girlfriends,” I admitted, thinking of my girls up on the ship and the ones I had left behind on the station. I hoped once again that Kira and Ro were doing all right in my absence and that the Collectors hadn’t attacked the station again.

“Girlfriends, with an ‘s’? Really? More than one?” she asked, sounding intrigued, but not repulsed.

“Yes, more than one,” I admitted. “And they all knew about each other. It wasn’t a secret.”

“Wow, you were quite the man whore, weren’t you?” she asked, still not looking offended.

“I proudly wear that badge of honor,” I replied with a wink.

In the rearview mirror I saw Andrea roll her eyes at my answer, but even she was smiling a little as she looked out the window.

“It must be torture. It’s probably been weeks since you’ve gotten any relief besides your own hand,” Amy said quietly. Andrea’s whisper yelled ‘Amy!’ came from the back. Amy just ignored her sister. “Those big balls are probably full. They’re probably sore.”

“Well...it hasn’t been easy,” I said, playing it up with a forlorn look on my face, a mix of sadness of longing, as I turned my head to meet Amy’s mischievous eyes for a moment, interested to see where this was going.

“Would you like me make it feel better, Gothic? Would you like me to choke myself on your big, hard cock?” Amy asked, reaching over the console between us to rub my quickly hardening cock through my dress pants.

“I- I think I’d like that, Amy,” I said.

At my affirmative answer, Amy got on her knees on her seat and leaned over the console, quick hands lowering my zipper and pulling the pants down, freeing my cock from my boxers. As my cock was fully exposed and growing even larger in her soft

hand, I heard two simultaneous gasps from the two blondes in my car.

“I told you he had that big dick energy, didn’t I?” Amy offered, glancing back at her sister with a bad girl smile, before she leaned over and took the head of my cock into her mouth, sucking softly on the head as her tongue swirled madly around it.

“That feels so good, Amy, thank you for looking out for my health and well-being,” I said as she started bobbing her head up and down my cock like she was a sex addict on a long dry spell, my head falling back against the head rest, my eyes closed as I enjoyed the pleasurable feelings she was giving me. She made a sound of affirmation even as her mouth was full of my cock.

Luckily for her, the previous owner of the vehicle had opted for a pretty aggressive dark tint on all the windows, so it was near impossible to see through the windows from the outside, not that I cared particularly if anyone saw. That kind of shame has been burned out of me halfway through day 1 on Risa.

Speaking of seeing us, my passenger in the back had been suspiciously quiet since that initial exclamation of shock, so I opened my eyes and looked into the rearview mirror. I was greeted with the sight of Andrea reclining in her seat, her pants open and hand moving gently in her panties as she fingered her little pussy, getting off on watching us. Our eyes locked and though I saw a hint of shame in them, mostly I saw lust and desire and slow acceptance that I was getting my cock sucked by her little sister, all the while I watched her frig her clit and

plunge her fingers inside her pussy in time with her sister's bobbing head.

While our eyes were locked, I turned up the music a little bit more to hide what she was doing in the back from her sister, to which she nodded shakily in thanks.

"I thought you said you were going to choke yourself on my dick, Amy," I mocked lightly. "Let me help you out there."

Then I threaded my fingers through her long blonde hair and forced her head down, chocking her on my cock. She shuddered in pleasure as I used her mouth like a fleshlight. I saw Andrea shudder in arousal at my tone and how I was using her sister, refusing to meet my eyes anymore in the rearview mirror.

"I'm going to cum in your pretty little mouth, Amy, don't waste any of it," I warned. "If you're a good little girl, maybe you'll even share it with your sister."

In the back I saw Andrea's body lock up and her eyes tightly closed as she shuddered in orgasm. At the same time I let loose in Amy's sweet little mouth and she swallowed repeatedly to catch it all. She shuddered in delight as the effect of my cum hit her like a drug.

Once I was done, she pulled up with a blissful smile on her face like she'd done a long line of cocaine.

"Why do I feel so good, right now?" she asked quietly.

"Because I'm an Augment, baby," I answered quietly, though I was positive she hadn't heard me.

I had no issue with her kissing me afterwards.



“I can’t wait for you to fuck me,” she said with a smile, before taking her seat and reclining it with a blissed out smile on her face, eager to glory in this feeling while it lasted.

“Whenever you want,” I answered.

The timing was perfect because the convoy started to move again.

**XXXXX**

**Center for Disease Control. Atlanta, Georgia. The Walking Dead universe.**

By the time we finally reached the CDC campus, the sun was getting lower and lower in the sky. The convoy had been excruciatingly slow, stopping over and over again for this or that, including at one point when Dale’s RV busted a hose and he needed to make yet another field repair on the thing with copious amounts of duct tape.

Going out at night during the zombie apocalypse was a death sentence. The dead didn’t sleep, and they were much harder to spot at night now that nighttime was so truly dark, especially on moonless or cloudy nights. I had advised the group that we should find a house or other area to hole up in for the night, coming at this fresh in the bright sunlight of morning, but I had been overruled as their excitement at being so close to their destination overrode their good sense, even Rick’s, who was normally very level-headed about things like that.

The area around the CDC building had probably been quite nice before the apocalypse, with plenty of greenery and trees, places

to sit and rest, maybe enjoy some lunch, tall downtown Atlanta buildings visible in the background. Now, though, it was a charnel house. Long shadows being cast by the setting sun.

During this state of emergency the military had fortified the entire surrounding area around the CDC to protect the researchers inside who were desperately looking for a cure for whatever this was, the country's last best hope of getting through this shit. The military had placed multiple military checkpoints to keep people out and to protect the researchers inside from any threats, complete with barricades and sandbag barrier walls. There had once likely been hundreds of soldiers placed here, mounted .50 caliber machine gun emplacements, and several Abrams tanks.

*It hadn't been enough.*

Bodies of half-eaten soldiers and civilians practically covered the ground like a macabre carpet, ripped apart bodies lying draped across barriers and sandbag walls, guts spilling out, blood spatter all over the place and the flies were like a thick moving fog in the air, their collective buzzing as they feasted on the corpses sounding so very, very loud in all our ears. The overwhelming smell of hundreds of bodies rotting in the hot summer air of Atlanta had several in our group throwing their guts up.

The whole group had left the convoy to approach the building on foot as we couldn't get through the barricades or bodies with the vehicles. Andrea and Amy formed up around me, Andrea holding her far too shiny pistol down, but at the ready. Amy

remained unarmed, which was not good in my opinion. I carried a large duffel bag across my back filled with supplies we might need, my rifle in my hands. My duffel bag would have been heavy for a civilian to carry, but even before I was enhanced I went on long patrols in Afghanistan with far more weight on my back. Now that I was an Augment, it felt like nothing.

As we walked around this horror show, not only was I looking for threats, but I was also looking for useful supplies and I hit the jack pot at a .50 caliber machine gun emplacement.

Thankfully, the soldiers here were carrying the standard issue M4 carbine which used 5.56mm NATO cartridges, which was exactly what my AR used. My more mercenary side was tempted to take all of the M4s, but I hardly had the capacity for something like that. The weight itself wasn't an issue, but all those rifles would be unwieldy and would restrict my movement, making me vulnerable.

A relatively intact male soldier with officer's bars was lying draped over a barricade with a large hole in the back of his head. Whether he had been bitten and committed suicide/been put down, a civilian had shot him, or he had been the victim of friendly fire in the chaos of their last stand I didn't know nor did I particularly care. The only thing I cared about was that all of his equipment looked in good condition and he had stuff I wanted, including something that I had hardly expected to find, a Surefire suppressor that I'd only seen Special Operations Command (SOCOM) operatives use.

Thankfully, this suppressor---never a silencer, since that was just ridiculous---*should* fit my AR-15, as it had what looked like a

universal adaptor. Seems like the men here had started to realize that the zombies were attracted to noise and had started to adapt, but I suspected that that realization had come a bit too late. It was also a specialized bit of equipment that only the special forces guys had, which meant it wouldn't be something that they had a lot of on hand. I put it in my pocket so that I could find it easier if needed.

“Andrea, Amy, cover me,” I said as I set my duffel bag down and slung my rifle to my back. Thankfully they understood as they faced away from me, scanning for threats while I had my attention elsewhere.

With little care for the corpse of this man, I quickly stripped him out of his tactical vest, the standard IOTV, and from the weight of it I could tell that the vest had the ceramic ballistic plate inserts inside, providing protection against projectile penetration. The attached holders for spare magazines, both rifle and pistol, were probably even more valuable to me and could be attached to the vest or my belt. No more would I be that asshole swapping magazines I kept in my pants pockets. Quickly putting it on, I stripped him of his M9 universal pistol belt and his M12 pistol holster which had a standard issue Sig Sauer M18 9mm pistol still inside.

Pulling out the pistol, I quickly ejected the magazine and found it full. Racking the slide open slightly, I put it up to my nose and took a sniff, not smelling any spent cordite, which meant this guy had not even fired it during the battle, which likely meant that it was in good working order. I tossed the belt and holstered

pistol into my open duffel bag, along with a full can of 5.56mm rifle cartridges and 9mm pistol rounds.

Spotting a female soldier who had half her face eaten, I stripped her of her vest and pistol belt.

“Amy, back up to me,” I said quietly, though she didn’t hear me or didn’t understand so I put my hand in the back of her pants and underwear and pulled her closer to me. She squeaked in surprise, but stayed still as I cinched the belt and pistol around her waist.

“Andrea, stay close, but find another female soldier, if you can. Make sure she’s all the way dead! Take a belt, holster, and tac vest off of them,” I ordered. “Amy, quickly grab any pistols you see and put them in the bag. Now. Move quickly.”

Both jumped to obey me and carry out my orders.

I looked and grimaced at the M2A1 .50 caliber machine gun that was just sitting there, but my greed knew some limits. Even with a carrying handle, the thing weighed nearly 90 pounds, which meant few but me could even carry the thing on their own.

Given the weight and recoil, it was only useful for fixed positions anyway. The ammo for this weapon would likely be near impossible to find outside a military base or a rare situation like this, so keeping it fully loaded would be a near impossible task. I also just didn’t have the fucking room for such a large weapon system in the Hummer And that was ignoring just how loud a .50 caliber bullet was. We’d attract every walker in a 5-mile radius if I fired this fucking thing.

Seeing Andrea and Amy weren't done yet, I looked around a bit more hoping to find something good and hit the jackpot. A suppressor and now a thumper, of all things?! Maybe Q was throwing me a bone. A thumper was the nickname many of brethren called the M79 40mm grenade launcher, a single shot, shoulder fired, break-action low recoil weapon system first introduced during Vietnam and seen in such movies as Terminator 2. It could fire a number of grenade types, including high explosive, anti-personnel, smoke, buckshot, flechette and illumination.

It looked brand fucking new, despite it probably being older than me, not even a nick on the glossy brown wood of the stock. I suspected this thing had sat in a dusty wooden crate at the back of some forgotten, just-in-case Reserve or Georgia National Guard armory and had come into service only because of the apocalypse, because why the fuck not. It was single shot, which meant a slow rate of fire and an inability to keep up a constant volume of fire during a firefight, which eventually saw it replaced by underbarrel grenade launchers like the M203 and other dedicated grenade launchers with high-capacity magazines.

I opened the breach and found an explosive round. An anti-personnel round would have probably been more useful, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

The girls returned dressed more appropriately for combat now. "Ladies, have you seen any ammo cans with this in it?" I asked, holding up the M79 grenade.

Amy nodded and quickly took off, struggling to bring back an open ammo can filled with explosive rounds. I quickly closed it up properly and put it into my bag. The thing must weigh over 200 pounds by now.

“Good girl,” I complimented, and Amy smiled happily. “On me now, we need to move,” I said. Amy had added nearly half a dozen pistols to the bag. I took off at a jog and they followed by my side.

Unfortunately while we had been doing our best to take advantage of the situation, the whole group had moved on without us and we were on our own. They’d have been well served to stock up on useful supplies in this rare opportunity, but that was the problem when working with civilians. Their priorities weren’t always straight, and they did not have the training to know any better.

I could see the group was already at the steel shuttered doorways to the building trying to open it up but were having no luck. My looted antique grenade launcher could probably get through those doors, but anything strong enough to breach these doors, would leave them permanently open, meaning any walker could waltz right in right after us, which would put us in severe danger.

When I reached the group I turned around, placing my back to the group, and started scanning for walkers, listening to their words as I protected them. I pulled out the suppressor and was trying to figure out how to attach it to the flash suppressor on

my rifle. Trying this in the field wasn't exactly ideal but needs must.

"There's nobody here," T'Dog said with regret.

"Then why are these shutters down?" Rick answered desperately.

"Walkers! Contact rear!" I warned the group, watching as a few walkers started heading in our direction. In these small numbers I didn't want to risk a rifle shot calling even more so I kept at my task. "Daryl, crossbow."

"Baby, come on," Lori begged Rick.

Daryl's stepped forward and a crossbow bolt penetrated deep into the nearby walker's skull, putting the former soldier down for good.

"You led us into a graveyard!" Daryl complained.

"He made a call," Shane defended Rick.

"It was the wrong damn call!" Daryl condemned as he shot another walker.

The suppressor attached securely with a satisfying click and I took my first shot, firing into the skull of a half torn apart civilian woman. The shot was significantly quieter than before, more like a loud clap than a shot that would be heard for miles around. I'm just glad the rifle hadn't exploded in my hands given I had attached the device in the . Praise be to Q and the Prophets.



“Just shut up. You hear? Shut up. Shut up!” Shane yelled. “Rick, this is a dead end.”

“Where are we gonna go?” Jacqui cried.

“Do you hear me? No blame,” Shane said.

“She's right. We can't be here, this close to the city after dark,” Lori, the voice of reason said.

“Fort Benning, Rick... Still an option,” Shane tried.

“We don't have the food or fuel to reach Fort Benning,” I calmly pointed out, taking a knee and killing multiple walkers with precision shots. “It's over 100 miles away.”

“125. I checked the map,” Glenn pointed out helpfully.

“Forget Fort Benning. We need answers tonight, now,” Lori said.

“We'll think of something,” Shane said.

“Regardless of our destination, we need to retreat from this area and regroup. We won't make it in the night,” I said. “We need to make this decision when we're not in combat, so I need everyone to calm, the fuck, down. This place will be here in the morning.”

“Gothic's right. Come on, let's go. Let's get out of here. Let's go. Please, Rick,” Shane begged.

I heard the lubricated servos of a camera moving, but I doubt anyone else did.

“All right, everybody back to the cars. Let's go. Move,” Shane ordered.

“The camera... it moved,” Rick pointed out desperately, literally and figuratively.

“I saw it too,” I lied, knowing how this all played out.

“It moved. It moved,” Rick yelled plaintively, whose emotions did not match the urgency of the situation. I had a feeling that Rick was at the end of his rope and needed a dose of normalcy, a time free of danger to get his head on straight again, even a short one, or else he'd have a nervous breakdown.

“Rick, it is dead, man. It's an automated device. It's gears, okay? They're just winding down,” Shane said quietly and calmly, trying to convince Rick to leave while they still could. “Now come on.”

“Man, just listen to me. Look around this place. It's dead, okay? It's dead. You need to let it go, Rick,” Shane tried again, knowing that as long as Rick wanted to stay, people would follow him.

Rick pounded hard on the metal shutters. I knew I needed to let this play out like it was supposed to. Rick's sincerity would convince the Doctor, whose name I had entirely forgotten, to open the security doors.

“Rick, there's nobody here!” Shane tried.

“I know you're in there. I know you can hear me,” Rick yelled.

Shane tried to drag Rick away from the door, this time with the help of Lori.

“Everybody get back to the cars now!” Shane ordered.

“Please, we're desperate. Please help us. We have women, children, no food, hardly any gas left,” he yelled, the naked and extreme emotion was hard to listen to.

“Rick. There's nobody here,” Lori tried gently, perhaps sensing that her husband was at the end of his proverbial rope.

“We have nowhere else to go,” Rick yelled pounding on the door again. “Keep your eyes open. Watch as we die. If you don't let us in, you're killing us! Please!”

My rifle continued to bark as I methodically killed each and every walker that approached, attracted to all the yelling that Rick was doing. My kill counter was down to 248 now.

“Come on, buddy, let's go. Let's go,” Shane said gently, like Lori sensing that Rick was having a moment.

“Please help us. You're killing us! You're killing us! You're killing us!” he cried.

As the group was about to drag the nearly psychotic man off, the security doors to the CDC recessed up, overwhelming the group with a bright artificial light the likes of which they probably hadn't seen since the world had ended.

Finally. Finally I could get some answers to justify being dropped in this world.

Hopefully.

Maybe.