

The hysteria left Echo a bigger ghost town than it already was. Now, only Flynn, his family, and the tetanus alley gang remained. It was a sad shell of its already miserable self. The heat was palpable, wavy mirages appearing whenever one looked. The harsh sunlight remained, a contrast to the horrible red dark skies that spread across the town during that terrible night. It continued providing to the plants—the only part of Echo that remained and wasn't rotten to the core.

And yet, Carl was calm. Jeremy always told him that sometimes, if you just tried hard enough, you'd see your entire life flash before your eyes and then something magical would happen. That was according to Keith—Jeremy just relayed that information to him. A *lot* of what the tetanus alley gang said was complete bullshit, but that night during the hysteria, the ram realized that Jeremy was *right*.

When everything was splayed out to him in that facsimile of Pueblo University, everything felt so much... smaller. Everyone—him included—was just a speck in the universe. Stardust floating across a vast space, and the worries that had been plaguing him for so long didn't die, but they at least lost their hold on him for the first time in his life. He wasn't ready for life—not at all. That graphics store was not hiring after the mess he made, but that was okay. He was just... existing—but doing so while making something out of that existence.

His mom finally agreed to let him study under something that he actually felt passionate about. Maybe she also saw her life pass through her eyes while she was away from him—although without the risk of losing her life. That was something he could always wear as some sort of comfort—he survived something.

Carl leaned further back into the chair, hoping that relaxing his posture would attract some more fish. He had caught two fishes, but Flynn was reeling them in like a madman in comparison.

Suddenly, his phone buzzed.

Chase: Hey. Picking you up at 7:00 pm. That okay?

Carl: yeah. just chillin with flynn

Chase: Cool.

Chase: Also change my name in your contacts.

Carl: already did lol

He sent Chase a screenshot, making sure to crop out the last message he had sent the otter; a full moon he took when he was high.

Chase: Okay. Don't change it again Carl because I swear to god if you forget that you did while you're high and then struggle to call me for hours I'm gonna lose it.

Carl: aye aye captain.

“Bored of fishing already?”

Carl turned to Flynn, a non-intoxicated smile painted on his lips. “Nah. Just Chase being a lil’ bitch about his name.”

“Ah, you mean some fucking otter you don’t know?”

“That’s the one.” Carl chuckled. “A bit of a shame that he left so soon. I would’ve liked him to be here.”

“You know how Chase is. Fuckers probably more interested in throwing a hissy fit over his project instead of sticking around.” Flynn hissed—his words tainted with insidious venom. “Fucker couldn’t even be bothered to visit even after they fixed his leg.”

“Eh. He’s probably dealing with some other shit. I think Leo’s been trying to contact him?”

“Of *fucking* course.” Flynn groaned. He threw the fishing rod at the floor, the fish it had hooked scurrying deep into the lake. He looked downwards at the desert floor, scowling at the small clumps of dust carried through the wind. “Can’t believe this shit. You’re doing this... great thing and everyone else has their head shoved up their own ass so far up that—”

“Woah, woah. Chill, man.”

“Ugh, I can’t! It’s just... shitty. It’s just so shitty, and don’t you fucking try to defend them!” Flynn quickly intercepted, shutting down Carl as the ram’s mouth hung open. “I know what Jenna fucking did.”

“I—”

“Don’t try to defend her. I fucking heard what she said to you. So fucking easy for her to give you shit and—”

“Flynn.” Carl firmly said, a newfound edge to his voice clamping the lizard’s lips shut and making his slit, emerald eyes go wide. “It’s fine. She was shitty about it, but... she had a point. I want to have a birthday party that I’m present for. I can’t hide away, especially from... my friends.”

“Sure, whatever. Dick move from your ‘friends’ to leave you here because they think they’re just ‘better’ than this town.”

“Anything’s better than this town, to be fair.”

Something was coming. Flynn was a ticking time bomb, but it’s because no one could defuse him—not after Sydney. Still, he remained quiet, continuing to look at the lake. Flynn had a problem, but so did he; he wasn’t in any place to judge.

“Not the *actual* soil and town. The people here. A lot of them were dicks, but not all of them. Some of them didn’t deserve what happened to them.” Flynn shoved his hands deep into his pockets, clearly attempting to hide the fact that he had balled them up into fists. “I just... They

didn't care about you, Carl. Leo, TJ, Jenna... fucking Chase," He couldn't help but say that last name with *ire* dripping from his words. "Just like always, I was the one that stepped up. Leo and Jenna always fucking complain' about them keeping the group together, but I *always*—"

"Flynn." Carl knew this was coming. It was supposed to be a fun getaway party, but even from the second that he saw Flynn waiting for him outside his house, the tension exuded by the lizard was impossible to miss. It made the air thick—a suffocating slow burn. "You need to calm—"

"Oh my god, Carl. Shut the fuck up! Just shut the fuck up!" Flynn roared like a beast, flailing his hands wildly as his screams overtook the harsh desert wind. "You can't just... *be* in Echo. You have to *try*. Every day, when you wake up and see the shithole of a town you're in, you have to *try* not just for yourself but for other people, and some people are too involved in their own bullshit to realize that."

Carl held his tongue, staying still as he hoped that Flynn would come to realize that his voice was cracking with each word.

"And what the fuck do you want me to do, huh?! Just... *accept* that you're just going to take people hurting you over and over again?! And you *thanking* them for it!?"

Carl was hurt. Everyone was. Echo was a town that had its tendrils wrapped around everyone's neck from the moment they were born, but Carl knew that his own problem went beyond that. He fueled those tendrils—helping them grow stronger with mindless indulgence, and psychedelics to just escape from his own life for just a few moments. Chase could've been dead in that car crash, and he still would've continued living inside his family castle—away from the consequences of his own actions.

"I-I dunno. It's just... Fuck, I gotta do *something*." Carl said, hitched breath and slumped shoulders. "I don't wanna be... *that* version of me. The one that..." He shuddered at the thought of James wriggling inside his body, turning him into a meat puppet—his subconscious launched into the deepest depths of his brain, a mere passenger in his own body. He allowed that bastard to use him so easily—all because it was easier than trying to resist.

"Well fuck, Carl. All of us want to be other people, but we can't have that, do we?"

"Why not?!" Carl felt like a little kid asking—his voice whiny and raspy. "Flynn, what the fuck is your problem?!"

"The fuck you mean 'why not?', shit's the way it is for a reason. You can't really do anything to change it. You can only make life hurt a little bit less." The gilla shoved his hands into his pocket, bitterly looking at the small lake. "That's how the world works, you fat fuck."

"Maybe it's how it works in Echo, but I dunno... I wanna start actually looking forward to things. Thinking that everything was shitty was what got me into that funk... I mean, I almost died—"

"We *all* almost died, Carl." He reminded the ram.

“Well, yeah. That’s the thing. Why do you want things to just be how they used to be? I mean, I’m okay with Jenna just kinda not vibing with me. Same with Leo. Shit’s gone, I guess.”

The gilla groaned painfully, rolling his eyes back in frustration. “What, did Jenna shove her hand up your ass? You yourself know that she thinks her psychology degree is enough to fix the world.”

“I mean, my mom does want me to go therapy—”

“That’s. Not. The. *Point*, Carl.” Flynn huffed, a red tint slowly beginning to spread across his face. His palms were sweaty and he sounded as if he was going to run out of air at any second. “You can do whatever the fuck you want! You *should*, but I don’t want you bending over backward for the fuckers that left us to rot all those years ago. They don’t deserve to be forgiven. I mean, what the fuck, didn’t Jenna try to stab you?!”

“THAT WASN’T HER!”

Carl didn’t even realize that he had begun crying. *Oh. Oh my god.* God, he felt like a fucking loser. Even now, he was breaking down over the smallest shit. How was he supposed to even get out of Echo if he was still such a mess? He *wanted* to—he wanted it so *much*—but right now, it felt like he had walked a hundred steps back after taking one forward.

“It wasn’t her...” He reiterated, his voice faint as a whisper. “It was... our families. I don’t want to be mad or sad all the fucking time, man...”

Flynn suddenly froze. He was still breathing hastily, each huff sounding like the breathing of a rabid, feral monster. The gilla stood tall, towering over him with an unreadable expression.

Was it ire? Pity? Maybe a mix of both? Carl could conclude that he *hated* his own inability to read people.

“It’s not... Fuck. Okay, shit. I mean, I just heard about what you were talking about with Chase and just assumed that she tried to hurt you during the hysteria. What do you mean it wasn’t her?” Flynn was practically shrinking as he spoke, rubbing the spines on the back of his head awkwardly. “I mean, Raven and Chase were talking about some crazy shit in the police station...”

“It’s complicated.” That’s the simplest way that he could explain everything. Even *he* didn’t understand how things fully happened. He just knew that James Hendricks was probably gone for good and whatever thing was keeping him in his house wasn’t there anymore. “Just... I swear it wasn’t her. It was her body, but it wasn’t her.” Saying it out loud made Carl cringe. He sounded just like one of the junkies from the Tetanus Alley. “You believe me, right?”

“Looked like her... but it *wasn’t* her?” Flynn’s face contorted into an uncomfortable grimace. “Yeah... I think that I can imagine that. I still don’t know what happened on my end either so, uh...” The gilla bit his lip, awkwardly looking away from the ram. “...Can you like, stop crying now?”

The bluntness of the request stopped Carl dead in his tracks. The ram looked at Flynn, mouth open for a few seconds before a dry, wheezing cackle escaped his lips. Saliva flew out of his mouth as he coughed mid-laughter, slowly stumbling back and leaning against Flynn's van for support.

"What the fuck? D-did I say something funny?!"

It was the first time that Carl had seen Flynn genuinely caught so off guard in a long time. The only time that he ever saw him so unsure of himself was when Flynn got put on the spot during one of his financially overblown childhood birthday parties after Chase asked him if he had a crush on anyone. He became a lot more closed about what he thought after that. Carl felt like a dick for finding the memory funny, but seeing someone that was so closed off acting like... like *him* made the ram chuckle a bit.

"Maybe? You really should think about going to therapy." He said as a half jab, half genuine suggestion. "It'll help you to stop saying things like that."

"Well what the fuck else was I supposed to say, fatass?!"

"Definitely anything other than telling the guy who's starting to cry to not cry."

"Oh, fuck you." Despite his words, it was clear that Carl's sudden laughter had become infectious. "And... I just didn't want you to feel like you owed them anything. Like, they didn't stop talking to you because you did anything wrong." Flynn looked uncomfortable in his own skin. Every word that came out of his mouth sounded strained—as if he was puking them out instead of speaking them. "You know that, right?"

"Why do you as—"

"Carl, I swear to god. Answer the fucking question or I'm throwing your fat ass into the leech-infested lake."

"Yes!" He said, having finally come back to find the lizard's faux frustration almost endearing—just like the old days. "Same goes for you, by the way. I know that you'll be *heartbroken* that you won't get to cook for my fat ass anymore."

"That does leave a big gap on my schedule, now that you mention it," Flynn said, eyelids half-ridden down and a smile underneath. "A *massive* one, actually."

"For shame. Time for you to find someone else to cook for while I'm gone, then. Maybe Jer—"

"You better not finish that sentence, Carl."

"Noted."

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The sound of the diner's fluorescent neon sign reached them even inside. Flynn always said that it wasn't definitively up to code and that it was bound to cause a fuse to go off, but Carl

always thought that it made the diner feel even cooler. Specifically, it had a good *aesthetic*—every time that Carl said that word, Flynn would tell him to get his ass out of social media because only pretentious people and people obsessed with social media said that word.

“What is even the point of pink lemonade? It’s just lemonade with more sugar.”

“Tastes better when ti doesn’t make you scrunch up your face like *this*.” Carl pushed his lips into his mouth and closed his eyes, feigning pain before turning his expression back to normal.

“Seriously. You put a concerning amount of lime on your salads.”

“It gives them flavor. It’s a *sophisticated* taste.”

“The only sophisticated thing is pink lemonade, actually.”

“Oh, shove it with your faggy drink. Next time cut to the point and just order a milkshake.”

Carl chuckled. “Maybe. Don’t think they’re gonna sell pink lemonade on the Pueblo Campus, so that’s why I went with it.”

“Are you gonna miss your normal food, then?”

Carl stopped reaching for his glass, looking at Flynn. He had thought that maybe something like this would come up eventually, but he didn’t expect Flynn to be one that ripped off the bandaid. “Yeah.” He said bluntly. “I’m gonna miss your food. I’m gonna miss you.”

“Good. You at least know that you’re losing something good by leaving the town.” Flynn sank onto the booth cushion, cringing at how the leather had begun to rip off and having the filling push up against his back. “Just know that if you want to take online classes or some dumb shit like that, you just do it. No asking your mommy, your daddy or—”

“Yes. Yes. I won’t let Big Bad Chase boss me around. You *really* dislike him, huh?”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“Whatever floats your boat, Flynn—”

The pair suddenly turned around at the sound of a blaring car horn. Immediately, they recognized the vehicle showing under a shower of neon as Chase’s. It was as beat up as they remembered it—apparently, someone hotwired and crashed it during the hysteria. No one knew who, but all of them had an inkling that it was Duke.

“Shit.” Flynn mumbled under his breath. “Fuck, he arrived early. We didn’t even get to—”

“Hey.” Carl suddenly reached for the gilla, placing his hoof around his shoulder. Carl never did comment on how well Flynn was—too afraid of ever corrupting the only good thing in his life. Now, at the precipice of everything, he was ready to live a rife with risk and reward.

“Flynn.”

“...What?”

Carl planted his lips against Flynn's. He didn't want to make the diner worker witness two guys tonguing each other, so he simply gave the lizard a small peck. He felt like a dumb middle schooler playing the bottle—a rush of feelings that he thought impossible to get once he fell into the pit he had been stuck in for years now exploding. He could feel Flynn warming up underneath him, and fuck, it was the cutest thing that the ram had ever seen. It felt different than the time they had sex. It was like a gentle wave gently washing over him, waking him up not too forcefully.

Immediately, Flynn covered his mouth and looked away. The sound of his nails scratching against the paper plate where his sandwich was on joined the cheesy, 80s music coming from the boombox.

“Good luck, you fucking stupid fatass.” He whispered, still looking away.

“Thanks... I'll call you when I unpack.”