

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

Last time on The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Unknown Universe. Somewhere on Earth's surface.

Coming to consciousness was again a slow and rather aggravating process considering how good I normally felt as an Augment. My head was pounding, and I felt groggy again like I had gone on an all-night bender with the boys and was now suffering the requisite hangover. Being an Augment normally meant I never had to deal with those kinds of consequences anymore.

In fact, this felt exactly like I had upon waking up in that club in Fort Lauderdale in the Flight of the Navigator dimension, including the lack of any kind of connection with my armor, my omnitool, my ship, and my other resources.

Why Q delighted in moving me from my ship to the planet's surface, suppressing my Augment abilities, and turning off all my technology, I didn't know. Maybe he was fucking with me? Always a possibility. Maybe he was protecting me somehow from the dimensional transit in some manner? Also a possibility. Maybe it had something to do with keeping my arrival low key in whatever universe this was? Other high-level beings like Q may be able to detect us arriving. Bottom line is that I had no idea, and it was probably ridiculous to even speculate about it given how little information I had to go on.

Slowly opening my crusty eyes I found myself looking up into the sky. Nice fluffy clouds, a blue sky, only a single star visible. That didn't narrow the list of planets I could be on, but as Q had said I would know the various dimensions he put me on, my money was on this being Earth again.

While I hadn't noticed it before, there was a low, continuous cacophony of noise, like low groans and the shuffling of many feet. What the fuck was that?

Looking around I figured I was on my back, and there were raised walls on all sides of me.

Was I in a truck bed??

Just as I had programmed it in case Q pulled this bullshit again, my omnitool activated after detecting it had been deactivated through unknown means and was following the pre-programmed steps of reactivating my synaptic transceiver, which brought online my connection to my omnitool, then my connection to the ship which was in orbit again.

Vicinity scans detected a ton of fucking movement all around me, but no detectable life signs, which was really strange, so I decided to sit up and take a look for myself.

Sitting up and glancing around, I used all of my self-control and all of the self-discipline I'd achieved from being in pitched combat for years on end, to keep myself from yelling in surprised shock at what I was seeing all around me. Then just as quickly, laid back quietly, hoping I hadn't been detected.

I could be on the bridge of my luxurious starship, but no, no, that wasn't good enough for Q who was definitely fucking with me right now. What purpose could there be other than fucking with me when he placed me in the back of a disabled pickup truck on a highway, lying in its cargo bed, abandoned vehicles all around, while also all around me, surrounding me even, were what were quite obviously hundreds, maybe even thousands of decaying and mindless zombies, walking mindlessly in a large herd looking for prey.

Fucking Q!!

The Adventures of Augment Gothic

Chapter 46

Unknown Universe. Somewhere on Earth's surface.

It really was a beautiful day, I thought, as I stared up into the blue sky while lying on my back, wisps of white fluffy clouds in the sky moving slowly across my field of vision, sunlight gently falling on my face. The temperature was 90 plus degrees, and the wind was gently blowing, the leaves rustling. Unfortunately, that's where the day quickly went to shit as the wind carried the scents of thousands of rotting corpses and the hot temperature and bright sun probably wasn't helping in that regard. For a normal human the smell would be disgusting, even repugnant, for an Augment like me with an enhanced sense of smell, it was damn near intolerable.

It really was a beautiful day, I thought, but now trying to breathe through my mouth more. Once my armor came back online and I could deploy it fully, I'd use my air filter originally designed to protect me from toxic gases. Under normal circumstances I imagine that there would be the lovely sounds of birds, the symphony of insects, but no, all I could hear were the shuffling steps, and the moans and groans of the dead walking aimlessly around, searching for living prey to infect and devour.

'Jarvis, you there, buddy?' I asked mentally, still getting no response to my inquiries.

What the fuck was going on? My mental connection to my omnitool and my ship was there, I could feel it in the back of my mind, but it was like something was actively interfering with it, as there was no data throughput, which should have been impossible given the quantum entangled communications technology. Bringing my arm around, I found my omnitool had activated, but only the most basic functions were available. The display and local sensors were working, but nothing else and my armor's systems were not responding to my status inquiries or commands, nor could I communicate with my ship and beam the fuck out of here.

'Is Q fucking with me?' I thought moments before a really poorly drawn 2d rendering of a decaying zombie, its low-resolution face stuck in a toothy snarl, appeared in the middle of my field of vision, like a game image straight from a 1980s Nintendo 8-bit video game. The image was accompanied by an over-the-top growl sound effect in the midi style. Oh, and my chaos meter had reset to 0%.

My eyes widened comically as an "x 500" appeared to the right of the zombie graphic. The implication was relatively clear. In terms of game logic consistent with the age of the graphics Q

had used, I needed to kill 500 zombies in order to be allowed access to my armor and to be able to return to my ship. Under normal circumstances, maybe not a huge deal, assuming that I had all the advantages in weapons and armor and technical capabilities I had spent so much time and money developing, but I had no such access at the moment. And frankly, I had no idea what post-apocalyptic zombie universe I was in. There were so many of them to choose from. The fact that these zombies were walking around in the sunlight did eliminate universes like *I Am Legend*, though.

Tapping various commands into my omnitool, I kept trying to activate my armor systems, trying to force a restart using several of the emergency activation subroutines I'd installed in the last universe that this had happened. To my complete lack of surprise, this wasn't a technical issue, so nothing I tried worked. Unless I underwent a spontaneous apotheosis into Godhood right this moment and was granted reality warping finger snaps of my own, this was a lost cause.

What was I even wearing, I thought, as I looked down. Was I wearing an honest-to-God tuxedo of all things? Why? Just why?!

'Fuck you, Q! Dropping me into an unknown zombie universe, in the middle of a zombie herd, wasn't enough, I have to have a mother fucking handicap?!' I mentally growled, feeling increasingly frustrated and increasingly...*unwell*...if I had to put a word to it, which was making me say things I normally wouldn't when talking to a cosmic-level God-being like Q. Something was definitely wrong with me.

The being might have a great sense of humor, but Gods were fickle beings at the best of times and didn't tolerate disrespect lightly. I only had vague memories of being sick from when I was a normal human and hadn't been sick a single day since I'd been upgraded. By this point in the *Flight of the Navigator* universe I had already been feeling more like myself, so what the fuck was going on?? A terrible thought occurred to me, but I didn't have the guts to give it voice, so instead, I lashed out.

'You hear me, go fuck yourself!'

As if the multiverse was reminding me that speaking that way to a God was a supremely bad idea, a bright orange light collapsed from all edges of my vision till it shrunk, adding a zero to the 'x 500' to form a '5,000.' I gulped fearfully and forced myself to calm down and focus, which was surprisingly difficult, given I was now seemingly required to kill 5,000 zombies because I had mouthed off. That was a very daunting and very dangerous number, especially with the restrictions I was seemingly operating under.

'I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm not feeling like myself,' I begged/pleaded/explained in the quiet of my mind. 'Whatever you think is appropriate is A-ok with me!'

The zombie graphic and number slowly shrunk to the bottom right corner of my field of vision, before it almost grudgingly reduced back to 500 and my omnitool's sensors began providing me limited basic information on my surroundings, but with all of its high-level functionality disabled. It was clear that while Q had forgiven me, at least a little, he wasn't going to be letting me fully off the hook, which might be the best I could actually hope for given the circumstances.

Lifting my head, I took in more of my immediate surroundings, while also removing the ridiculous bowtie around my neck and tossing it aside. The side walls of the truck bed were noticeably higher than normal, as the most likely long dead previous owner of the truck appeared to have been a tradesman or was someone handy enough to want to purchase those saddle style tool chests that you could mount on the side of a truck bed to store the tools someone needed when at a job site.

Lucky for me, these mounted tool chests were making it much harder for the still passing herd of zombies to realize that I was there. Unluckily, these tool chests were meant to be accessed when standing *outside* the truck, so I had no smorgasbord of potential weapons to use to defend myself. Luckily, this was the zombie apocalypse and the extreme circumstances had obviously meant what orderly storage scheme of tools the truck's previous owner had once adhered to had broken down, like society itself, as there were several loose tools that had either come loose during some evasive maneuvers or were hastily thrown in the truck bed when the former owner had fled.

The previous owner had likely tried to escape a major city and gotten caught in this traffic jam on what was obviously a highway, if I was reading what my sensors were telling me. Lifting my head, I found several tools I immediately discarded as unsuitable for weapons, before deciding on an 8-inch-long Phillips head screwdriver and a 14-21 inch telescoping lockable lug wrench made of a chrome vanadium steel. Both had ergonomic grips which was a big part of why I had chosen them. The screwdriver would be perfect for deep penetration into the brain of a zombie, assuming that trope applied in this universe, and the lug wrench would give me the opportunity for a little blunt force trauma at more distance. The lug wrench was made of a high-quality hardened steel meant to survive extreme torque and pressure, but only God knew how long it'd hold up to this kind of abuse. It was a lug wrench, not a fucking medieval morningstar meant to crush skulls.

I wasn't afraid or unskilled at close quarters combat, but only a fool gets so up close and personal when they can kill from a distance with far less danger to themselves.

Now armed, by some *very* loose definition of the word, considering the advanced weapons I normally wielded, I focused my full attention back on my short-range sensors. The herd of zombies that had previously been all around me had mostly moved on, continuing their endless death march down the highway looking for prey, but there were several dozen stragglers that formed the tail end of this mob that were still all around me. My plan was to simply wait silently until they passed me by before I got out of this truck and figured out just where the hell I was.

Of course, that's exactly when my luck changed, and so did the wind, I later realized. Some tall fucking Billy Bob-esque zombie mother fucker, in an honest to God set of hillbilly denim overalls, shoulder straps and all, started sniffing loudly and was tall enough to turn and look down into the truck to see me lying there. So these fuckers could hunt by smell, good to know, because I sure as shit had been quiet.

My left hand holding the Phillips head screwdriver arced up quickly and penetrated deep into the hillbilly zombie's eye socket up to the handle itself. The zombie went limp and fell as I pulled

the screwdriver out, squelching, crimson red blood covering the metal and me to a degree, but it beaded off which suggested my clothes were made with 24th century fabric technology. My zombie counter ticked down a digit to read 499, confirming my original suspicion regarding what it meant. I sighed at this, but wisely, I felt, kept my mouth shut and my thoughts free of Godly recrimination.

Unfortunately, killing one of them attracted the attention of the several dozen zombies all around, as they began converging on the pickup truck. Thankfully, the tall tool chests mounted to the sides of the truck bed kept the vectors of attack limited to the tailgate area of the truck, naturally funneling them. Since the game was up, I jumped to my feet, swaying a little. Now I knew something was really wrong with me as perfect balance was part and parcel of the Augment enhancement package.

Staying out of range of the grasping hands of four or five zombies currently trying to eat me, I swung with all my might at the head of one of them. While I wasn't feeling great, my strength was still enough for this job as its head was literally ripped from his body and a fountain of blood erupted from the open neck. While I was normally a fan of overkill, there was also something to be said about getting the job done with a minimum expenditure of energy. And that only made sense given how unusual I was feeling.

Given how tightly packed they were, I used my screwdriver more than the lug wrench to deal the finishing blows, with quick deeply penetrating thrusts through the skull bone and into the brain, and quick retreats to keep my hand and arms away from rotting teeth that sought to bite and tear at my exposed flesh, flesh that my armor would have always protected, I thought but stopped before I got in trouble for it. They dropped like their strings had been cut, but there were always more to take their place.

I fell into a rhythm of slaughter, killing (or re-killing?) zombie after zombie near the tailgate as inhumanly strong hands tried to grab at me from all directions, keeping me in the middle of the truck bed. A few swings of my lug wrench on hands and arms that managed to grasp my ridiculous outfit snapped and shattered bones and left the dead limbs unable to function properly, which suited me just fine. The lug wrench also took a sharp turn at the end to attach to the tire, but it had proven useful in 'hooking' zombies behind the neck to pull them closer for a stab with my screwdriver, or to penetrate the top of the skull with a hard enough overhead swing.

Unfortunately, the undead didn't give a shit about their losses and just kept coming. Doubly unfortunately, was that each zombie I killed fell to the ground where they stood and a ramp of undead flesh had accidentally been created, each zombie adding to and solidifying the platform which meant that they could be stepped upon to reach me up in the truck bed. At many points during this battle I had wished for my weapons, but this was perhaps the moment I really, really regretted not being able to just vaporize these fuckers and be done with it.

Slowly, but steadily, I was pushed back to the cab of the truck, the dead climbing upon the ones I'd already put down to reach me in the truck. I Spartan kicked several of them, hoping to create some distance and prevent another ramp from being created, but their bodies, already weakened from decay, mostly came apart from the great force of my kick, rather than being pushed back

and away from me. Eventually I had to back up yet again and climb up onto the roof of the truck cab itself.

Taking a quick glance around at my surroundings, I was dismayed to find that all the fighting I had engaged in had attracted many of the zombies and they practically surrounded the truck now on all sides. The many bodies of the dead were pressing up against the body of the truck, all desperately trying to reach me, which caused the truck to start rocking back and forth, further worsening my position. This wasn't strategy, though, this was just a useful accident on their part as they mindlessly tried to get at me with no regard for their fellows in their way.

While it galled me to do so, a strategic retreat might just be the best I could hope for under these conditions.

I had already killed 140 zombies, according to the counter, making a substantial dent in my 'kill quota', but this situation was turning against me quickly and one slip up was all it would take for them to pile on me and tear me apart. If I had my armor, they could tear at it till their fingernails and fingers tore off, but I was much more vulnerable without it, which is probably why Q took it away in the first place. One on one, even twenty to one, under the right conditions, and they'd be no true threat to me, but quantity had a quality all its own.

The truck was on a highway, surrounded by other abandoned vehicles, but like many highways, off to the side were some visible trees and one of those paneled fences meant to reduce road noise and to prevent animals from crossing onto the highway and getting struck by vehicles. There were several breaches in it I could see, way further down, but the section near me was relatively intact which would slow down or discourage pursuit, at least that's what I hoped. Again, I still had no idea what universe I was in or how persistent these zombies would be in chasing after me. Taking a running leap in the few feet I had available to me on top of the truck's roof, I jumped the 20 feet or so distance, clearing the mass of snarling zombies, the fence, and landing in a forested area clear of zombies. For a normal human that jump would have been impossible, for an Augment, easily doable.

My short-range sensors were extremely limited at the moment, so I picked a direction at random and started running at about 25 miles per hour through the woods. My only thought was to get away from the highway for now and hopefully lose the interest of the zombies there.

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Jogging around an abandoned post-apocalyptic American suburb was a bizarre and jarring experience, I found. The constant hustle and bustle of activity, cars driving, kids playing, dogs barking, people cutting their grass, or washing their cars, was something you unconsciously tuned out most of the time. But when it was absent, well, it was noticeable and jarring in its absence. As I lightly jogged down the empty roadway, the silence was really messing with my head. The abandoned cars, pools of dried blood, and ripped apart corpses that littered the area really didn't help, though several of the cars had water that I drank freely from. I searched here and there, but so far, none of the cars had anything else usable.

From the condition of several American flags hanging here and there on houses and on flagpoles, it must be the early days of the zombie apocalypse, because they were relatively intact and in decent condition overall. The various grass lawns were overgrown, definitely, but were not the result of months or years of neglect either. If he had to guess, he'd estimate a few weeks to a month or two at most. The mail confirmed it.

Inspecting the mail that was still in several homes' mailboxes told me that I was in Atlanta, in the state of Georgia, in the United States. The last postmark on a small sampling of mail, coupled with the temperature, told me that it was probably summertime.

Thankfully, the standard grid layout of a suburban neighborhood was ideal in preventing large groups from forming together and moving as one, which meant there were plenty of targets for me to silently shank in the back of the head. Q might have taken my armor and weapons away, but I was still an Augment, even as diminished as I was.

Silently stalking up to the next small herd of fifty or so zombies---I had already taken out a few smaller ones like this---I used the overgrown grass to muffle my footsteps. My silent stalking must have been successful as the trailing zombie I was hunting didn't even turn around, never realizing it was being hunted, as I quickly thrust my Philips head screwdriver deep into the back of its skull. Like a puppet with its strings cut, the reanimated body went limp and fell. Catching it, I quietly lowered the now *truly* dead zombie to the overgrown grass, then moved onto my next target. I killed 6 more of this small group, none of them realizing that their numbers were being systematically thinned as they shambled mindlessly down the sidewalk of this once rather nice suburban neighborhood.

As I went to silently take out the 13th zombie of this small group, things predictably went to shit. Threading my fingers through and gripping the long dreadlocks of the next zombie, I jerked its hair back, hoping to efficiently bring it into position for another screwdriver kill shot as well as to ensure it fell where I wanted it to, onto the soft grass to keep its death quiet. Unfortunately, I had not taken into account that the hair and scalp of a zombie, dead for some time now, slowly rotting in the sun and heat, was not strong enough for what I had intended. So instead of being jerked back into the perfect position to be killed quietly, I had, instead, *ripped* its scalp clean off with a disgusting squelching sound. The sound the zombie made gave the game up and the rest of the herd turned as one to me.

Tossing the disgusting bloody scalp to the ground, I spartan kicked the now hairless zombie into the herd, knocking several over, smiling grimly at the group of zombies as I moved between them. With my left hand I stabbed and with my right I bludgeoned and caved in skulls, ducking back whenever one of their hands was going to wrap around my clothes to grip me. In a minute they were all dead, well, almost all.

Looking down at the young female zombie who was still groaning and biting and reaching out to me, I saw that her head had been partially caved in, but just not enough to kill her. From her age and the clothes that she was wearing, she looked like a college student. My lug wrench had obviously caused enough brain damage to interfere with her motor functions, but not enough to actually permanently end her.

“I’m sorry that this happened to you,” I said quietly. While fighting them and killing them, I had had little time nor inclination to consider that these—things—used to be living people, with their own lives and stories, desires and loves. “This is the only mercy that I can give you.”

With little more remorse, I brought my foot down on its skull, collapsing it under my foot, putting it out of its misery and silencing it forever. It was definitely time to get out of here. The end of my fight with this last herd had been loud and I could already hear more zombies converging on my location.

My remaining zombie count was sitting at 298, which meant that I had a lot more killing to do before I would be allowed to return to my ship and the comfort of my armor and modern weapons. It seriously felt like I was fighting in my pajamas here. How did Starfleet do it? I felt so vulnerable in this get up.

My priorities were neatly rearranged in the next moment as my stomach let out a loud groan of discomfort and I started to feel acute hunger pangs. The last time I had felt this hungry was when I had first been taken out of stasis back on the *Enterprise*. My sensors hadn’t been able to tell me if Q had gone full authenticity when he had disabled my armor and also disabled the other advantages the nanites in my body provided me.

The Collector energy cells I had surgically grafted into my body, primarily for the purpose of powering my armor systems, were just as useful in supplying my body its significant energy needs that would traditionally be taken care of through eating and drinking. This was a way to overcome a pretty significant weakness of my enhanced biology. Essentially, my nanite network would constantly supply my body with the water and energy it needed to keep running at peak efficiency even if I didn’t eat or drink in the normal manner. I could be dropped on a desert planet with no food and water and be perfectly fine as my nanites would essentially replicate what my body needed to stay alive and at peak strength. I was quite proud of that technical achievement.

Being an Augment was incredible most of the time, but the enhanced caloric requirements were no joke. With modern replicators it was easy to keep on top of, on an Earth in 20th and 21st century, also easily handled if you had enough money on hand. In a post-apocalyptic world, well, it could be a pretty big problem given scarce resources. As we were still in the early days of all this, these homes all around me probably had plenty of food and water squirreled away. As this was America, and the state of Georgia, acquiring guns should also be relatively easy, hopefully.

Sighing, I used my enhanced hearing to find a relatively quiet direction and loped in that direction, cutting through yards and jumping fences in search of supplies.

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The ultra-modern and chic looking house that I had selected for my first bit of zombie apocalypse looting was really quite nice and probably would sell for a few million dollars at this point in the timeline. It was in a relatively isolated area where each home had quite a bit of land to it, so the homes were spread out and thus the zombie density was commensurately lower as

there had been fewer people here to turn and also fewer reasons to draw zombies from outside the area.

This particular home was alone at the end of a street and on a cul-de-sac and butted up against a large, wooded area, which might be a large park, or some kind of nature preserve. That should also help in ensuring the number of zombies in the area were lower.

Jogging up to the house, I quite liked the pattern made by the brick pavers in the driveway. The owners of this place had great taste. Even the lawn looked perfect still, which confused me for a moment before my sensors told me that it was an artificial surface like astroturf. I could respect that. Perhaps they were busy people and didn't ascribe to all the work and water it took to keep a lawn in good condition.

Unsurprisingly for a house this large, it had a 3-car garage, which made me wonder if I should actually grab a car for myself. The place was dark, but that wasn't an issue since it was mid- to late afternoon and there was still plenty of sunlight left in the day. The house had an extensive array of modern looking solar panels on the roof, which suggested it might even have its own power still. That would be a lucky find!

Rather than going to the front door, which I could see was closed, I circled to the back of the property. At the back was a lovely in ground pool and hot tub combination, an outdoor grill and covered patio, with a black metal railing enclosing it all with a nice view of the wooded area behind the house itself. The land quickly fell at a steep angle which would make it difficult for zombies to travel up that way. There were sun loungers out with pillows still on top of them neatly arranged and intact. If you ignored the sight of the pool and hot tub with some debris and leaves floating on the surface, you'd almost not realize that the house was abandoned, and that this world was in the middle of a zombie apocalypse.

The entire back wall of the house was made of glass, allowing virtually the entire expanse to slide open and recess into the wall to remove the divider between the house and the pool area. It really was a nice house.

Walking up to the closed sliding glass door, I readied myself to break the glass to get inside before I stopped myself and instead gently pulled on the door. It slid open effortlessly, which made me chuckle at myself. I was about to break the door open when the fucking thing was unlocked. Sometimes the simplest solutions were the best ones.

Stepping inside the house I was again impressed at the decorating of this home's former owners. On the far left was a door leading into an in-law suite, bright and airy, with a made-up bed, bright white comforter, pretty art on the wall and a large walk-in closet. The main living room was open concept, two stories tall, and leading into a large kitchen. On the left was a dining room and on the right was a sitting area with comfortable-looking couches and armchairs, surrounding a large 10-foot rectangular fireplace.

The kitchen itself was also lovely with a huge island, with a waterfall edge, made of a pretty white marble with veins of color running through it. On the right, built into the wall itself, was a large fridge that I could hear was still running, which suggested the solar panels on the roof were

still supplying power to the whole house even when the rest of society broke down. Without regular maintenance and new parts available, assuming the inhabitants of this house didn't draw too much power from the system, it could last for a few years before something inevitably broke. If I was a survivor in this world, finding a place like this would be ideal, though it was lacking in the way of defenses.

Standing still I listened carefully for any sign that a zombie was in the house. There was the faintest of sounds, but that could just as likely be the house flexing in the bright sunlight and heat of the day. A house like this would have excellent sound insulation, so who knows if I'd even be able to hear anything. In this situation, it might be a good idea to sound the dinner bell and let any zombies come to me.

On full alert, I carefully and quietly walked through the kitchen and towards the front of the house by the front door, weapons in hand. To the left was a washroom and a doorway presumably leading to the garage. I slowly opened the door and turned on the light. Three vehicles were present inside the garage, including a Porche, a Mercedes 7 series, and a full-sized silver metallic Hummer H2 Luxury with a heavy-duty grill guard on the front. While the Hummer was likely going to be terrible on gas, it was a vehicle designed for durability and off-roading. It was also a flex fuel vehicle, which meant that it could also run on a gasoline and ethanol blend which may be more available in the various gas stations around as not many cars could use it. That grill guard would also be ideal to knock some walkers out of the way.

Turning off the light, I went back into the house. Nothing had jumped out at me yet.

The foyer was a brightly lit two story affair, light and airy. Sitting there, in the corner, though, looking like it had just been delivered, was a Steinway & Sons Grand Concert Piano that looked like it might be a family heirloom, but was in excellent condition. These guys must have been old money to have something like this just sitting in the house like a decoration. Luckily the piano was set up in a corner of the foyer, the bench set up so that my back would be a wall.

Grinning at the silly idea that had popped into my head, I sat on the black, highly polished piano bench and carefully set my weapons down atop its highly polished surface, careful to not scratch the wood, but also leaving them perfectly placed to pick them up quickly and use them if needed.

Unnecessarily cracking my knuckles, I placed my fingers carefully on top of the ivory of the keys, stroking them gently, almost lovingly, before beginning to play Vivaldi's Summer from the Four Seasons, at least the more energetic portion of it. Letting my fingers dance delicately across the keys, I paused at various points to listen if anything was coming my way, before continuing to play. One of the first things I had done during my instrument learning phase as a new Augment was to learn to play the piano, something that I had always wanted to do but had never done. Of course, I had never imagined I would be using those new skills to essentially try to summon zombies, but my life was a crazy adventure these days.

I had no idea if the former owners of this place had played the piano or they simply had enough money to keep this piano maintained, but it was perfectly in tune. No zombies had come shuffling towards me as I finished the last loud notes of Vivaldi's famous work.

While I wanted to immediately check out what was in the fridge to satiate the emptiness of my stomach, hard won lessons from my time in Iraq, Afghanistan, and on Bajor during the Occupation forced me to methodically search the house for dangers before I settled down and let my guard down, even a little.

I went from room to room looking for any potential dangers as well as any useful items that could help me achieve my goal of getting back to my ship. Every room I went to was clean and devoid of any dangers. In fact, this place looked like it had been readied for a photo shoot in some magazine for home decor, it was that clean and organized and well appointed.

Going upstairs I found three bedrooms, the two guest bedrooms, while again looking clean and unoccupied, with made beds as well, were empty. The main bedroom had a sitting room that overlooked the main living room and I could see the blue pool through the many windows on the back wall of the house. Turning back to the second floor, there was a doorway leading into the master bedroom area that was closed.

Unlike every other room in this entire house, this was the first closed door that I had encountered, which meant that if there was a zombie in these rooms, the closed door would have prevented it from coming when I had loudly played the piano, hoping to entice any zombies in the house to come forth and try to eat me. I quietly pressed down on the lever style doorknob and pushed it open, jumping back to give me room in case something jumped out at me, weapons in hand, ready to kill.

Nothing. Still quiet.

Walking carefully down the dark hallway, there was a door on the right leading to an empty bathroom, and a door on the right, leading to a large walk-in closet. In the corner of the closet was a large 6 foot safe which was very promising and something I would definitely need to check out once I was finished with my sweep of this floor.

At the end of the hallway was the large master bedroom, lit up by two large windows letting sunlight into the room. The bed sat against the left wall, perpendicular to the doorway, so from my position in the hallway I could only see the foot of the bed.

Walking slowly into the bedroom, my eyes immediately landed on the two adult figures lying motionlessly on the bed under the white bloodstained covers, like they had just gone to sleep facing each other. The bright white of the comforter and pillows really made the red blood stand out, I thought.

Both figures were in a lover's embrace, clutching each other, with a small space between them. From the long blonde hair on the left figure, I figured that that was the woman. On the side wall behind her was the distinctive blood bloom of a gunshot. It looked like she had been shot in the head.

The figure on the right, most likely her husband, had given her that mercy, as it looked like he had then put the handgun in his own mouth and pulled the trigger. Since these were headshots, they hadn't gotten up in death to terrorize and consume the living. That was kind of them.

Moving around the bed carefully, just in case, I found a handwritten note in a beautiful script, likely the woman's, left on a bedside table. It was short and simply read 'Forgive us.' I had the distinct impression that this couple had decided to leave this world together, rather than face the horrors of this new world. There was no recrimination in my heart for them and their decision.

As the world went to shit this kind of thing had probably happened all over the world. Not everyone saw the zombie apocalypse as some great opportunity for unchecked freedom and adventure. Discounting the constant danger from the hundreds of millions of zombies in this country alone, the breakdown of society meant that man's worst impulses would be allowed to be freely acted upon. Murder, rape, slavery, cannibalism, and the rise of hundreds, maybe even thousands of petty warlords and dictators rising up all over the place who would get to act out their every deviant fantasy of ruling over others. While the zombies were certainly dangerous in their own right, it would be the people themselves, the ones who thrived in this new world and delighted in it, that would be the most dangerous of all.

While it was certainly macabre, my time in the Occupation had taught me to never leave valuable resources that could help me survive behind, so I pulled back the covers to retrieve the pistol only to jump back several feet in surprised terror.

Hidden under the covers was an infant baby, swaddled tightly, looking at me and biting the air weakly, unable to even move much at all, which is probably why I hadn't realized it was there. It couldn't have been more than a month or two old and had no ability to escape its swaddle, much less even get at me considering she couldn't even crawl yet. The note begging for forgiveness probably had *everything* to do with this little baby that it looks like they had smothered to give her a painless death. Unfortunately, they probably hadn't been aware that without a head shot, dying only meant coming back as a zombie. Surviving an apocalyptic world with an infant to protect, feed, and take care of...no, I didn't begrudge them their decision. Instead of leaving her to die or putting her out of her misery, they chose to leave this world together, as a family. I couldn't fault them for that at all.

Seeing that there was little threat from a swaddled infant zombie, I reapproached the bed and gazed down at the baby. The only thing I felt in that moment was a profound sense of sadness. It was all well and good to watch *The Walking Dead* on a television screen, it was quite another to see the horrific realities of that kind of world in person.

There had been several clues already as to what universe I was in, but I hadn't been sure till this moment. The slow speed of the walkers, the highway setting where I was dropped in, right outside of Atlanta, Georgia, the very state the show was set in, the fact that it was 2010, the year the show debuted, and now proof that everyone was infected, that it was in the very air and even a normal death meant becoming a walker, rather than only through being bitten. It also explained why my body was not behaving like normal; I had been exposed to the walker virus the moment I had appeared here outside of my armor and breathed the air.

And to be fair, I wasn't truly worried about that, though it was taking a worrying amount of time for my body to beat this shit, which was unsettling in its own right. My enhanced physiology had been given to me by god-like multi-dimensional beings, this virus wasn't going to defeat that

kind of enhancement or ruin their entertainment. Q wouldn't have dropped me in this universe if I was going to die simply by being placed here. I didn't think he would save me from being killed normally, but he wouldn't drop me here only to die because of the placement itself.

The walker baby continued to struggle weakly, almost cutely, as it tried to kill me from her swaddle. I placed my hand on her chest, well away from her little gummy mouth that didn't even have teeth yet.

"I'm so sorry, child, that you didn't get a chance to truly live your life," I said in a solemn whisper. "It was robbed from you by the terrible circumstances that you were born into and your parents did what they thought best. May you find the peace in the next life that was denied to you in this one."

With these last words, I released this innocent soul into the next life with the thrust of my screwdriver. It laid still and unmoving, finally at rest with her parents, so I pulled covers back up to cover them all, carefully taking the pistol.

I had not seen any religious iconography anywhere in the house to discern what religion her parents had followed, but I offered up several silent prayers to the Christian God of my childhood, to Q, even to the Prophets for good measure, asking that they protect this innocent soul and see her delivered to paradise.

I let out a long sigh. While this life was an adventure, and I truly cherished it, it was moments like these that reminded me that this was not a fictional world. This was real. The Occupation had been filled with horrors like these too.

Leaving the bedroom and quietly closing the door behind me, I went into the master closet and flipped on the light. The gun safe I had spotted was wide and large, maybe 6 feet tall and quite well built, with a digital keypad on its face. Unlike the backdoor to the house, the safe was securely locked. Fortunately, while my omnitool's more advanced capabilities were locked to me, scanning the battery powered electronic lock of this safe and hacking the opening code was easy as pie.

I was not disappointed with what I found inside, which was a single, genuine Colt AR-15 assault rifle that looked heavily customized with all kind of bells and whistles, the best that money could buy, including a very elaborate holographic red dot scope, ergonomic front hand grips, telescoping butt stock, rail mounted tactical light, padded sling to hang the rifle around the shoulders, high capacity 30 cartridge magazines, even a bi-pod and a quick reload mag coupler.

The mag coupler really threw me for a loop as it allowed two fully loaded magazines to be attached to each other. The idea was to quickly eject a depleted magazine, then just move it slightly over to the side and slide in the other, already loaded magazine that was attached to the depleted one. In Vietnam they used to call this mag-coupling, "Jungle-style", as they typically just attached two magazines together with some tape on hand. Mag coupling essentially provided a simple solution to the age-old problem of wanting more ammunition and wanting it right the fuck now in combat. Many soldiers who'd seen some combat did it and got quite good at quickly switching between the magazines.

Had this guy seen too many movies? Or had he just been so rich that he bought whatever looked cool in the store? I'd likely never find out, but it was certainly useful for me now, so I sent a silent thank you to him in the afterlife.

There were 10 boxes of 20 cartridges of some very high-quality match grade 5.56mm ammo with additional semi-transparent magazines for the rifle. The former owner was rich and had obviously spent some serious money getting some high-quality stuff, probably for home defense purposes. There were additional magazines and boxes of 9mm hydra-shok hollow points for the pistol as well, but probably 300 rounds of that.

Tucked into the back of the top shelf was a very welcome surprise, a Gerber Mark II double serrated knife which was a classic by any definition. It had been released in the 60s and was probably one of the most popular and best-selling combat knives ever. Many of my friends in the service had had one of these and swore by them. The blade was 6.6 inches and made of a black oxide coated stainless steel to reduce reflection. It was doubled sided and double serrated and was 11.5 inches long overall. It was stored in a ballistic nylon sheath that looked brand new, but the knife itself looked well used and loved. Maybe it had been the Vietnam-era combat knife of one of the owner's veteran father or relative, but it was in excellent condition and was obviously well maintained. My screwdriver had a couple more inches in length, objectively, but this was a weapon designed for combat and would probably hold up better long-term.

The handgun I had taken earlier was also an excellent weapon, a Springfield Armory XD-M 4.5" 9mm handgun, which had a magazine capacity of 20 plus 1 in the chamber. In my previous life I had always been a fan of a higher caliber of bullet for greater stopping power, but with my enhanced capabilities, my accuracy was far better than it used to be, so I was more concerned these days with having more ammo on hand. Of course, my modern weapons had virtually infinite ammo considering I had a harnessed micro-singularity power cell at its heart, but no, that wasn't fun for Q.

Sigh...

Thankfully, there was a large heavy-duty duffel bag in the closet that I loaded everything into. Now, if only this guy had had a military-style tactical vest in his closet, I'd be golden, though he did have a decent quick draw thigh holster that fit his firearm for open carry. I was guessing, but I suspected this rich guy saw the coolest and most expensive holster and decided to buy that, which worked just fine for me in this instance.

Guess I'd be wearing this ridiculous tuxedo for a while longer. While the male owner of this house had plenty of clothes in his closet, the tuxedo Q had placed me in appeared to be made of 24th century fabric material technology, which meant that it was highly durable, tear resistant, moisture wicking, and great in most any temperature, which made it superior to just about any clothing I could get here.

A terrible suspicion/realization suddenly occurred to me.

Had Q given me a tuxedo made with 24th century materials technology knowing that I would continue wearing it because nothing better was available, even though it would make me look ridiculous to the people of this world? Was Q that much of a diabolical genius???

‘Of course he was,’ I growled internally.

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If I was in a movie, truly, when I opened that running refrigerator, divine white light would have poured out of it and angels singing would have been heard. Since I wasn’t in a movie universe, the only sign of my happiness was the wide smile I wore. It was fully stocked, and while a lot of it had gone bad, like the milk and some of the meat, there was plenty that was still good, including a lot of fruit, fancy cheeses, and the glistening pitcher of cold orange juice that I half drained in seconds.

I should drink more orange juice. Orange juice was amazing! For a bit of fun I added some cold champagne for mimosas, because why not?

The freezer was stocked with steaks and seafood, and the food pantry had all kinds of canned and dry food items including a lot of fruits stored in mason jars and other things. The house’s owners must have been on a farm to table, organic kick. I had a grand old’ time cooking up those frozen steaks on the kitchen’s stovetop with some butter, rosemary, and garlic. It was tempting to use the outdoor grill that had a propane tank connected to it, but I had no desire to potentially attract any walkers to the area with the smell of fresh cooked food, or any people for that matter.

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Lying on this sun lounger, by the side of the pool, drinking a mimosa out of a crystal champagne glass, it was almost possible to forget the state that the world was in. Almost. Then you’d take a moment to just listen and you’d probably notice just how eerily and unnaturally quiet it was. Then you’d notice how well you could see all the stars in the sky when there was absolutely no artificial light pollution, like I was lying under the stars in some far-off place in the middle of nowhere, instead of a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, a big city.

Unfortunately, while I had figured out, mostly, what universe I was in, I had only a rough idea of where I was in the *Walking Dead* timeline. I knew that it was relatively early in the show’s run, so probably early in season 1, but nothing more solid than that. The show had debuted in 2010 and I had been taken from my home universe in 2016, when the show was still running, but I hadn’t exactly been keeping up with it when there was no television to be had on a hilltop FOB in Afghanistan. My memory of what happened from seasons 1 through 6 was spotty at best and I had zero idea if the show had continued for long after I had been dimensionally translocated.

The show was a guilty pleasure for me, not something like Star Trek that I had watched multiple times over the years, so I had only seen it once. So I knew the major players, mostly, considering how many of them were killed off each season and replaced, but it was mostly broad strokes only. While this was all interesting, why had Q put me here in this universe? What benefit did I

get from it? In the last universe I had gained access to some truly advanced technology, but nothing like that was available here. I supposed I'd eventually figure it out.

My sharp eyes searched the sky for any glint of light reflecting off my ship, assuming it was even there and uncloaked. Who knew what Q had done to not only prevent communication between us, but to prevent them from just beaming me up or even landing the ship on the surface. My crew would want to rescue me if they were up there right now, who knows, maybe they were even watching me right now...

With that random thought, I quickly got up and went into the house, quickly finding some craft paper and a black sharpie marker to write out a message.

'Q is preventing access to my technology, communications, and my return to the ship till I kill a set number of reanimated corpses,' I wrote, not being sure if they'd even recognize the archaic word of 'zombie' or the universe specific one of 'walkers'. 'Once I meet his objective, communications will likely be restored, and I can return to the ship. Continue scanning the planet and access/download any information sources still functional by remote only. Gather all information similar to last universe as best as possible with current operational restraints. Do not send any personnel, if possible, to the surface. There is a deadly airborne biohazard contagion present. Maintain strict level 10 biohazard protocols.'

Holding it up to the sky, I displayed my message for a minute or two, then set it down face up on the lounge next to me and weighed it down with some smooth river rocks from the flower beds. That was the best I was going to be able to do for a while. Hopefully Q would find this archaic one-way form of communication a little silly, perhaps novel, and thus allow it.

For now, though, I needed to get some sleep and figure out my plan for the morning. All day I had felt sick and lessened by what my body was fighting, all the while I was on heightened alert and in active sustained combat engagements operating with little water or food. That couldn't have helped my immune system fight this off. Some sleep would do me good.

Heading into the house while securely closing and locking the glass sliding door behind me, I decided to sleep in the first-floor bedroom. If any walkers should wander by in numbers I couldn't handle, I could easily escape out of one of several exit points from the first floor.

Sitting down on the very comfortable mattress, I propped my rifle up by the side of the bed, then pulled my pistol from its holster on my thigh and racked the slide to confirm a round was in the chamber before sliding it carefully under my pillow. This wasn't the first time I'd gone to sleep in my clothes, armed and ready for trouble, in fact that was pretty much normal during the days of the Occupation. Tapping on my omnitool, I set it to maintain a proximity alarm. If anything larger than a fox moved in the vicinity of the house, it'd let me know.

Lying down on the comfortable mattress, sleep quickly claimed me before I even realized it.

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Waking up slowly to the bright morning sunlight caressing my face, I took a deep breath and smiled at the fact that I had had a great night of sleep, uninterrupted by combat. This past day I

had felt like I was fighting something, diminished from my usual state, less than. A belly stuffed full of food and drink, and a long night of untroubled sleep had done me a world of good. My omnitool's medical functions were very limited at the moment so I couldn't confirm it, but my body was telling me that it had beaten this thing or adapted to it somehow.

Checking the time on my omnitool, I was surprised at the time it showed. I had gone to bed at 10pm and it was now 10am! I don't think I'd slept that long a stretch since I had begun this new life. Just goes to show you how badly my body needed the time to fight this, which really made me question just what was behind this apocalypse. The show had talked about a 'virus' very briefly during the episode where they holed up at the CDC, but no simple virus should have allowed the dead to rise up, or for bodies to essentially move around for weeks, months, and years at a time like they were being animated by some kind of infinite energy source, or how the bodies, while obviously rotting, somehow stayed together and intact despite it being over 100 degrees during the day in Georgia right now. Those were not ideal conditions for a corpse to stay intact for long. Yeah, there was something wonky going on and I was really curious what 24th century medical technology would say about this supposed virus.

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After a dip in the pool and a hearty breakfast I felt like a new man, or perhaps, more like myself and was ready to tackle the day and my goal of trying to find the main characters of this universe. While it remained important to kill the required number of Walkers, I still had to hit my requisite level of chaos. So far I was sitting at 5% which suggested I might have killed a Walker or two that had been destined to kill someone important or that would affect some important future event in a way that I couldn't see.

Prepping a very nice and expensive cooler I found in the garage, I packed it with ice and began loading it with beer, steaks, and whatever else was left of the freezer contents after my recent feasting. There was no telling whether I would ever be able to return here, so why leave anything behind? I also emptied the pantry of anything edible and loaded it into some empty suitcases I found.

The Hummer actually had 3 rows of seats vehicle, but the previous owner had lowered the middle row of seats into the floor to make a large cargo space in the main cabin. That suited me just fine as I loaded everything I wanted to keep into the space. It would keep things closer to me and hopefully less visible to anyone checking the back of the vehicle.

After I had loaded up everything into the Hummer, I did a last-minute weapons check. My Gerber was attached securely to my left thigh and had been freshly sharpened on a sharpening stone that came with the holster I had. I practiced unbuttoning and pulling the blade out quickly, even switching grips a few times till it felt natural.

Then I checked my new pistol. Ejecting a mag I found it full and racking the slide I confirmed that one round was in the tube. Before I'd trust my life to these tools, I had taken the time this morning to disassemble and clean both my new pistol and rifle, cleaning and oiling and lubricating everything to ensure that it worked exactly as it was supposed to. Quickly holstering

my pistol and pulling it a few times to bring it to bear on an imaginary potential target, I was happy. I similarly checked my new rifle, checking on the two coupled magazines, giving me 60 total shots between the two magazines. I put the safety on and placed the rifle muzzle down in the passenger seat.

I sighed at the fact that I was forced to carry spare magazines for both my rifle and pistol in my tuxedo pants pockets, of all things, but such was life and I had gotten pretty damn lucky with finding this house. I couldn't really complain much.

Sitting in the driver's seat of the Hummer, I hit the button to open the garage, it opened smoothly and quietly. Turning the key, my new ride started up and purred, with nearly a full tank of gas reading on the gauge.

Turning on the radio, there was nothing but static of course, but the CD deck read that a disc was in. Led Zeppelin's, The Immigrant Song, began belting out of the optional premium sound system.

"Nice choice, my friend," I said aloud as I pulled out and began my search for the main cast near Atlanta.

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Letting the warm air of the day warm my face as I drove along in my commandeered vehicle, I kept my head on a swivel, constantly looking for threats. This all felt so very familiar to me in some ways, given the number of times I had sat in actual military Humvees with my comrades going through the city in Iraq, constantly on the lookout for IEDs and or the possibility of an ambush along our path. Of course, the dead were not going to be setting up IEDs or ambushes, they were much simpler in the way they killed, or more straightforward. The living, though, may set up traps or ambushes if they wanted my supplies. I'm sure there was plenty of that going on all over the planet as groups fought and killed for limited resources.

As you could imagine during the specific chaos that engulfed this world, people had been desperately trying to flee the cities, rather than stay in them, which meant the highway direction leaving the city of Atlanta was jam packed with abandoned vehicles, sitting bumper to bumper. That left the highway direction going into the city relatively free of vehicles. Like so many things in this world, it was a little jarring to see and thus have 4 lanes of open highway for me to drive in.

Though I hadn't seen another herd the size I had encountered when I had been first dropped into this world, I had seen a handful of walkers on the other side of the highway. They reacted to the sight of my vehicle, but thankfully the tall, heavy, concrete dividers separating the two sides of the highway, common near a city, kept them from crossing over. I paid them no mind and just kept going.

When I saw a group of 10 or so walkers ambling along, though, I actually stopped in the middle of the highway about 75 yards down and got out, angling the vehicle a bit, and keeping the Hummer running as I had always been taught to in Iraq. It was stupid and dangerous to trust

weapons that you hadn't personally checked or maintained, though sometimes it was an unfortunate necessity. In those cases where you couldn't, hopefully, the weapons were either brand new, or you trusted the brother in arms that had cleaned and maintained it before you. It was the *height* of stupidity and danger, though, to trust your life to weapons that you had never actually fired before and weren't intimately familiar with. The practical logistics of a large military organization meant standardized weapons for the most part, but another good reason for it was that everyone was familiar with those weapons in general.

I had, of course, shot many 9mm pistols before, and even some variants of the AR-15, but never these brands and never these specific weapons. Who knows what it felt like to shoot, or what modifications the previous owner might have made to the trigger pull, for instance.

Opening my door, I carefully pulled my rifle from the passenger seat and slung its strap around my neck. The walkers, of course, had seen me and were trying to cross the barrier and/or walk closer to me on their side of the highway.

I stepped to the front of the Hummer and extended the bipod to rest the rifle on the hood of the vehicle. Extending the telescoping stock, I put the butt of the gun firmly to my shoulder and spread my legs wide to stabilize my stance, just like I had been taught. Bringing my eye to the red dot scope, I sighted in on a walker that I had attracted the attention of. The scope had an infrared range finder on it which told me that the target I had specifically selected was 79 yards away.

Pulling the bolt back, I loaded the rifle, switched off the safety, and released a slow calm breath, the targeting reticule set on the walker's forehead. Since he, a middle-aged man wearing a business suit, was coming towards me, only minor adjustments were needed as he moved. Squeezing the trigger, just as I had been taught, the firing of the rifle almost came as a surprise to me, the bullet grazing the side of the walker's skull, a line of red appearing on him.

For a cold bore shot on a rifle that I had never shot before, I was pretty impressed with both this rifle and my accuracy with it. I adjusted the scope accordingly, lined up the next shot, and squeezed the trigger once more. This time, the businessman walker's head snapped back with a hole in its forehead, and it collapsed truly dead to the ground. My walker count went down by one in the counter that was always in the bottom right of my visual field.

Lining up my shot again on one of the closer zombies' foreheads, this time a young teenage girl, I waited for the range finder to read 50 yards before I squeezed the trigger. Another minor adjustment was needed, but she went down like the other. I did the same for another walker at 25 and then 10 yards, though they had come to a stop directly across from me on the other side of the highway barrier, unable to cross over and too stupid to try to climb over the 4-foot reinforced concrete barrier.

Laying the rifle down on the hood, I smoothly pulled my pistol from its holster and took aim at 10 yards and headshot one of the walkers. The aim was excellent, and the pistol felt comfortable in my hand. The trigger pull weight was light, just how I liked it, and the recoil was easy to manage. I took out the rest of the herd with pistol shots at various yardage, sometimes moving

back 10, 20, and 30 yards before shooting again. By the time I had killed 15 walkers in total, I felt like I had a good feel for how this weapon performed.

Putting my weapons away, I removed the magazines that I had fired with and put fresh, fully loaded ones in, then started reloading the spent mags one bullet at a time, constantly paying attention to my surroundings. In this moment, when I wasn't in the middle of combat, it was an ideal time to make sure that all my available mags were fully loaded and ready for use.

You did *not* want to be in the middle of a firefight and need just one more bullet and find yourself regretting not taking the time to load your magazines when you had had the opportunity. It was this kind of practical shit that never appeared in the movies. Most of life in the military was hurry up and wait, then doing boring to watch type shit like carefully cleaning your rifle or loading magazines or carefully replacing a spring, yet those things were incredibly important and could keep you alive.

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"Where the fuck are they?" I asked quietly, getting increasingly frustrated now, as I continued to drive around, my eyes constantly moving between the road and my omnitool's holographic life sign display showing the surrounding area. Given the number of scans of the dead I'd taken, even with my omnitool's limited sensor functionality and range, scans could now determine the difference between a living person and a walker. In this case, it was all about the temperature difference. Living people were displayed as green dots, and the walkers in red.

At this point I had been driving around for about two and half hours now, trying to dredge up memories from episodes of a show that I had literally watched *once* over 9 years ago, relatively speaking. Had I been wrong in my estimation that we were very early in season 1??

I remembered that Rick Grimes was a county sheriff in some rural county of Georgia close to Atlanta. He had taken the highway to reach the city, even used a horse at one point to travel into the city? His wife, Lori, and son, Carl, were part of a group of survivors who were taking refuge in some mountainous area close enough to Atlanta to see in the distance, but not close enough to be affected by the herds roaming around. That group included Rick's best friend Shane who was boning Lori, who Shane had told Rick was dead. Drama! This group of people would form the main cast of the show till 2016, some being killed off, others being added as time went on.

Unfortunately, I couldn't remember much of anything more that would narrow down the area any better at the moment. I was also being slowed down by the need to pull off the road on two occasions and retreat into the woods when a particularly large herd was on the other side of the highway. While in a small group they were unlikely to be able to cross the divider, when bunched up they likely could crawl over top of each other to get at me and I had no desire to have to fight off a group of several hundred. Even being in the woods wasn't safe, but thankfully my new combat knife and my trusty lug wrench was up to the task of silent killing the 20 or so I had encountered. Once the herd had moved on, I went back to my Hummer and continued my search.

“What else?” I asked, trying again to think of anything that might narrow things down. Even a small detail could help. “People were fishing?? In very blue water with stone sides all around? A quarry maybe? A quarry!”

Luckily the previous owner of my car had opted for the premium GPS package and the GPS satellites were still functioning. God knew how long that would last, though.

I used my fingers to move the map grip around till I found a large blue spot near Atlanta. Zooming in I found a likely spot, Westside Park at Bellwood Quarry. Tapping on the name, a brief description came up. It appears the park was a 351-acre park with a 45-acre lake at the site of the old quarry which was used as a drinking water reservoir. Jackpot!

So I found where I needed to be, or at least roughly where I needed to be. On paper it wasn't a bad spot. Close enough to Atlanta to go on supply runs, access to fresh water and fish, the mountainous area would likely limit walkers randomly showing up, limited access by road. Unfortunately, that wouldn't last as the walkers in the city and near the city started ranging further and further...as they would find out, as I recalled.

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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.