The Delegation of Power

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Summary

Negan's right-hand man, Simon, is heading the weekly pickups in Alexandria and has taken an interest in their leader, Rick Grimes. It's well-known in Alexandria that Simon handles things a little differently when Negan's away, and Rick, who will go to any lengths to prevent the loss of any more of his people, suffers the brunt of his attention.

[Tags added progressively]
What the hell was going on?

His eyes burned and sweat was seeping through his shirt.

Rick couldn’t process what was happening fast enough. When he tried to lean toward the door to get a look at Carl in the next room, Simon started speaking again, demanding his attention.

He seemed to think Rick didn’t afford him the same respect as Negan. Rick didn’t. He understood the game though. Give them what they want and let them be on their way. Simon seemed to want to make it personal though.
Shifting his weight idly, Rick waited to hear what the man wanted. As best he could, he trained his attention to the tall man in the center of his kitchen and not to the group in the next room. God, if he could just get Carl in his sights though. His eyes trailed once more to the door.

Simon had said he wouldn’t do anything to the boy, but this was Negan’s man. If Rick knew nothing else about him, that would be enough. What was worse was that Simon had this overblown sense of entitlement about him. You’d think he was Negan himself the way he sauntered around, dispensing orders and needling the Alexandrians. Rick had his type pegged back in the woods: weaselly, sneaky, ass-kissers who neither earned nor knew how to handle leadership but who were convinced they did. Rick had met plenty of Simons in his life. Even had to put down a few since the end of the world. Usually though, Rick didn’t give Simon’s type more than a passing glance. Guys like that were only dangerous when they had power.

That was the thing about the end of the world though. People you wouldn't have been able to pick out of a line-up of one suddenly had whole arsenals of guns and goons at their disposal, and were busting into Rick’s home, demanding half his shit and holding a gun to his son’s head.

“You listening to me, Rick?”

A snap of fingers near his face brought Rick’s attention back to the lanky man in front of him. He swallowed hard and steadied his breathing.

“What do you want?” Rick asked, because Simon definitely wanted something, and if it would get him and his two fellow Saviors out of Rick’s house and away from Carl, Rick sure as hell would give it to him.

“Easy there. Easy. I pulled you over here so your son wouldn’t have to see his pops getting put down—if it comes to that. I thought you'd appreciate it. Doesn’t need to go that way though.”

Rick’s head was spinning. He couldn’t hear Carl or either of the other two Saviors. He tried to lean toward the entryway again to catch a glimpse of them in the living room but a long arm barred his way. Rick’s eyes followed the limb back up to the mustached face of Negan’s right-hand man, who was staring down at Rick with something like disappointment.

“I told you already, the boy’s gonna be just fine. Long as you don’t do anything stupid. But you behaving like this tells me you don’t trust me. You saying I’m not a man of my word, Rick?”

Rick tried to keep his eyes fixed on the other man but Simon’s face kept going in and out of focus as Rick’s attention was tugged by sounds from the next room.

“Rick?” Simon leaned in, filling the full landscape of Ricks view.

“No,” Rick grit out.

“No what?”

“Not sayin' that.”

“That’s good. Nobody has to get hurt as long as you do everything I say. I’ll be good to you if you’re good to me, Rick. You keep up the hospitality and Negan won’t hear nothing but good things.”

Simon’s voice was fading in and out again as he went on and Rick let his thoughts drift back to the sounds that might've indicated a struggle in the next room. After a while, he noticed Simon was staring at him expectantly.
“Yes,” Rick answered, quickly recalling the man’s last words in his head.

“Say it.”

“I trust you.”

Rick’s responses were mechanical as he set himself on autopilot, only speaking when prompted to do so but registering little. His chest was aching as his heart pounded within it. He wished to God the man would just get to what he wanted, but it was like Simon was going out of his way to draw this out. Toying with him.

This game wasn’t new to Rick. He knew how to deal with men like Simon. Just keep your head down and answer respectfully. It wasn’t unlike getting pulled over. Nine times out of ten, Rick gave out warnings in place of tickets just for good manners alone. Rick hoped this would just be a warning.

Simon was taking particular enjoyment out of Rick’s subjugation though. It seemed like all it took was Negan leaving him alone for five minutes. Now the man was drunk with his heightened responsibility. He seemed bent on being more Negan than Negan. The big difference between Negan and Simon though was that Negan knew he was a leader. Within ten seconds of meeting the man, everyone else knew it too. He didn’t need to advertise. The show was just an added bonus for him. Simon, on the other hand, was nothing without the show, certainly nothing without Negan.

Rick was prompted to answer again and did so, keeping his voice level. Simon seemed pleased, his gaze drenched in condescension. Rick was fanning the man’s ego, which was a dangerous thing for someone like Simon, he knew. Still, he had to keep him happy, at least until Carl was out of danger.

He didn’t know if he’d been phasing the man’s voice out again or if Simon had just gone silent, but Rick’s ears were pounding from the dense quiet. He couldn’t hear a damn thing in the other room. He didn’t know what worried him more: the sounds of rustling that might have indicated a struggle, or the silence, which left far too much to Rick's imagination.

Without thinking, Rick moved toward the doorway but was stopped by Simon’s voice.

“Not finished here, Rick,” he said, a perceptible warning in his tone. “Thought you said you trusted me.”

Rick froze, fists clenched around sweaty palms. A chill ran through him. Somehow he was both shaking his head and nodding at the same time. “Yes. yes,” he said, desperate to give the man what he wanted. “I trust you.” His eyes darted from Simon to the door and back again. “Please, just—“

“Please, what, Rick?”

Rick still hadn’t heard anything in the next room. His eyes bore into Simon. What the hell did the man want?

Taking a breath to steady himself, Rick looked at the ground, then back up to Simon. “What do you want?” He asked, straining to keep the contempt from his voice. What came out sounded more like a plea.

A big smile spread across Simon’s broad mouth and Rick felt his stomach churn.

Simon rocked happily on his heels a moment, appraising the room around him as if he’d been waiting for Rick to ask.
“Well, let’s see,” he sang. “I’ll take that cast iron pan there, that alarm clock, that cute bird clock too, come to think of it. That picture with the country landscape…Well, hop to it, Rick! What are you doing standing there? That shit won’t gather itself up.”

Rick jerked into action, feeling his bones creak in protest like he’d been holding himself in that position for hours. As he began quickly gathering the supplies, Simon continued listing off items.

“And I noticed you weren’t writing any of that down. I better not be missing anything, Rick.”

Rick stacked the items on top of each other as neatly as he could with the pan on bottom, and leaned the picture frame against the cupboard beneath the pile. When he thought he’d collected everything listed, he moved back to his place near the door.

“Good, good,” Simon said, sifting through the pile of cookware and appliances. “Damn, y’all are living good here!”

Simon continued making comments about the loot and Rick was relieved for the distraction, taking the opportunity to listen in on the living room again.

There were voices, Rick was sure of it. He angled his ear to hone in on what might have been Carl’s voice. At once he felt relief and dread. Don’t threaten them, Rick prayed. Too easily, he could imagine the young man slingins insults at his Savior captors until one of them got fed up and dished out a capital punishment without a word from Simon. Just keep cool, Carl. Please. Just a little longer.

When Simon’s words caught up to him, Rick blinked and stared at the man, who at some point had reclaimed his position in the center of the room.

“What?” Rick said.


Rick continued to stare, feeling only at more of a loss. Unconsciously his eyes went down to his shirt and back up to Simon, who was watching him with the same easy expectancy as when he’d rattled off his list of appliances.

“My…” Rick began, but couldn’t make the connection in his head.

“Your shirt, Grimes. What the fuck? You gone stupid or what?”

Rick’s expression must have mirrored his thoughts because Simon was fast in his face again.

“Or maybe you’re just making trouble? Is that it, Rick? You trying to make trouble for your people? ‘Cause I’ll tell you what, I’ll shut that shit down right here.”

The use of Negan’s own particular brand of phrasing wasn’t lost on Rick but was only a distant echo amidst the barrage of mismatched information swarming around his head.

Simon’s tone shifted as he seemed to pick up on Rick’s inner struggle. “Look, I’ll make this real simple for you: You take your shirt off and give it to me, and I won’t have to take it out on your boy out there. Got it, Rick?” The tone was gentle but the words themselves struck deep.

Although the mere mention of Carl was usually enough to spur Rick into almost any action, he found he was struggling with this one. When he reached for the buttons of his shirt to give the man what he
wanted, he kept stopping short as if hitting an invisible barrier.

It wasn’t his pride that held him back (though there was a sliver of that left, despite all that the Saviors had done to them). No, what made Rick hesitate was a small and probably meaningless bit of information that kept flitting around his head, holding up the more important processes: He just couldn’t stop thinking about how tall Simon was. Damn tall. At least a head taller than Rick, and long-limbed as anything. What the hell did he want Rick’s shirt for? It wasn’t going to fit him.

On a whim, he thought of asking if it was for someone else, but dispensed of the thought nearly as quickly as it arose.

*Ridiculous,* he thought. The whole thing was ridiculous. What did it matter what Simon would do with the shirt, or any of the things they’d take from them that day? Just give him the damn shirt.

But the thought kept buzzing in his ear like a nat, and Rick was sure he was going crazy. At a time when the dead walked the Earth, and his friends were being picked off like animals, and his son was in the next room with a gun pressed to his head, Rick couldn’t stop thinking about how absurd Simon would look trying to fit into his shirt.

Carl. Carl in the next room.

*Carl.*

*“Rick.”*

Like a taut cord that finally snapped, Rick broke through the haze. Of their own accord, his hands rose to the button’s of his shirt, breaking through the invisible barrier. His eyes stayed ahead on Simon, though Rick barely registered the man.

He moved quickly so he didn’t have time to think about it. With mechanical efficiency Rick pulled the tucked flaps out from his waistband, unfastened the remaining buttons and slid the shirt off his shoulders. As Rick thrust the discarded garment out in front of him, he stared at the floor. It wasn’t another ploy to placate Simon’s ego; Rick found he just couldn’t bring himself to meet the other man’s eyes right then. It was as if the simple removal of his shirt had left Rick bare in more ways than one.

When the Savior didn’t immediately take the proffered shirt, Rick’s eyes drifted upward. Only when they locked with the other man’s did Simon finally reach out to accept the offering, taking his sweet damn time in the act, Rick noted.

Rick took a breath and straightened up, telling himself that it was only a shirt he was handing over. It wasn’t any different from anything else these men had come in and taken from them, and certainly not the worst thing. Somehow it felt oddly personal though. He couldn’t help suspecting that that was Simon’s intent. Rick didn’t think the weaselly man was capable of such underhanded power-play though. Rick wondered, with a creeping dread, if he’d underestimated Negan’s right-hand man.

*“The belt.”*

Rick looked up.

With his thick brows raised high, Simon watched him.

Slowly Rick’s hands moved to his waistband. It wasn’t as daunting as the previous request and didn’t occupy as many of Rick’s faculties to process. Still, the idea that another layer was about to be stripped from him was hard to swallow. Before reaching the buckle, Rick’s hands seemed to hit
another barrier.

“No,” he said.

“What was that?”

Rick’s arms fell to his sides.

Simon was fucking with him. That’s what this was. Just fucking with him. It wasn’t about the shirt or the belt. Simon had seen how Rick didn’t afford him the same respect as Negan and now the petty man was taking it out on him the only way he could: kicking a man when he was down and rubbing his face in the dirt.

Rick couldn’t play along anymore. Hadn’t the Saviors already beaten them? It was easier to grit his teeth and bear it when it wasn’t so damn petty. Rick couldn’t reconcile giving this much to a guy who wasn’t even Negan, and all to satiate some power trip.

“Not doing it.” Rick shrugged.

Simon blinked at him. “Look. I don’t know if you forgot already or if you’re just playing dense, but I’ll lay it out again for you.” his voice rose and Rick heard shifting in the other room. “We take what we want. That’s our part. Your part is you give it up. Now I want that belt you’re wearing. It’s a good belt. Give it to me.”

Rick grit his teeth, caging in his tongue. It was no use though; his inaction spoke for him.

“Sid,” Simon called out.

Someone in the next room answered and Rick’s breath caught in his chest.

“You got that nice baton we picked up from The Kingdom the other day?” Simon asked as his brown eyes never left Rick’s.

“Oh yeah,” the man called Sid replied.

“You ever get a chance to try it out— Hey! stay the fuck right there!” Simon caught Rick as the possessed man made a dash for the door.

“Dad!” Came Carl’s voice.

Simon barred Rick in with his arms while Rick shoved wildly at him. The combination of Simon’s larger mass and cooler head kept Rick boxed in.

“Carl!”

“Everything alright in there?” The second Savior called.

Rick was panting from panic and exertion, his body now covered in sweat and his damp and tussled curls hanging in his face. He heard sounds of struggling and knew that Carl too was fighting.

Dimly, he realized Simon was watching him. Inches from Rick's face Simon silently eyed him, using his chest to pin Rick against the wall. He was waiting. Rick understood without the other man having to say it: It was up to Rick now what happened next.

“Simon!” Sid called again, sounding more concerned. The creaking of footsteps neared the kitchen.
“It’s alright. We’re good,” Simon said at last, before the other Savior could come any nearer. Rick was partly relieved. He remembered he was bare from the waist up and his dignity was already depleted enough without having to endure the confused stare of someone walking in on this.

“We’re good, right?” Simon said near his ear, voice low so only Rick heard.

Again, Rick found he was unable to meet the other man’s eyes. He swallowed and gave a stiff nod.

“That’s good,” Simon said, easing off of the smaller man and taking a half-step back. He was still near enough to be imposing and it was a while before Rick could lift his gaze.

“I’m alright, Carl,” Rick called hoarsely to the next room when he’d gotten his breathing under control. “You alright?”

When no answer came, Rick’s eyes traveled warily to Simon, who’s lips spread into a broad smile.

“Go on ahead and let him answer,” the Savior called out to his men at last.

“M’alright, Dad. I’m alright,” Carl finally answered with a cough. Rick felt like he’d been socked in the chest. A warm stream glided down his cheek and he took a breath for what felt like the first time in ten minutes.

“Alright,” he said to Simon, after he’d gathered himself. “I get it.” His hand worked quickly this time, unfastening his belt with a practiced proficiency. A couple of tugs released it from his waistband. “Take it.” He held the belt out as he’d done with the shirt.

With that big smile, Simon took it. Now, having procured Rick’s shirt and belt, Simon unceremoniously tossed both items on the ground. “Pants,” he said then.

With his brow furrowed in confusion, Rick eyed the discarded garments where they lay crumpled on the tiled floor. When he looked at Simon, the taller man's expression hadn't changed.

The threat on Carl's life was too fresh now and Rick himself too exhausted in both mind and body to protest, and so it was with a mechanical resignation that his hands moved to his waistband.

Although he knew how Simon would react if he resisted again, Rick found he couldn’t get his leaden fingers to work the button of his pants loose. It wasn't defiance now— Rick wanted it to come loose, needed it to come loose so he could give Simon what he wanted and get him and the other Saviors out of the house. Yet his fingers had become clumsy in his desperation, and Rick couldn't get them to cooperate. He felt white hot panic coursing up his spine and saw spots in his eyes.

“Having problems?”

Rick’s eyes snapped up to Simon who was suddenly standing very close to him. So rattled, Rick hadn’t noticed him move. Now the Savior's overbearing nearness reminded Rick, not for the first time, of Negan’s similar disregard for personal space. Still, like with everything else of Simon’s, his presence held a different kind of weight to it. Where Negan danced along the fine line between invasion and restraint, fully aware of the power of tension, Simon was tactless and blunt as he breeched Rick’s borders.

Simon’s hands shoved Rick’s aside as he took up the job of unbuttoning the jeans. He didn’t seem to fare much better because it took a moment before the button snapped open, exposing the waistband of Rick’s boxers beneath. Only later would Rick realize that Simon had in fact broken the button with the force of his impatience.
Rick watched silently a moment, feeling as if he were out of his body, observing the scene from a distance. The zipper was next. Simon slid it down with an almost sensual slowness that seemed incongruous after the violent force with which he’d dispensed of the button. When Rick felt the scrape of calloused thumbs along his waist, he came slamming back into his body. He was moving without thought, his hands grabbing at Simon’s wrists, his head shaking in silent discouragement, his brow furrowed in question.

This wasn’t right. Whatever was happening before was a thing entirely separate from this. That, he could grit his teeth and bear. This—Rick wasn’t even sure what this was.

Simon only smiled at him, that familiar condescension twinkling in his brown eyes. “One word from me, Rick. Remember. That boy of yours…”

Simon didn’t need to finish. Rick didn’t relieve his grip on the other man’s wrists but did stop pushing him away.

“Christ, you’re so fucking pretty,” Simon said, in a tone that sounded somehow scathing. The taller man craned his neck down to whisper things low and gruff next to Rick’s ear. Rick could only shake his head stupidly, his attention pulled downward where large hands slowly pressed his jeans down his hips, letting them fall to his ankles.

Simon’s face was very near his—too near—his mustache brushing against Rick’s jaw as he spoke. Rick’s reeling mind fought to pay attention to what he was saying, to make some damn sense of it, but he only managed to cling to a few words. “I know” the man kept saying. I know— he knew what? What did he know? Simon’s hands were on his skin but Rick felt once more like an outsider.

He heard another voice, soft but nearer than Simon’s snake-like hisses, and guessed that it was his own. “Stop,” it said.

“Don’t act like Negan didn’t break you in. You two were gone a long time in that trailer. Jesus, he knows how to pick ’em. Bet he broke you in good.”

“S-stop.”

His attention kept shifting to the living room but all he could hear was his own heavy breathing and Simon’s hissing.

“I get it. You belong to Negan now. Lucky for us, we’re all Negan. Just give me a little bit of what you gave him. Just a little taste.” Rick tried to twist his neck back from the intruding mouth that was leaving wet trails from Rick’s shoulder to his jaw.

The whole thing was spiraling away from any kind of sense and Rick couldn’t keep up. What had Simon said about the trailer?

Axe on the roof. Get my axe, Rick.

Simon’s breath was hot in his ear.

“What are you doing?” Some part of Rick was still back at when Simon had asked for his pants. Simon wanted his pants. He wanted them, but the man was clearly too tall. It made as much sense as the man wanting his shirt.

“He use your mouth or your ass? Fuck, he used your ass, didn’t he? Saw the way you were limping back. God damn, he had you begging on your knees. Jesus, you beg so sweet. He gentled you real good, didn't he?”
Simon nuzzled Rick’s neck again, his tall figure curling over him, his long arms wrapped around Rick’s hips and trapping him against his body.

“Did he get you all wet? Make a mess of you? Bet he made you mewl like a bitch.”

_Bitch._ Rick blinked hard. That’s what Negan had said as they’d dragged Daryl away. Rick’s head had been moving just as sluggishly then. Why couldn’t he get a hold on what was happening?

“Let me feel that sweet cunt of yours.”

A hand was suddenly diving down the back of Rick’s boxers and a thick calloused finger was pressed between he cheeks. The shock of the foreign violation was like a bucket of ice water on Rick’s head.

Without a thought, he shoved Simon away. The taller man tumbled backward, landing splayed on the kitchen floor, where he gaped up at Rick in surprise.

Rick, whose ankles were still caught in his bunched jeans, was also knocked backward by the force of the blow. Leaning heavily against the wall, he quickly yanked his jeans back up around his hips.

By then, Simon had recovered from the fall and began to rise, but the slighter man was prepared and fully alert now. He leapt forward and kicked Simon square in the face, propelling him back again. From beneath his hands clasped tightly over his nose, Simon heaved an agonized groan.

“Simon! What the fuck is going on?”

Rick turned toward the source of the shout and Simon took the opportunity to kick Rick’s legs out from under him. Once he found his feet, Simon managed to get in two hard kicks to Rick’s bare side before pausing for a breath.

As Rick cradled his aching ribs, he heard Simon’s hobbling footsteps moving away from him. When Rick craned his neck up he saw that the Savior wasn’t going for the door but for the table.

His gun, Rick realized. He’d left it there, seeing no need for it what with how _gentled_ Rick was.

Scrambling to his feet, Rick charged the man before he could reach the weapon. In a flash of noise and light, they were careening through pane glass and tumbling over thorn bushes.

For a moment afterward, Rick lay disoriented, feeling dizzy as he scanned his surroundings. The grass beneath him let him know that he was no longer in the kitchen but now outside the house. The broken glass shards surrounding him and pinching into his forearms and knees let him know that he’d tackled Simon through the kitchen window. Luckily, Simon had taken much of the impact.

The man in question was on his back not far from Rick. Spots of blood blossomed from various areas of his shirt. Rick immediately crawled over to him before the Savior had a chance to find his bearings.

The sound of a pistol cocking was a distant echo as Rick’s fists rained down on Simon’s head. With Rick mounting his chest, there was nothing Simon could do but take the punishing blows. Rick saw red as he bludgeoned the man and would later remember very little. In that moment he was a feral animal and the suburbs around him a wavering mirage. He knew nothing then but the feel of hard skull beneath his knuckles, and would have likely killed the man if it hadn’t been for the voice that called him out of is haze.

“Dad!”
Rick turned to see Carl standing on the porch with Sid the Savior holding the barrel of a gun to his back. At once, Rick’s eyes drifted to his own bloodied fists and then down to the bloodied man beneath him. After a moment, his fists loosened and he crawled off of the unresponsive man to kneel instead in the grass beside him.

Rick held up his empty hands to signify to Carl’s captors that he was done. His mouth opened to form some plea, but someone else spoke first.

“The fuck's your shirt, Rick?”

Rick turned to see Negan standing by the mailbox, one foot up on the curb as he took in the scene.

Behind him, a sizable crowd of people had gathered in the street and Rick felt his skin burning from the many eyes on him.

He heard a groaning beside him.

“That Simon?” Negan asked, pointing his barbed bat at the bloodied, motionless body of his right-hand man in the grass beside Rick. "He dead?"

Immediately, a female Savior ran up and knelt next to Simon. Her fingers quickly found the spot beneath his jaw.

“Alive,” she said promptly. “Just unconscious.”

“Seriously, what the fuck happened here?” Negan bellowed, directing his attention now toward the group around the porch. He looked from Simon, to the broken window, and at last back to Rick, who was still kneeling in the grass. “You did this?”

Rick gaped mutely, struggling to form words. Breathing deeply, his eyes scanned the ground as if he might find an answer among the glass shards.

“Jiminy Christmas, am I talking to myself here? Will somebody tell me what the fuck I missed?”

It was Sid who spoke up. “Grimes,” he said, as if no more explanation was needed.

“Well, I’d gotten that far,” Negan hooted, eyes wide and boisterous. “I can’t leave you alone for ten minutes can I, Rick?”

Rick felt himself moving, head shaking in dispute. He needed to stop this from escalating. Carl still had a gun pressed to his back. Rick had only narrowly preserved his son in the woods. What were the chances that Negan would spare him twice?

“I thought we were past this, Rick,” Negan sighed as he stalked up the lawn toward the man, Lucille hoisted over one shoulder. “I thought I made it clear that I don’t like when you attack my people. Did we not already have that talk? I could have sworn we had that talk, Rick.”

"You did have that talk," Sid said.

"Shut up, Sid," Negan said. "But Damn. I guess I was just wasting my goddamn breath."

He sighed. "I try to delegate. I try to send a guy. But I can’t just fuckin’ relax with you people, can I? No. I gotta come down here and deal with this shit myself like there isn’t fuckin’ just one of me."

At once, Rick's vision was filled with Negan as the larger man squatted down to his level. Rick flinched at the closeness. If it weren’t for the sun in the sky and the grass beneath his hands and
knees, Rick could swear he was back in the woods with Sasha to his left and Abraham’s bludgeoned corpse to his right. He could even feel the still-warm splatter of the redhead’s blood across his cheek.

"Do I need to show you again what it feels like to have someone fuck with your people, Rick?"

Rick was babbling nonsense, pleas, promises. If Negan understood any of it, he didn’t seem swayed.

“Shh-shh-shh,” the Savior said softly, holding a leather-clad finger to his lips. “Just tell me this. What happened here, huh? Why’d you do that to Simon? I don't like when you do that to Simon. Is it like my friend, Sid, says? Are you just being a problem for me today, Rick?”

Rick’s breaths were coming in harsh. His eyes flickered for a moment to Simon laying motionless in the grass, his face a canvas of deep red. Rick had no interest in protecting the man and felt no sympathy. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to say the words to damn him. Somehow he just couldn’t say them.

He thought back to the feeling of the man’s hands on him, touching him, invading him. Rick had been able to quickly get his pants back on after but still felt naked. He became very aware of Carl’s presence behind him. The weight of the young man’s stare was like an anvil on his shoulders.

“Welp!” Negan announced, rising smoothly. “Guess I’ll just have to make somethin’ up. Can’t get a fucking peep out of this one. What, killer? You got a story for me?”

In his peripheral view, Rick saw the barbed bat swing upward as Negan pointed it toward the porch.

The yard was silent as the object of Lucille’s aim gave no response.

“An icy stare is not an answer, kid. I don’t care how fucking badass it is,” Negan said at last and let the bat drop to his side. “So, the way I see it, ol’ Rick and Simon come barreling through a window, beating the ever-living shit out of each other, and no one but these two shits has any idea what the fuck started it? Not one goddamn witness?”

“He… he told us to stay back.” Rick guessed it was Sid again, though the Savior's voice sounded smaller than it had in the house when he’d been ordering Rick and Carl around while ransacking their belongings.

“He wanted to be alone,” Negan elaborated and Sid gave a soft confirmation. “With Rick. Simon wanted to be alone with Rick.” Another confirmation from Sid. “And you guys just let him. Just said — fuck it, let him go off alone with the guy who took down an outpost. Sounds right. Real fucking smart. Why don’t we fucking do That.”

“Simon had his gun,” Sid offered.

“Do you see a fucking gun around here, Sid? Oh snap, there it is! It's in the fucking bushes. It'll be a real fucking help over there, Sid. Oh, thank Jesus for that.”

Silence.

Rick couldn’t move from where he sat. He was frozen as his fingers dug into the cool soil.

“Alright, Rick,” Negan said, towering over where Rick knelt, making him no less imposing than when he was invading Rick’s space. “Unless you’ve grown a tongue in the last thirty seconds, I’m about to get real fuckin' irate.”

Rick’s throat was paper. He felt the eyes of all of Alexandria on him. Still, he couldn’t say it.
Couldn’t speak. Carl was behind him, watching him. Rick couldn’t say it.

“Oh. My. God. Alright, Rick. Since you’re so damn bent and determined to get someone dead today, I will fucking oblige you. Goddammit, I thought this was gonna be an easy day. Arat, bring me that curly-haired fuck! Time to get the tears flowing!”

Rick’s eyes snapped up. From the center of the crowd of people gathered in the street, a heavily armed woman emerged dragging Aaron behind her.

“On your knees, prick,” she barked.

“No!” Rick screamed and Negan turned with a look of genuine surprise. “It was me. It was me. I messed up. It was me. Please.”

Slowly, Negan sauntered back to Rick. Taking Lucile in both hands, he knelt down once more in front of him. Rick was rocking slightly where he sat, panting heavily. All at once, there was no division between the night in the clearing with everyone lined up on their knees, and now with Aaron in Rick’s sight and the bloodied body lying next to him. It was all the same, and Rick couldn’t lose Aaron next.

“You’re saying,” Negan said, voice measured and thoughtful. “All this was your fault? You instigated this?” Negan pointed Lucille toward Simon in the grass.

Dropping his eyes, Rick felt himself nodding.

“Yes. It was me,” he said. “I’m s-sorry. I’m sorry.”

There was a prolonged silence as Rick felt Negan’s eyes trailing over him. He was reminded again that he was without a shirt and felt a flush rise up his neck.

“Rules still hard to swallow,” Negan said at last.

Rick’s head sank further as he awaited the punishment, but he thought there was something noncommittal in Negan’s tone.


As the leader of the Saviors walked away, Rick was left in the grass, shell-shocked but otherwise unharmed. Ahead of him, Aaron too had been left. Eric had leapt forward from the crowd of Alexandrians as soon as the Saviors had begun clearing out, and now held Aaron in a tight embrace.

The next thing Rick felt were arms wrapped around his own shoulders as Carl appeared at his back to embrace him.

If Carl was there then the two Saviors holding guns on him were leaving too. The sight of Sid stumbling after Negan confirmed it. The pudgy Savior was speaking to the leader, gesturing backward at Rick, who didn’t have to hear what he was saying to know that Sid was complaining about the leniency of Negan’s response. Rick too felt like he’d gotten off easy.

Amidst the crowd, Negan stopped dead, turned to Sid and said something that shut him up quick.
That night as Carl helped him clean and bandage the few cuts he’d sustained in the scrap with Simon, Rick couldn’t help noticing how oddly silent his son had been since the Saviors had left. It hadn’t been a great day, sure. In fact, lately it seemed like they’d had a string of pretty damn awful days. Still, they’d made it out clear. No one died, as Negan had said in parting. There was a palpable tension though, and Rick felt it most when he tried to make eye contact or engage the boy in conversation.

“Something wrong?” Rick asked finally, both too exhausted and too sore to keep ignoring the growing roughness in the boy's touch.

Carl made a sound like a scoff as he pressed a cotton swab soaked in peroxide firmly over a cut on Rick’s back making the older man tense and grunt.

“Carl, what is it?”

With the boy at his back, Rick couldn’t see his face but heard the deep intake of breath.

“What happened, Dad?” Carl asked at last.

Rick fought his body's impulse to stiffen. “Not sure,” he said, which wasn’t a lie. “Things just… got out of hand.”

Carl seemed to accept this, and in the silence that followed, Rick felt relief that he had somehow managed in a phrase to move them past this, and he'd done it without having to lie to his son. But then Carl spoke again.

“What happened to your shirt?” There was a timer in his voice, something ticking beneath the surface.

Rick swallowed, feeling his son watching him closely. Once more, he chose honesty. “He wanted it.”

Carl’s hands left him. “He wanted it,” the teen repeated. "Your shirt?” From his incredulous tone, Carl seemed to be having as much difficulty processing the idea as Rick had when he'd first heard the request.

Fighting to keep his voice even, Rick answered, “Yeah.”

He recalled the feeling of standing in the kitchen trying to process Simon's commands, which sounded as strange to Rick as if they were in a different language. All the while, the Savior was watching Rick with those large eyes. A chill ran through him.

Carl had been silent for a while.

“Also wanted all that stuff in the kitchen,” Rick added. He turned his head to try to see what his son was doing behind him. “Left it all behind though.” He gave a soft laugh which hurt a little. “Must've forgotten about it, with the…concussion.”

Rick felt Carl’s hands return to gently apply a salve to one of the larger cuts on the back of his arm.

“Was that when you started fighting him?” Carl asked softly. “When he asked for your shirt?”

Rick sniffed, nodding. “Yeah, it was about then.” He thought about making a joke about how Negan's group had gone so far as to start stealing the shirts off people’s backs, but couldn’t find the humor in it at the moment.
“Your belt was down there.” The tenderness in Carl's tone was all but gone. “He wanted that too?”

Rick’s head fell forward and he was glad Carl was behind him. “Yeah.”

He lifted his arm slightly so Carl could wrap a band of gauze around it.

At some point, Rick had stopped trying to control his breathing. The weight of Carl’s scrutiny was dense in the room and almost overwhelming. He felt like he was already exposed and they were both now just ignoring the obvious. One damning bit of evidence haunted Rick still. He’d been fast enough to get the pants on but not fast enough to fasten them. No one had gotten as close to him as Carl after the Saviors had gone, and likely wouldn’t have noticed. In that moment, Rick’s head was scattered all over and when he noticed himself, it was already too late. He remembered how after helping him up, the teen's eyes had flicked downward to the opening of his jeans then back up. It was also then that Rick had first noticed that Simon had broken the button in his hastiness to undress him. That knowledge paired with the memory of what happened had made Rick’s face burn hot and he couldn’t meet his son’s gaze. Carl had been behaving strangely ever since.

The next question sounded more like an accusation.

“Did he ask for more, Dad?”

The moisture that had been slowly brimming spilled over then as Rick shut his eyes. " Carl." His voice cracked.

The boy's hands had left him again and Rick felt colder from the distance between them. “Carl,” he said again, turning slowly to his son. “It’s not like that.”

But it was no use. Having seen and been subjected to so much in his young life, the boy was too wise and it seemed like there was very little Rick could get past him now. Carl’s stare was fierce and confirmed what they both knew and what neither of them would soon forget.

The road to Terminus.

“Is he going to come back?” Carl’s voice was low and grave. He’d been forced into maturity in a matter a of few years and there were only traces now of that fragile boy beneath the hardened shell. Still, if there was innocence left in Rick's son it would soon be smothered by the revelation that his father was too weak to stop another man from using him that way, and to continue using him that way if it came to it. Rick couldn’t bear Carl knowing, having to see his father sink so low and unable to do anything about it. It was that fear that had kept Rick from speaking as he’d knelt before Negan in the grass earlier that day. Like a giant pit lodged in his throat, the fear of being so shamed in the eyes of his son had rendered Rick mute.

“Carl.” He reached for him, but the teen stepped back, his face twisting into a snarl.

“Is he coming back?” Carl demanded again, sounding too bitter for someone so young. “Is he going to try it again?”

Rick shook his head wordlessly, rising up from the stool to go to the recoiling boy.

“I’ll kill him. I’ll kill him if he even...” Carl's shoulders rose and he was tense all over. He looked to Rick like a cornered animal, frightened but vicious and ready to lash out.

Slowly, Rick reached out to him. “I’m sorry,” he said gently. "It’s not like that, Carl. Please.” Then, in a stride, Rick enveloped his son in his arms before the boy could pull away again. He felt the narrower shoulders shaking. “That’s not what happened," Rick whispered into the soft hair. "It’s not,
Carl’s arms were stiff at his sides, his fists balled tight. As Rick held him, he could feel his fierce, hot breaths against his neck.

He would have to take it back somehow, deny the whole thing. It was the only way. If Carl tried something, he’d be killed. It wasn’t a question. Rick didn’t doubt his son’s courage nor his love for him, but he did doubt the extent of Negan’s lenience.

“It’s not what I meant. I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Rick soothed until he felt Carl’s breathing slow and his shoulders relax. “I just misunderstood is all. That’s all, Carl. I’m alright. Really.”

“He didn’t try to…”

“No, no,” Rick urged softly, holding Carl’s head against his shoulder and rocking slightly as he would to calm Judith. “I’m sorry it came out that way. No, no. Wasn’t like that.”

He pulled away enough to look into Carl’s eyes, which were as red-rimmed and sleep-starved as Rick’s likely were. He caught the gleam of tear streaks down the flushed cheeks and wiped them away with his hand.

“I promise,” Rick said, looking his son straight in the eye. “It wasn’t nothin’ like that. I just…I got a little hot-headed when I thought I heard them getting rough in the other room. I didn’t think about it. I should’ve thought. Just a scuffle in the kitchen and it got outta hand is all.”

Rick held him there like that for a while, soothing him and assuring him everything was fine, batting away the more specific questions when he could, and lying as little as possible. By the time Carl retired to his room for the night, Rick was fairly confident that he’d assuaged Carl’s fears that anything like the road to Terminus had gone on between him and Simon. While Rick still didn’t have a feasible explanation for why he’d been caught in such a state of undress, he thought that with time, he’d be able to think up something. Because Carl was a smart kid, of course he wasn’t fully convinced, but Rick would rather Carl have doubts about a lie than be certain about the truth and end up attempting something dangerous.

Later, as Rick lay on the wool blankets in his own room, he felt oddly at peace. It wasn’t the biggest lie he’d told his son, but of them all, this one left Rick feeling like he’d done right in keeping something from him. He couldn’t bear Carl risking his life on Rick’s behalf. If keeping this a secret kept Carl safe, Rick would do it.

He just wished he knew now what it meant going forward.

He felt both regret that he hadn’t killed Simon and relief that Carl had called out to him when he had. If Rick really had killed Simon, then it was doubtful that he would have been able to stop Negan from killing Aaron for reprisal. Still, now that Simon lived, what did it mean for them? For Alexandria? For Rick. He didn’t want to think about that, but Carl had been right to pose the question.

“Will he try it again?”

Rick had been too stunned to think that far ahead and was only relieved that Carl was safe. That was the important thing.

Now, Rick would need to be careful.
This just kind of went in its own direction. Let me know what you guys think! I'd love to hear.
Surrender

Chapter Summary

Rick tries to move past what happened on the Saviors' last visit by busying himself with scavenging and preparing for upcoming pick-ups. However, he finds that his careful mask isn't fooling everyone. As a familiar face returns, Rick finds keeping both his pride intact and Alexandria safe is a very difficult balancing act.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the next week, Rick busied himself with errands and chores around and outside of Alexandria. He found himself rising earlier, unable to lay in bed with his idle thoughts.
If Michonne noticed anything strange in his recent antsiness, she didn’t bring it up and he was glad for that. It was bad enough having to skirt around Carl. Every so often Rick would catch the young man watching him, his half-concealed stare radiating either disappointment or accusation. The boy had for some time given up on voicing his frustration with how Rick was handling things and so now concentrated his emotions instead into a silent, weighty stare. Rick couldn’t decide which he preferred: when Carl was confronting him with unwanted questions and ridiculing Rick for not fighting back, or the heavy silence. Both were wearing Rick down. That coupled with Michonne’s prying eyes quickly became too much for Rick to bear and he found himself spending much of his time away from the house and scavenging for the Saviors’ next pick-up.

Rick thought he’d rather be alone, lest someone try asking him about what happened, or worse, somehow see it on him. That was ridiculous of course. No one but Rick and Simon could know about what had happened. Sometimes, though, Rick wondered if some of the other Alexadrians suspected.

Rick was sitting by himself on the stairs of his porch one day when Father Gabriel approached, pulling Rick from his thoughts that had taken him further away than he’d intended. The priest was watching him with a deep and thoughtful look that made Rick uneasy.

When Rick had announced to everyone the new arrangement with the Saviors, Father Gabriel was one of the last people Rick thought would side with him. Yet the man had held surprisingly loyal in the face of all the growing friction within the walls and responded promptly whenever Rick called upon him for assistance in aiding the people through the tough transition. Most surprising yet was the look of genuine compassion Rick sometimes found when meeting the other man’s eyes.

It was the same look that was pointed at him now as Rick stared up at the priest from his porch steps.

“You’re doing what you have to do,” Gabriel said. " No one here can say you're not doing everything in your power to keep everyone safe.”

Rick already felt his eyes beginning to burn so he lowered them as the priest went on.

“Not all of us were there that night and we can’t imagine how terrible it was to have to witness that. Just know that most of us understand the position you’ve been placed in and we’re behind you, whatever you do. We’re scared. But we’re behind you. And if you ever need an ear, I’m always here.”

Father Gabriel remained there until Rick gave a stiff nod of thanks. Then, just like that, the priest left as smoothly as he’d come, leaving Rick sniffing deeply and staring at his hands.

Father Gabriel was right that not everyone was against him, which Rick was pleased to find when Aaron volunteered to accompany him on scavenging trips. The man had a calming presence, which Rick certainly was in need of.

Still, it was the people who were against him who made Rick uneasy.

Occasionally he would catch Spencer’s eyes following him across Alexandria as Rick made his rounds to the people. He thought there was a certain calculation in the stare, a sense of waiting. Spencer was another one of those guys, like Simon, who weren’t made for leadership, but who hadn’t gotten the memo. Rick didn’t think he needed to worry about the man attempting a drastic power-grab, but still, considering what Simon had tried to do (and Rick often tried not to), he knew he shouldn’t count it out. Rick resolved to keep an eye on him.
After seven days, the Saviors returned as planned. Rick half-expected to see Simon when the iron bars slid open, but it was a Savior he didn’t recognize in charge of this one. He was also mildly surprised not to see Negan among them.

When Rick asked a Savior in passing where Negan was, the man told him in a tone that nearly made Rick flinch, that it was none of his damn concern.

That pick-up had gone as smoothly as Rick could have hoped, considering that the Saviors were carting away half of their much needed supplies. Still, as long as everyone was safe, he told himself — and no one else died— things could always be worse.

With a last nod from the group’s leader, the Saviors left and Rick turned to see Carl staring at him once more with that weighty, ocean-blue gaze. The boy still didn’t understand why they were going along with this arrangement, and every day they let it stand, he seemed to grow more frustrated with it. He knew it had taken nearly everything in the boy not to step in as the Saviors moved freely among them, taking liberties with what wasn’t theirs. Still, Carl held his tongue, and though it pained Rick to see the disappointment and fury in his son’s face, he was proud of his restraint.

Rick gave a nod and small smile to the boy. Instead of returning it however, Carl turned and walked back toward the house.

Another week later, Eugene slid open the gate and there, at the head of the group of Saviors was Negan’s second-in-command. Simon was back.

There was the noticeable yellowing of fading bruises covering his face and what parts of his body were visible, as well as few minor bandages over various cuts, the most notable of which was across the man’s prominent nose. Fractured, Rick gathered. All-in-all though he seemed little worse for wear.

Rick damned himself for daring to think that he might have seen the last of the man.

When the tall Savior’s eyes found the leader among the small gathering of Alexandrians, Rick saw a muscle leap in his jaw.

From the purple sockets of his eyes, Simon held Rick in his gaze, making the latter feel in an ominous moment as if it were only the two of them there in the street. Then the broad mouth twitched and the dark brown eyes left him.

Once again, as Rick’s eyes scanned the incoming brigade, he didn’t find Negan. While he knew that the Savior leader’s presence usually didn’t bode well, his absence made Rick uneasy too.

Because Rick had been identified as the leader of the group, it was up to him to present the supplies to the Saviors. He preferred it that way anyway; he couldn’t stomach the idea of anyone else being held responsible if something should go wrong.

There was little discussion between them as Rick lead Simon to the supplies, Negan’s right-hand man only giving occasional clipped directives and hardly meeting Rick’s eyes. Rick couldn’t help also noticing that Simon was missing that characteristic bounce in his step and didn’t seem as antagonistic as he normally was.

Maybe that beating had set the man straight, Rick thought. Maybe Rick’s mistake had been for the better. Simon was behaving more tolerably than Rick had ever seen him, if just a little agitated.
As Simon sifted through the compiled offerings, Rick waited in silence. Another week of pick-ups would soon be behind them. It hadn’t been easy gathering up all this stuff. Most of it was new; things he and Aaron had found out beyond their regular rout. They would have to go even further next time, but Rick would deal with that when it came. One week at a time.

“The fuck is this shit?” Simon asked.

Rick looked at the small item the Savior had just picked up. “Pack of gum,” he said.

“Yeah, I see that, Dipshit,” Simon spat, growing visibly more annoyed. “It’s missing two pieces.”

Rick stared at the man a moment, shifting his weight where he stood. It was becoming their routine that much of what Simon said to Rick was difficult to process. Rick’s eyes flickered for a moment to the small, silent group of on-looking Alexandrians and for the first time noticed Carl among them.

“Y’all trying to hold shit back from us now?” Simon's eyes seemed to glow from within their dark sockets.

The former deputy was left speechless.

“Anything else here missing, Rick?” the Savior spat the name as he threw a pack of cards a him. Rick caught it against his chest, eyeing Simon. “Count ‘em,” Simon demanded.

Again, Rick cursed himself for entertaining the thought that they’d moved on from their last encounter. It seemed obvious to Rick now that Simon would seek retribution for how Rick had left him.

At last, dragging his weary eyes away from Simon’s blazing ones, Rick glanced first to Carl who’d now moved to the head of the crowd, and then down to the cardboard box in his hands.

Rick removed the cards from their pack while Simon watched. As he tried to count, Rick could hear the other man breathing laboriously through his nose. Rick guessed he’d been pretty thorough in collapsing his nasal cavity.

“Well,” Simon barked, when Rick had gone through the deck twice. “All fifty-four there? I’ll tell you, it looks a little light.”

Feeling slightly dizzy, Rick sighed and looked to the sky then finally to the beaten face of Simon, who seemed to swell with anticipation.

“It’s fifty-one,” Rick said, resigned.

“Come again?” Simon turned his slightly-cut-up ear toward Rick.

Rick repeated it and the mustached Savior looked absolutely elated.

“And what the fuck am I supposed to do with a fifty-one-card deck, Rick?” Simon howled.

Rick shook his head, unable to come up with an answer. It was just too ridiculous.

“Alright, ladies and gentlemen, we’re gonna strip every single one of these houses until we find those missing cards! If any of you tries to get in the way, I will personally take that as a sign of resistance and have you beaten senseless in the street.”

Rick was trying to speak, feeling the whole situation spiraling fast out of his control.
“It’s just— It’s just … you can’t—“ he stammered, but Simon was in his face so fast Rick didn’t have time to flinch.

“Do you really want to play this, here,” he said as the rest of the Saviors whipped into action around them. “’Cause we can play, Rick. I won’t fuckin’ hesitate if that’s where you want to take this.”

It was so stupid a thing, so small, it couldn’t possibly warrant this.

Shaking his head again, Rick felt his eyes burning. He swallowed and looked down while Simon still bore into him with his bruised stare.

“Fucking right.” The man growled and spat on the ground between them.

Of course they wouldn’t find the cards. Rick already knew. Hell, Simon knew. It was just payback for Rick beating him so bad. It was all Rick. All for him, and the Alexandrian leader felt like everyone in the community knew it.

During the raid, Carl had lost hold of his temper and charged one of the saviors who was tearing a hole in their couch with a bowie knife, as if the cards would be hidden in the stuffing. It had taken Rick thrusting himself bodily between them and carefully pleading with the armed man to defuse the situation.

Carl was still snarling furiously behind him like a feral dog when the Savior, whom the teen had nearly barreled over, snapped at Rick to keep his little shit on a leash.

After urging his son to stay with Judith, Rick ran around, trying to reach as many homes as possible to calm everyone down and discourage any altercations with the Saviors. Meanwhile, Simon strode the streets. The lanky brunette’s eyes blazed from purple sockets as he took in the chaos he’d incited.

It had been two hours and Rick could see no end to it. Worse still than not knowing how it would end, was the certainty that it was his fault. Rick’s lack of restraint had done this. The very thing he’d scolded Carl for not long ago.

In his head, Rick replayed those last intense moments of the fight with Simon, and still he couldn’t get a grasp on the details. What had gotten into him? It was like he’d been thrown from his body the same moment he’d thrown them both through that window. It didn’t have to go as far as it did. Even if Rick had still thrown them out the window, he could’ve stopped it at that. He didn’t have to go on beating Simon so badly, and so publicly. A man like Simon, whose ego stood on such shaky ground, wouldn’t recover well from such a consummate defeat. No. A man like Simon could only come back much worse.

Unless something happened, Simon was just going to keep finding reasons to tear them down until he was absolutely certain that Rick was damn sorry for what he’d done. Something had to be done quick, that was for sure, and it had to be Rick who did it.

With broad strides down the main street, Rick let his purpose propel him forward. It wasn’t long before he came upon Simon, who was shoving aside an Alexandrian who hadn’t even been in his path. When his blazing brown eyes fell on Rick, Simon stopped to regard the other man, taken aback it seemed by the sudden and bold appearance of the Alexandrian leader.
For a strained moment, they both only stood there, a few paces separating them.

Simon’s hands shifted around his gun as he watched Rick with increasing wariness.

Giving a quick glance to the weapon, Rick swallowed and steeled himself. “What do you want?” Rick asked, licking his dry lips.

The street around them seemed to fall as still as Simon had, as Alexandrians and Saviors alike all stopped to observe the two leaders’ interaction.

One of Simon’s thick brows quirked upward at the plainness of the question and he gave an odd smile. He seemed to understand that Rick didn’t want the superficial answer, the "showy" answer. They both knew that Simon wasn’t looking for three rogue playing cards.

“Whatever it is, we’ll go along with it. It’s fine. You have all the power.” Rick's voice was direct but not aggressive; he needed Simon to see that he was accepting his authority and that he wanted to give him what he wanted. “You’re in charge here. We all see that. Please just…”

His head fell and his sweat-dampened hair tumbled forward. This level of supplication would be difficult for Rick in a normal situation, but in the face of a man like Simon, it was taking much more out of him. Something in Rick’s gut twisted at the thought of yielding to someone so repulsive to him, but he swallowed down his pride. For his people, he asserted. No one needed to get hurt. He could end this here.

When he lifted his eyes, he’d removed all of his resistance and felt only the nakedness of his surrender.

“What do you want,” he finished, voice so soft now he doubted their audience heard it.

The rage that had been simmering within the beaten Savior had, in the course of Rick’s speech, melted away. Now Simon watched the slighter man with open surprise.

The only way Rick knew to convey his sincere surrender to the man was to truly mean it himself. He could only hope now that his broken state was convincing. He didn’t know what more he could give the man short of dropping to is knees right there. And God, as much as Rick hated the idea, if it came to that, he would do it. He would do it if it would put an end to all this.

But it seemed that Simon didn’t need that.

After a silence that felt painfully long to Rick, the tall Savior moved forward. The former deputy fought himself from tensing up as the other man advanced nearer.

When Simon had at last come to a stop just in front of him, Rick could see that the Savior was still measuring him, still unsure of what to make of Rick’s display of subservience. Much closer now, he must have seen something because the furrow in his brow soon eased and Rick felt he could see the cogs in his head turning with a new interest.

Now that Simon had Rick’s reverence, which had previously been reserved for Negan, what would he do with it? As Rick watched Simon visibly take him in like a feast for his eyes, the former deputy hoped he hadn’t made a mistake.

Simon licked his lips, arranging his thoughts, his chest swelling around deepening breaths.

“Can’t just let this skimping on supplies fly, Rick,” he said, but Rick sensed that the real danger was gone. “Can’t let you get away thinking you can screw us like this.” It was a show again. He had to
do it for the others watching. They both knew that Rick had already given him what he wanted.

Rick forced a hasty nod, effecting a look of desperation that wasn’t all fake: he really did need to curb Simon’s violent mood before the scene escalated further. Still, Rick found himself having to call forth some of the fear that Negan stirred in him to maintain a viable air of supplication, which, try as Rick might, simply didn’t come naturally with Simon.

“Gonna need to take even more from you this time to make up for this little stunt,” Simon was saying, and Rick tried not to lean away as the man craned down further into his space. The disorienting events of two weeks ago had grown less vivid in Rick’s memories, but still loomed enough to keep him on his guard around the other man.

Rick nodded again, concealing his wariness.

Later, as he watched the Saviors taking box after box from their food storage, Rick’s jaw ached from the strain of keeping his mouth shut tight.

They needed that food. Maybe they even needed it more than Rick needed to keep Simon happy, but at the moment, Simon’s displeasure posed a more imminent danger than starvation.

So occupied with hiding his devastation at the loss of their much-needed supplies, Rick was late to notice the Savior watching him.

The taller man was gauging Rick’s reactions, waiting for him to snap, likely. Since Rick had confronted him earlier, Simon had been quietly testing him, challenging the extent of Rick’s loyalty.

Now, as Rick watched more food than his people could afford to lose get carried off, he wondered himself how much more of this he could stand.

A close presence at his side pulled Rick’s attention to Simon.

“I won’t forget about that shit you people tried to pull earlier. But this a good start to getting back in my good graces. You did good for me today.”

*Did good for Negan*, Rick couldn’t help thinking. The man had taken to skirting over the existence of the true face of their operation as if the mere mention of Negan would rob Simon of the new respect he’d managed to garner in his stead, particularly from Rick.

“Aside from that initial shit, I’d say you made me pretty happy today, Rick. Keep up that eagerness to provide and your people will live long, healthy lives.”

As if it was up to him.

Rick only nodded, face slack, as he found he didn’t have the stomach to speak.

The Saviors left and after making one last round to check on the townspeople, Rick started his slow plod back to his home. The sun was falling and everything was blanketed in a vibrant blue. As Rick reached the front steps of his house at last, he was headed off by Spencer, who once more appealed to him about how to better deal with the Saviors.

“Yes, Spencer,” Rick said, quietly imploring the man to move aside. He felt more exhausted than he had in a long time and would need to rise early tomorrow to scavenge for more food to replenish what they’d lost. He didn’t have time for another heated exchange with the son of Deanna. “We can talk tomorrow.”
“We can turn things around for the better,” Spencer urged, as Rick side-stepped him and wearily climbed his front steps. “Let me do it!” Spencer called after him. “I can talk to them.”

“No,” Rick sighed. Without turning, he entered his home and closed the door behind him.

The living room still left in disarray from the scavenging Saviors, though it looked like Carl had made some efforts to move the furniture back where it belonged. When he found the door to his son’s room shut and no evidence of Michonne, Rick felt oddly relieved; He couldn’t handle their heavy judgment at the moment. Whether it was their disappointment or sympathy, Rick could deal with none of it right now.

Although sleep called to him, Rick stopped first in Judith’s room. He just needed to feel her in his arms for a while, to just be with the warm, soft weight of her, and to breathe in her sweet, distinct scent. Although Rick would have liked to hear her voice or feel her hand grip his fingers, she was asleep and he couldn’t bring himself to wake her. Instead, Rick pressed her small fist to his mouth, kissed it, then very gently placed her back in her crib, immediately missing her grounding presence against his body.

When he looked up, Carl was standing in the doorway.

“When did you get home?” the boy asked, a slight but perceptible edge to his tone. It seemed he too had come in to check on Judith, not expecting to find his father there.

“Just now,” Rick said gruffly, then cleared his throat. “Went around to check in on everyone.” The brief moment with Judith had had a powerful effect on him. It was as if her touch was the final blow that toppled his shaky resolve. and Rick now felt overly aware of the burning in his eyes as his eldest watched him.

“How you doin’? You alright?” Rick asked hastily, more as a distraction.

Carl gave a huff.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m great, Dad.”

At that, Rick bit down, feeling his face heat up from his own blunder. He hadn’t been thinking. Of course after the day they’d had, Carl would be just as exhausted as Rick, but even more so with his added pent-up frustrated likely. All he needed now was a little provocation from his father in the form of a stupid question like that, Rick thought bitterly. He couldn’t blame the teen for his frustration. Carl had a right to be upset, certainly with him.

Although Rick tried not to show how his son’s tone wounded him, Carl must have sensed it; When the young man spoke again, his voice had softened. “You should get some sleep, Dad. Really. I’ve got Judith.”

Rick looked up at his son, who was watching him now with a new tenderness, and felt warmth swelling in his chest. This had to be hard for Carl, Rick knew. Much of it, the boy couldn’t possibly understand. Still, the evidence that Carl was at least trying to support Rick, despite his disapproval, was deeply touching.

As Rick moved past him to leave, clasping his hand briefly on the boy’s shoulder, he didn’t care that Carl could see the wells in his eyes.

Rick returned to his own bedroom, the space darkened now with the setting sun. Too exhausted, he didn’t bother to undress or remove his shoes. With no bed to lay on, he sprawled out on the blankets that were spread across the floor. His bones ached and the ground was hard but comfortable enough
for Rick to ease into slumber almost instantly.

In his last moments before deep repose, Rick thought of Carl, and of the boy’s stubbornness and ferocity. Carl’s support, though hard-earned and often wavering, was nevertheless there and it meant the world to Rick. As long as he had Carl behind him, Rick could do anything.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys for the support. It really inspires me to keep going. I hope you enjoyed the chapter. It was another heavy one I know. Let me know you thoughts!
Chapter Summary

Negan leads this week's pick-up. Rick, who feels increasingly uncomfortable around the Savior leader, wants to get it done with as fast as possible.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sooner Rick got them the guns, the sooner they’d be gone.

It seemed straight-forward enough but the Saviors had already been there upwards of an hour and they hadn’t even made it to the armory. Rick couldn't help attributing the delay to one man.

“Am I fucking crazy…”

Rick turned around to see that Negan had stopped in the middle of the street.

“Or am I picking up a pattern here?” The tall, leather-clad Savior was pointing with two fingers
toward opposite ends of the street.

After a rallying breath, Rick doubled back to where the Savior leader had stopped. Following where Negan was pointing, Rick’s attention was directed first to his own house and then to the one further down the street that once belonged to Jessie’s family. The front windows of both homes were marred by sizable holes large enough to fit the careening bodies of two grown men.

“That how you suburbanites usually handle business around here? I don’t suppose you had anything to do with *that* one?” Negan indicated to Jessie’s window.

Rick shifted where he stood and squinted down the opposite end of the street.

“*Jesus*, Rick. There’s such a thing as a damn door. You two should really get acquainted. Tell you what, you guys keep bashing in these pretty houses like they’re raining from the sky, we’ll take ‘em off your hands. How bout that? Ungrateful little shi—”

“Ready to move on,” Rick said, low but firm. He’d never been much for Negan’s flavor of small talk anyway, but he’d brave a little rudeness to get to the end of this pick-up faster.

Negan only looked amused.

“Almost. That reminds me. You and Simon been playing nice?”

Rick surveyed the street again, in lieu of an answer.

“Alright. I get it.” Negan sighed. “I know it’s kind of fucked up that I left him in charge of you guys after your little spat— which, by the way, is *still fuckin’ beyond me*. But I thought it would be the best thing. Kind of therapeutic, you know? None of this tiptoeing around each other. Thought it might force you two kids to hash things out, overcome this little set back since we’re all gonna be seeing a lot of each other from here on out. Who knows, maybe you guys could even— I don’t know— *make friends*. Like you and me!” He added with a big, toothy smile.

Rick almost rolled his eyes then, a strange urge that hit him more frequently since he’d started spending time with the Savior leader.

“You remember how we used to be?” Negan spoke as if it were a fond and distant memory. “Shit was crazy then, huh? Now look at us!” He flung an arm over Rick’s shoulder, trapping the slighter man against him. “You’d never know, seeing us now, that you slaughtered a dozen of my people in cold blood.”

Rick flinched.

“And yeah,” Negan added, leaning in despite Rick’s clear discomfort. “I realize I just skirted over the two dudes I popped with Lucille, but let’s just say I was being *fucking generous* when I said “a dozen” just now. Yeah, try *that*— plus twenty. You got a real psychotic streak, you know that, Rick? Still waiting on that apology, by the way. Wasn’t gonna say anything.”

Rick kept his eyes on Negan’s, fighting to keep the contempt down. As the Savior leader held Rick in the full grip of his attention however, Negan’s expression softened and his smile returned.

“Ah, I’m shitting you! It’s fine. I know you guys are busting your asses to pay for it. But really. How’re things with ol’ Simon? Y’all making s’mores and singing songs by the camp fire yet? I only hear from Simon. It’d be nice to get your end.” His lip was in his teeth and his gaze dipped downward.
Rick did roll his eyes then.

Releasing Rick at last, Negan chuckled heartily. The former deputy felt instantly more at ease with the distance.

“Speak of the devil himself! There’s the man right there. We were just talking about you.”

Rick caught Simon’s eye briefly before they were fixed firmly on Negan.

“What can I do for you, boss?” Simon asked, sharing a familial grin with his leader. Rick couldn’t help noticing how relaxed Simon was. Bored even. The casual attitude was alarming to Rick, who didn’t think he’d ever stop walking on eggshells around Negan.

“Just asking Rick here how you guys are adjusting to the arrangement. Everything going smooth? No more… incidents?”

Simon’s tongue swept across his teeth as he took his time to answer Negan, something that also struck Rick.

“All good here, boss,” he said at last and, to Rick’s bemusement, even shrugged.

When he realized both men were now staring at him, Rick gave a nod, keeping his expression closed. “It’s good,” he said, his throat feeling constricted.

“Good,” Negan said. He caught his tongue in his teeth as his eyes shifted between them. “Good.”

At last, they moved on to the armory— or what had once been the armory but, since the Saviors had taken all their guns that first day, had become a barren room with empty shelves and a table. Simon lagged behind as he did when Negan lead the pick-ups, only emerging from the group of faceless Saviors when called upon. On visits with the Savior leader, it was Negan who handled the business, Negan who handled Rick.

Laid across a table were three guns which Rick had found among a cluster of walkers during his last run. He didn’t dare hide them away, what with the Saviors’ random inspections and raids. When Michonne had first seen them upon Rick’s return, she pleaded with him to hold at least one back, but Rick wouldn’t hear it. She was more frustrated than angry with him. The same couldn’t be said for Carl, who’d shoved Rick as he was on his way to drop the guns off at the armory. What’s wrong with you? The boy had screamed as Rick had stared back, wide-eyed and reeling from the power in the blow. When he found his voice again, Rick told his son they’d talk about it later, but Carl had already gone when Rick returned.

Now, in the armory, Negan whistled appreciatively at the proffered weapons on the table. The rest of the Saviors had followed them in and Rick felt a prickling on the back of his neck.

“Shiny.” Negan regarded the guns then turned to Rick. “Did you even wipe these down for me, Rick?”

The guns had been logged down with grime and gore when Rick had taken them off the walkers. It was natural that he would clean them and had done so without thinking. Still, he dropped his head at the implications.

Negan prowled around the table and approached the Alexandrian, stopping when he was well within Rick’s personal space.

“Well,” he said. “Aren’t you just as sweet as cherry pie.”
Rick stepped away, putting some space between them. He felt the prickling at the back of his neck again and didn’t need to turn around to know what he’d find.

“You have what you need,” Rick said hastily, to cover his discomfort.

“Watch your tone,” the Savior called Arat barked. Rick stiffened.

Negan’s smile didn’t falter. “Well, let’s move on then,” he said.

Although the Saviors did have what they came for, they weren’t done. Because Negan’s visits to Alexandria were so sparse, the leader of the Savior gang liked a full tour of the community. Rick should have expected as much and was foolish to hope he could be rid of them so soon.

Now, at the head of the group and with Rick as his chaperone, Negan swaggered from station to station, belting out greetings to every townsperson they met, grinning from ear to ear all the while. Rick couldn’t help feeling, with the flank of soldiers trailing behind them that they looked like a parade procession, and Negan the presidential candidate showing face for the public, shaking hands, kissing babies.

Somehow, Negan remembered many of the people’s names and struck up conversations as they went along, picking up threads they’d left off on in his last visit. It was striking what he remembered about them all. Rick wondered suspiciously if Negan had one of his Saviors keeping up a journal of names and corresponding information for each of them, so Negan could be up to date on each visit. Rick might have been impressed if he wasn’t so on edge.

He just needed this pick-up to end. He fought the urge to look over his shoulder.

On their visit to the medical center, Negan stopped suddenly. “Oh, shit!” He gasped. “There’s a fucking window over there! Nobody make any sudden movements. Rick might get excited and throw someone through it— shit, sorry, Simon. Didn’t see you there.” The yikes face he made then was for Rick, but the Saviors all laughed.

The camaraderie between Negan and his Saviors never failed to surprised Rick. They took their leader’s jabs good-naturedly and even returned it sometimes. They were all used to Negan, unlike Rick, who didn’t think he’d ever have a handle on the man.

The comment at the lieutenant’s expense had drawn everyone’s attention to the tall Savior. Without thinking, Rick too looked back then regretted it instantly.

Like everyone else, Simon was enjoying the reference to his recent tumble, grinning in his sardonic way, but his eyes were on Rick. The large, sunken orbs held his gaze a moment before drifting downward. Unconsciously, Rick followed the gaze down to the bat in his own hand. He shot a look back at Simon before following after Negan.

When Negan lead the pick-ups, he usually made Rick hold his bat— Lucille, as she was called. The dense weight of her and the bitter taste it left in Rick’s mouth was bad enough, but what made it worse were the looks it attracted. Carl was always incensed, Grimacing openly and containing his rage in tight fists; Michonne (if she stuck around), was ambivalent, wounded by the sight but hiding it behind a practiced mask. Rick had once caught Aaron staring at it ashen-faced, and when the younger man had noticed Rick, he turned away at once. Those who hadn’t been there that night were rightly confused by the sight of Rick holding such a thing, but still somehow seemed to pick-up the message. Negan was good about sending messages.

As far as the Saviors, Rick didn’t care how they saw it. Most didn’t spare it a glance half the time,
and only seemed to care that Rick knew his place. It wasn’t until Rick had caught Simon’s dark eyes trailing down the weapon on that first pick-up, that he became deeply self-conscious about it. There was always an odd curve to the broad lips, a slant in his eyes. It was as if he was reading something more from Rick’s chore than the obvious. The obvious being that Rick was now so thoroughly whipped that he could be tasked to carry the weapon that bludgeoned his friends to death. Rick got that. As much as it repulsed him, he got it and so did everyone else. But it seemed like Simon was gleaning some other symbolism from it.

As they moved through the gardens, Rick bristled, feeling the familiar prickling on the back of his neck almost constantly. He shot a look back at the source in time to catch the brown eyes sliding once more down to the bat in his hand.

Unconsciously, Rick gripped Lucille’s handle more firmly. It kept slipping as his palms grew more sweaty.

They’d reached the church now and Rick was once more pulled under Negan’s arm.

It was hard to focus on the words being spoken low into his ear when Rick felt the peripheral tug of a secret audience, watching them with that insinuating gaze.

He caught something about Father Gabriel and the fucking willies.

He wished Negan wouldn’t do that. The close-talking and over-familiar handling already put Rick on edge but with the added spectacle of it…the feeling of another set of eyes watching it, warping it …

The worst was when Negan would wave his soldiers ahead so he could speak with Rick alone. Rick had come to expect the way one particular set of brown eyes among the receding crowd would linger back on him in that knowing way that never failed to make Rick’s skin crawl.

Usually, Negan was just sharing a joke or clarifying something, but lately Rick had become aware that the way Negan spoke to him—always so much lower and closer than he needed to—was sending misleading messages to onlookers.

Even now, as Negan shooed out the small cluster of townspeople who’d been praying in the benches, and barked at Father Gabriel to "beat feet", Rick felt a chill of self-awareness. Stupidly, Rick began to clear out of the church with the rest of them, but Negan’s hand on his collar stopped him in his tracks.

Among the flock of concerned faces being expelled from the church, Gabriel looked back at Rick. The leader steeled himself and gave the priest what he hoped was a reassuring nod. Behind Gabriel, Rick caught the eyes he’d been avoiding all day. Thus far, Rick had been quick to look away when they accidentally met, but now he felt trapped by the other man’s powerful gaze. A knowing smile spread beneath the mustache and Rick felt sick.

Moments later, Rick was standing on the wrong side of the church doors, alone with Negan, again.

His back was against the door, his stomach in his throat, his mind in the yard outside.

At the head of the church, Negan began belting Slayer at the top of his lungs.

Rick felt a bead of sweat dribble down his rib cage beneath his shirt. His sweat glands always worked overtime in Negan’s presence, but somehow outdid themselves when Negan got him alone. Flashes of the trailer and the axe on the roof had definitely lent to Rick’s uneasiness but lately, something else made Rick dread the man's undivided attention.
“I have always wanted to do that,” Negan hooted after finishing the chorus.

He looked positively elated and almost skipped back up the aisle toward Rick, who hadn’t moved from the door.


“Stop.”

“You know, in old-fashion church houses like this, the acoustics are fucking phenomenal.” He whistled as if to demonstrate, not that it was necessary after his performance. 'They make ‘em that way so the preacher doesn’t need a microphone. They’re natural fucking concert halls. Soon as I find a decent fender, I’m gonna blow the fucking roof off this place. You can do bass. Wait, no— keyboards?’

“Stop.”

“Well, you’re not a fucking drummer, Rick. I can tell that shit at least. What do you want, a tambourine? Christ. Fine. You can be lead guitar. But I know you heard that shit just now. You are not taking vocals from me.”

Negan’s advance had slowed as he drew nearer, until he was directly in front of Rick. His head fell to one side as he took in the slighter man.

“What the fuck is up with you?” He asked at last, making Rick blink. “You are one morose mother fucker today.”

Negan was standing so close that their chests nearly touched, and Rick had nowhere to back away.


“Stop,” Rick said again, but it was even softer than before. Negan was leaning into him.

“Stop what, Rick?” The tone was light and Rick could hear the peevish grin in it.

Negan probably thought he was just ruffling Rick’s feathers, fucking with him like making him hold the bat. Rick wouldn’t be surprised to find that Negan’s visits were more to do with watching Rick squirm than anything else. The tribute was just an added bonus. Negan couldn’t know what was really happening, what he was really doing to him.

“Don’t…don’t do this. Don’t do this.” Rick shook his head at the ground. He knew he needed to keep himself together but it was taking all he had.

Negan kept smiling like he was completely unaware of the position Rick was in. “Don’t do what, Rick?”

Rick lifted his gaze as Negan swiped absently at a curl that had tumbled over Rick’s face.

This had to stop. Rick’s eyes swept over the many windows. They’d already been in there too long.

“It’s a fucking shame about Metallica, Rick. I gotta say. Real fucking disappointment. It’s really gonna mess with me that you’re not a Slayer fan. I don’t even think I feel comfortable with you holding Lucille.”
As Negan mentioned it, Rick felt the handle sliding in his sweaty grip. There was nothing he could say, nothing that would get through.

“You’re as tight as a pissy little clam today. What’s going on up in that noggin, Grimes?” Negan tapped lightly at Rick’s head like a kid taps the glass at a zoo.

Rick almost laughed.

What could he say? Could he tell him to stop touching him in front of his men? That every time Negan leaned in close or whispered in his ear, they were being watched closely? That every time Negan pulled Rick aside to speak in private, it looked like they were doing more than just talking about “Freaky Father Gabriel” and metal bands? Could he tell him that every time Negan made Rick hold his bat, what it really looked like was Rick keeping his dick warm for him?

Negan was studying him. Too easily, Rick could imagine the keen features twisted into cruel laughter.

Rick couldn’t say it. He couldn’t say it any more than he could confess that he’d been stripped down to his boxers in his own kitchen while his boy was held in the next room with a gun on him, nor the things Simon had said to him as he pressed Rick against the wall and touched him like he was just another item on a long list of property, nor that Rick hadn’t stopped it until the other man had his hand buried down the back of his shorts.

And even if Negan didn’t use it against Rick, what good would it do to tell him? What difference would it make to Negan, who’d already taken so much from them, to know that someone else was taking a little more? And to know that that someone was none other than his own appointed second-in-command?

No, Rick didn't see how it would matter.

It was beyond that though, wasn’t it. Simon wasn’t just taking blindly from Rick; His sense of entitlement was somehow warped to include everything that was Negan’s. And because Simon saw Negan whispering to Rick, handling Rick, pulling Rick aside into closed quarters, Simon too thought he could do those things to Rick. Worse, he thought that Rick owed it to him.

Rick remembered how at-ease Simon seemed with Negan, while Rick himself was a complete wreck. It was because the lieutenant genuinely didn’t think he was overstepping any boundaries. He thought he had every right to do to Rick what Negan did. The problem was that he thought Negan was doing much more.

It was maddening.

Rick saw it happening but couldn’t stop it. Negan wouldn’t stop it. The Savior leader wouldn’t stop pulling Rick close, whispering to him, shoving him into side-rooms and shutting the door behind them. Negan seemed to have no idea how much harder he was making things for Rick.

“I’m waiting, Rick.” The tone was teasing, but it was the last warning Rick would get, he knew.

Still, as Rick looked frantically from one hooded brown eye to the other, he felt hopeless, his tongue lame and fumbling in his mouth.

With nothing to say, Rick reached. “I’m… I’m sick,” he said at last.

“Well, shit. You look sick,” Negan observed. “Like you don’t sleep, Rick.”
Rick shook his head at the ground idly. “I… do alright. Just… got a lot goin’ on these days.” This wasn’t a lie. Sleep did come with more difficulty lately, despite the long days.

“Well, shit.” Negan said again, but with an air of conclusion. “You need a bed.”

Rick looked up.

“No, that’s—”

“Nonsense. You’re the leader. You oughta sleep like it.”

A loud bang sounded next to his head and before Rick knew what was happening, he was tumbling backward.

Negan had opened the door Rick had been backed against, and Rick would have landed flat on his back in the churchyard if Gabriel hadn’t been there to catch him. The priest’s eyes were scanning him as if for some injury. Rick was panting and squinting into the sudden sunlight unsure himself for a moment that he hadn’t sustained some blow.

When he scanned the bright yard, he saw that Negan was already cutting through the crowd, belting out orders and rallying his men for departure. Lucille was hoisted over one shoulder, and Rick guessed he’d snatched it as Rick was still reeling.

Simon was there among the Saviors. On his face was the familiar look of foregone conclusion, which Rick had come to expect. It was worse now though. Rick could guess how he must look. He dropped his head to hide his damp and burning face. He was shaking and he knew it. It always took so little for Negan to totally knock him off kilter. The shaking would stop with a little time.

He didn’t want to think what Simon made of the state of him and shoved the thought away, turning his attention instead to Gabriel, whom he thanked and reassured.

On his way to see the Saviors off at the gate, Rick’s breath caught in his throat. As he looked to the head of the group of departing Saviors, Rick saw Negan had come to a stop next to a small gathering of Alexandrians.

Carl was there.

The Savior leader was turning his serious gaze to the young man and seemed be speaking to him.

Rick was propelled forward. He tried to fight his way through the throng but the crowd seemed to be working against him.

Rick could only watch from afar, craning his neck over the heads of the soldiers to see. Unable to hear what was being said, Rick was glad at least that it was only words being exchanged. On more occasions than he cared to count, he’d had to flash a warning glance to Carl when the young man looked like he might charge the Savior leader. Carl’s fire seemed to burn fiercest when Negan made Rick hold the bat or when he caught Negan teasing him. If Simon’s stares were invasive, Carl’s were condemning. The boy just didn’t understand that what Rick was doing was not out of fear but out of responsibility to his people. Although he would never say it, Carl saw it as weakness. Still, Rick would gladly take Carl’s disappointment if it meant sparing him from much worse.

Still, he worried about the boy’s fast temper.

When Rick looked to the head of the street again, Negan had thankfully moved on, leaving Carl staring after him. The teen wore an odd look on his face but was otherwise composed.
Rick, who’d abandoned his efforts at reaching the head of the crowd, was suddenly knocked forward as someone pushed forcibly past him. When he looked up he saw the familiar stride of Simon, who glanced back as he advanced up the street with the rest of the Saviors.

Rick spared him only the briefest look of derision before his attention went back to the gate, where he caught a last glimpse of Negan’s leather jacket before it vanished into the passenger’s side of a large truck.

With all the supplies loaded up, the vehicles began turning around.

"Y’all take care now!" Negan shouted, smiling out the passenger side window and shooting a leather-clad peace sign. His eyes found Rick’s and held them until the truck had turned around and they were on their way back to the Sanctuary.

“What did Negan say to you?” Rick asked later, half distracted with wiping tomato sauce from Judith’s chin.

Carl was washing the dishes and he looked back only briefly when he’d heard his father’s question.

Rick hadn’t had to ask him to do the dishes and it was surprised when Carl had immediately stood up after finishing his plate and began cleaning.

“Nothing,” he said, but there were only traces of the usual bite in his tone. “Just…nothing. It’s alright, Dad.”

Something in it didn’t sit right with Rick.

Lifting Judith from her high-chair, Rick went to stand in the kitchen doorway. “Carl, what did Negan say?” He asked again, forcing an edge in his tone.

Carl shook his shaggy head dismissively as he dried the cleaned dishes with a rag.

“It’s fine, Dad. Seriously.”

Judith was making small, conversational noises on Rick’s hip, and he bounced her idly as he frowned at his son’s back.

“Carl, I want to know what he said. Tell me.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it, Dad. You’re making Judith nervous.” Carl turned and leaned against the counter. He had a patronizing look as he eyed his father. “Really, it’s fine. I promise. It’s late. Why don’t you get some rest, Dad. You’ve had a long day.”

“No, I—I have to get Judith ready for bed. Then I’ll,” Rick said, momentarily distracted. “But, no—hey, we’re not done—”

Carl was stepping forward with his arms outstretched.
“I’ll get Judith ready for bed,” He said, his voice held a weary tone which sounded more seasoned than it ought to have. “You rest. You look half-dead, Dad. You always do after pick-ups.”

As he allowed Carl to take Judith from his arms, Rick caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the darkened window pane. His grey-blue eyes peered out from dark circles and the lines on his forehead looked more pronounced than he remembered. He couldn't argue with Carl’s assessment.

“Alright. But you're still gonna talk to me.” He asserted, while noting how tired he sounded.

“Fine.” Carl sighed and walking away with Judith in his arms.

When Rick was on his way to collapse on his bedroom floor, he passed by Judith’s room and saw Carl gently rocking the small girl in his arms.

Carl could look so grown-up sometimes. Rick had to stop and come to grips with just how much the boy had seen in his life. It was a staggering amount for a mere fifteen years.

He must have been lingering there in the doorway for a while because Carl had noticed him and was speaking to him.

“He told me I should help you out more,” the young man said softly as he laid a sleeping Judith down in her crib for the night.

Rick blinked.

“He said you work really hard and could use a break sometimes. He said I should take better care of you. Negan's an asshole—" Rick bit down the impulse to scold him in favor of hearing him out. Carl, noticing it, continued. "He is. And he needs to pay for what he did...but he was right. You do work really hard, Dad. You go out there every day, scavenging and hunting to make sure everyone is fed and safe. I don't give you enough credit for it, Dad.”

When Carl finished he was looking down as if he were studying Judith’s dozing face, but Rick could see the coloring of his ears poking out from the draping hair.

Rick too felt warmth climbing his face. Although Carl had said it, it was Negan’s voice he heard.

Help out your pops sometimes, kid. Your old man’s putting his ass on the line.

Rick thought back to the way Carl had been behaving since the Saviors had left earlier. Aside from coming off a little distracted, he’d been unusually receptive to his father. There was none of that snapping confrontation Rick usually met when he tried to engage the boy after pick-ups. Carl had even gone around with him to some of the houses, checking in on people, as was Rick’s routine after visits from the Saviors.

It had occurred to him that his son's suddenly softened attitude might have something to do with the brief moment he'd shared with Negan at the gates. Still, he couldn't be certain about it until now.

After a moment, Rick moved forward. He embraced his son, breathing a thank you into his hair, then leaned down to place a kiss on Judith’s head.
As Rick lay alone on the floor in his room (Michonne was still gone on what had become her weekly hunt), he didn’t think of the short week between now and the next pick-up, nor the knowledge that Simon would be likely heading it and the dread that came with that. Instead, it was Negan who occupied Rick’s thoughts.

What he’d said to Carl as he left was disconcerting, but then so was everything else Negan did, Rick guessed. Try as he might, Rick just couldn’t get a handle on the man. But it wasn’t really Rick’s place to get a handle on Negan, was it? Wasn’t Rick’s place to get a handle on anyone anymore really.

*Your part is you give it up.*

Rick’s final thoughts before drifting off to sleep were of Negan’s last words before he’d bounded out of the church and left Rick stumbling behind him.

A bed.

Had he really meant that? Of all the damn things.

Negan would smile as he killed Rick’s friends, drive their town to starvation with weekly supply pick-ups, unleash Walkers on an unarmed village. Yet, the moment Rick expressed the slightest discomfort, Negan nearly jumped at the idea of fixing it.

It was baffling. Rick regretted the excuse he’d thoughtlessly blurted out under the pressure of Negan’s scrutiny. He certainly didn’t want the Saviors delivering a bed to his house. And with all of Alexandria watching...

The idea was enough to make Rick break out in a sweat again.

He only prayed it was an empty threat.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys. So, I just wanted to say that I love Michonne (and Richonne). Her absence is not a sign of contempt from the author. Just wanted to clarify that. I love me some Michonne. Not only is that just not what this fic is about, but I just don't see her hanging around while Rick shuts himself in like this. Alright, now that that's out of the way.

This chapter was a challenge to write but I'm really excited about it. Let me know what you guys think!
Chapter Summary

Negan isn't at the next pick-up and Simon seems to bear some resentment about the Savior leader's last visit.

Chapter Notes

As Rick had expected, Negan wasn’t at the next pick-up.

Eugene pulled open the gates to reveal only Simon at the head of the ranks. Rick steeled himself for the day ahead of him.

“Don’t suppose you got any more magic guns lyin’ around here,” Simon said, brushing past Rick and thus setting the tone for the rest of the day.
They raided everything, again.

Rick should have expected it. He couldn’t just go weeks without scrounging up a weapon of any kind and then suddenly have three loaded rifles on the day Negan shows up. Of course Simon thought it was planned, as if Rick could predict when Negan would be there.

Now Rick regretted not holding any back— at least one, as Michonne had urged. Then he would’ve had something to placate Simon with.

As it was, he had nothing.

Powerless and restless, Rick lead the Saviors up the main road, watching as house after house was stripped for guns that weren’t there. His people fled to the streets, horrified and confused, and Rick could do nothing for them.

He looked over at Simon, who grinned back with his too-straight teeth that reminded Rick of a jackass.

As if reading Rick’s thoughts, Simon winked and turned back to the chaos he’d incited.

Rick knew what was going on. This was spite. Plain and simple. Still, Rick couldn’t help thinking there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. The true source of the conflict was something completely beyond his control. Maybe Simon even knew that.

Outside of the church, he watched as the Saviors ransacked the building, once more halting the congregation and telling Father Gabriel to step outside.

“Reminiscing?” Simon said, coming up behind where Rick was standing in the doorway. “Fond memories in there, huh?” He did the smile again and without waiting for a response, strode inside to join the search.

Rick grimaced after him.

That’s what all this was about. The guns, the raid. It all came down to what Simon believed to be the nature of Negan and Rick’s relationship.

Rick couldn’t help the way Negan treated him. It was true that the Savior leader spent more time with Rick than any other Alexandrian, but that was to be expected; Rick was the leader. Of course he would bear the brunt of Negan’s more ardent attention. And maybe Rick preferred it that way— hell, he might’ve even provoked it a little bit sometimes, if just to keep the dangerous man’s focus aimed at himself and away from the others. But here was Simon, acting as if Rick was provoking something else.

What was more jarring was that Simon didn’t seem bothered by that part of it. Clearly, he felt a certain entitlement to Rick, but no more than Negan did. Equal even.

In a backwards way, it reminded Rick of the Claimers, whom Daryl had told him about after they’d gotten far away from Terminus and when enough time had passed that Rick could talk about it without tasting the coppery blood on his tongue and feeling the clumps of flesh in his teeth. The Claimers had a verbal calling system for taking individual ownership of items, food, beds,— people — and didn’t share what they claimed. Rick supposed it was the opposite with the Saviors, who
operated as more of a single unit. If any one person owned something, they all did. It seemed that Rick wasn’t doing his part for the unit.

Later, in a narrow alley between two houses, it was made more clear to him as Simon prodded his chest with the barrel of his rifle.

“I don’t think I need to remind you who you’re dealing with, Rick.”

He really didn't. “I know,” Rick said.

Simon took a step closer. “Who am I, Rick?”

Some time later, Rick was in the street again, feeling more damp and disheveled than when he’d left it and tasting copper in his mouth. Dragging his sleeve across his lips, he fought to stand straight despite the sharp ache that seemed to encompass all of his mid-section. In the chaos of the gun raid, no one noticed his and Simon’s prolonged absence. Carl wasn’t around either. After the boy had lunged at Simon twice—first when the Savior had shoved Rick forward so hard the man nearly fell, then later when he’d accused him of holding back supplies—Rick had finally told the boy, in a tone harsher than he’d meant, to go back to the house and help Olivia.

Like Simon, Carl was also growing more difficult to handle. As if sensing something different in the way Simon chided and got in his father’s face, Carl’s violent reactions were harder to rein in than when it was Negan doing the same thing. The boy was always wiser that Rick gave him credit for. He picked up on a lot. It inspired both pride and anxiety in Rick.

As they caught up with the group, Rick found the ground held more interest to him than his surroundings and there his eyes remained until the end of the pick-up.

The morning before the pick-up and gun raid with Simon, Michonne had found Rick in the church. At the time, he’d thought he was alone, when she came up behind him.

“I didn’t want to interrupt,” she said, “You looked so…”

Tired, Rick thought, knowing full well how he looked.

“Delicate,” she said instead, making Rick blink.

She moved closer then and ran her fingers through his hair. When he looked up, she pressed a kiss to his lips. Rick returned it, dazedly.

“I’m going,” she said, their noses nearly touching. Rick understood and nodded.

Then she was gone.

That had been three days ago and Rick hadn’t seen her since. Another long hunt he guessed.

Now, Rick found himself back in the same spot, still dwelling on what she’d said.
He was alone again, arms crossed over the seatback in front of him, facing straight ahead to the pulpit.

Delicate.

She’d said it soft and with an undeniable affection, but that didn’t lessen the sting. Delicate was not what Rick needed to be. Wasn’t what Alexandria needed. Certainly wasn’t what Carl and Judith needed.

They needed strength, stability.

But those weren’t right either, he supposed.

He absently ran a hand over his aching ribs, feeling the texture of the bandage beneath his shirt. No serious fractures but Tara had said it was close. She’d listened in silence as he painted an overly detailed picture of a nasty scuffle during a run. When he was done she was watching him skeptically. Sensing how feeble the cover story had been, Rick finally just leveled her with a look he hoped conveyed that she owed him more than she owed Carl. It seemed effective enough because she didn’t ask any more questions and Rick left, feeling fairly sure, though not as sure as he’d like, that she wouldn’t tell his son what she’d seen.

When the feel of the bandage began to conjure up different memories, ones with a towering mass and the paneled side of a house across a narrow alley, Rick shut his eyes and returned his hand to the bench in front of him.

Delicate.

Maybe that’s what he was. Maybe he’d been fooling himself all this time trying to fit into the role of the strong leader. Maybe if Rick had just been delicate from the start, kept his head down, mouth shut instead of trying to stand up for something, the Saviors never would’ve pointed him out that day in the lineup. Negan never would’ve dragged Rick into the trailer and thrown him into a horde of Walkers. Simon never would’ve gotten it in his head that Rick was some piece of property to be passed around—

Visions of the alley once more flashed in Rick’s mind without his consent and he cursed beneath his breath. It was out before he could stop it and he froze. He wasn’t particularly religious, or even close. Still, some things felt wrong. He gave an apologetic nod to the cross at the head of the room.

Rick appreciated the peace of the church.

It was better than lying in his room at night with his thoughts. Here felt somehow safer. Despite the expansive walls and high ceiling, it felt more private. He didn’t feel like his thoughts would seep through the walls and invade his children’s bedrooms. Here, the horror and fear he couldn’t show his people felt contained.

The emptiness of the surrounding benches was also a comfort. Lately, Rick had developed a level of distrust of the Alexandrians. He felt their eyes on him sometimes as he moved through town.

Did they all know what kind of man he was? Like Michonne, could they all see it? Was it only Rick who didn’t see? Why had no one told him before? Not Daryl, not Herschell, not Glenn. No one told him he had something in him that made people like Simon think they could pick him out of a group and peele him apart.

He clenched his fists until his palms stung.
Is that what Shane had been trying to tell him?

Feeling another presence at his back, Rick turned quickly, half expecting to see Michonne again. It was Father Gabrielle.

Although Rick preferred his own company in the church, he found he didn’t mind Gabriel. He didn't know when that had happened.

“Spencer's been behaving strangely.”

The mention of Spencer caused a sinking sensation deep in Rick’s stomach. He choked down another flash of memory from the last pickup, before it could rise again.

“What do you mean?” Rick affected ignorance, though his voice sounded thin and dry in his own ears.

“I can’t help feeling like he’s going to try something,” Gabriel said beside him, wringing his hands slightly in his lap. "He seems…more tense lately. I don’t know. I hear him talking to the others in whispers.”

“What is he saying?” Rick asked, more quickly than he meant to. He was reluctant to meet the priest's eyes.

Gabriel blinked at him. “Well, the usual. You know. Complaining about your leadership, talking about how we’d all be better off if you just let him take charge.”

Rick released a breath that turned into a kind of laugh. He felt himself relax.

“Oh yeah?” He huffed. Rick didn’t need to press for more details. He’d known for some time that Spencer had been going around him, trying to rally people against him. Even before the death of Deanna, Spencer had been outwardly opposed to Rick’s brand of leadership. There were few in Alexandria who didn’t know he felt entitled to Rick’s position. Rick wondered, with some unease, if what had happened at the last pickup had played some role in Spencer's renewed efforts.

Rick couldn’t dwell on it. Spencer, who seemed to possess none of his mother’s natural poise and resolve, didn’t threaten him. Somehow, Rick saw the young man as an even lesser insect than Simon. Rick simply couldn’t bring himself to devote any of his efforts to placating the man when there were so many other real and pressing things to deal with. Fortunately, it didn’t seem like Spencer’s sentiments about Rick’s leadership had caught on. Even though many people did disapprove of the arrangement with the Saviors, few seemed to trust Spencer to find them to a way out of it. The man couldn’t even shoot a gun. No, it was safer that Spencer be kept out of the spotlight— safer for Alexandria, but mostly for Spencer.

“I’d watch out for him, Rick,” Gabriel warned, apparently reading the dismissal in Rick’s face. “He’s different in a way. I’ve been watching him.”

“Have you?” Rick cocked a brow at the priest.

Noting Rick’s tone, Gabriel gave him a disproving look. “I’m serious. Most of the time people don’t notice me, or they aren’t threatened. So I’m able to pick up on a lot more than they know.”
Although skeptical at first, Rick took a moment to consider this. It was true. Even the Saviors barely interfered with Gabriel. He had a way of floating through Alexandria like a neutral presence, a ghost. A few times, he’d even surprised Negan, which had earned him the moniker “Freaky Father Gabriel,” from the man himself. Rick wondered how much of it was the collar or if it was just the passive, almost sedative energy that seemed to radiate from the man. It was certainly what made Rick feel more at ease around him than many of the other Alexandrians.

“So, you understand, I’m able to see sides of people that they only show when they think no one’s watching.”

“Alright,” Rick said.

“I see things, Rick,” The priest insisted. Something in the pause that followed and the weight in the man’s gaze made the back of Rick’s neck prickle.

What was Gabriel getting at?

“Things no one else even thinks to notice. I normally try not to interfere when it’s not my business but I’m telling you now because it concerns you. Directly.”

Rick’s head pounded with the rapidly accelerating pace of his own heartbeat.

“Spencer’s been watching you.”

“S-Spencer?” Rick croaked.

“Yes, but there’s something in it, something dangerous. I’m afraid he’s going to try something.”

“Has he...” Rick tried to look distracted by a scrape on his knuckle. “Has he said anything to you?”

“No. But like I said, I see it.”

At last, feeling his body beginning to cool down, Rick took a deep breath.

“Thank you, Gabriel. I’ll keep an eye out.”

He patted the other man on the shoulder and rose to leave.

“And Rick.”

The leader turned.

“Spencer isn’t the only one I’ve been watching.”

Rick swallowed, his heart rate picking up again.

“I said it before, and I meant it, Rick. If you need anything, even just an ear to listen, I’m here.”

Rick gave a stiff nod to the priest and turned once more to leave the church.

In his room that night, it came back to him as he knew it would. Outside of the safety of the church walls, it was like he’d become a beacon and the memories came swarming.
It was three days ago now but no less vivid.

He closed his eyes and the next moment was standing in front of Simon, feeling the unyielding weight of the man’s accusation bearing down on him.

When Simon had shoved him into the narrow space between the houses, Rick had thought the man would just berate him again about the damn guns.

“I picked those guns off a group of Walkers the day before y’all came,” Rick said again, but he was tired and it lacked conviction. He’d already told Simon twice but the Savior hadn’t been listening, and wasn’t now. He was determined that Rick had meant to hold those guns back so he could be the one to give them to Negan. Did Simon think they were a gift? An attempt to garner favor? It was ludicrous no matter the angle and Rick couldn’t begin to reason with it.

“You sure? Seems a little convenient to me. I don’t like the idea of you holding things back from me just to gift special for Negan. You give up your shit when you get it.”

"I told you already, we never held nothin' back."

“How you gonna make it up, Rick?”

Rick’s frustration had been steadily building all day and was now coming to a head. As it was, it was taking nearly everything he had to stomach all of Simon’s petty demands and condescension, but when the man started demanding more than the tribute which Rick had made damn sure was exactly up to standards, Rick couldn’t bite his tongue any longer.

“No,” he’d said, trying to keep his voice level. “No. You take what’s there, no more. You’re already tearing apart these people’s homes for some… damn guns they’re not gonna find. Just take the supplies and— and…”

As he spoke, he was growing so passionate that he didn’t notice Simon was hardly listening.

“We gave you everything—everything you asked for—“

“Yeah, that was before you started holding shit back. I say there’s not enough there, Rick. which means there’s not enough there.”

Rick was so furious his eyes had started burning. He gave a few shakes of his head to rid himself of the violence threatening to overtake him. He already knew he’d do it, whatever it was. He’d done so much already to keep the Saviors off their backs. He wouldn’t just throw it all away now.”

“Alright, I’ll…I’ll… have more next time.” He applied pressure to the bridge of his nose. “We-we’ll make it up. We’ll…we’ll find more guns. We’ll work harder.”

In his head, he began plotting out the areas nearby he might have missed and even places further out he would need to scavenge. As he thought of how he’d explain to Eric why he and Aaron had to go out for so long, he became slowly aware of something brushing against his stomach.

“Got yourself a new shirt didn’t you, Rick?”

Rick’s attention drifted down to the barrel of the rifle that had at some point drifted down from his chest to his abdomen. It slid over his navel and lower until it bumped against the top of his belt.
Rick looked up then and saw what he’d missed in the last five minutes he’d been blinded by his own stunted rage. Simon looked dazed, eyes hooded and the broad lips were slack and parted beneath the thick mustache.

“You gonna try harder for me, Rick? Like you did for Negan?” His voice dipped low in the last part and Rick felt himself shaking his head at the man in incredulity, words escaping him.

As Simon moved to close the space between them, Rick struggled to be still. The next moment, he felt the taller man’s breath hard and hot against his neck as he craned down to enfold him.

Rick felt numb except for the chill running up his spine and the prickling of Simon’s mustache below his ear.

“Gonna work so hard for me, aren’t you?” The almost affectionate tone and touches that accompanied it were a stark contrast to the roughness Rick had been enduring since Simon had arrived with the Saviors.

Simon’s arms had snaked around his waist and the large hands roamed up his sides and down his thighs. When they found his ass, Rick’s seized up.

“Stop,” he hissed through his teeth and shoved the man away.

Simon stumbled back. His surprise quickly turned to amusement as he took in Rick’s rattled state. With a straight-toothed grin he lunged forward again, mouth immediately finding skin and hands clinging to him.

The audacity of Simon was astounding. Rick could hardly believe the man. Aside from attempting something so base, which was hard enough for Rick to fathom, they were completely exposed. Any moment a Savior would come snooping around the corner and see. It occurred to Rick that the Saviors might not be the only ones who found them.

Earlier, he’d sent Carl back to the house, which in a way was like sending away Simon’s most powerful leverage over Rick. He couldn’t use his son to ensure Rick’s compliance. Still, what would it mean if it was someone else who found them this way? Would it mean anything at all?

Rick shoved Simon back again, more roughly. “Stop this,” he said firmly. He couldn’t bring himself to raise his voice. The idea of alerting anyone, Savior or Alexandrian, and being caught like this was almost as unwelcome an image as what Simon was trying to do.

“You’re a little tease, aren’t you?” The Savior’s long tongue rolled over his teeth.

Rick thought briefly of running away as Simon advanced again, slow and predatory. He didn’t run though. He wouldn’t. Instead, he awaited the man, his fists clenched and raised as if preparing to brawl. Then Simon moved.

The Savior was a towering mass of heat and lanky limbs, descending on Rick with such force that the slighter man was rammed against the side of the house and pinned there. From there, Simon was all snaking arms and groping hands. Between them, Rick’s own arms were bent and stunted, his voice caught in his throat as a leg wedged itself firmly between his thighs.

It was then that Rick’s antsy eyes fell to the mouth of the alley.

There in the narrow gap stood not a Savior but an Alexandrian.

Spencer.
When Rick first saw him, he was so filled to the brim with fury and peaked animal instinct, he could barely keep focus on the still figure that seemed to blend into the scenery, and nearly missed him. When they finally locked eyes, time seemed to slow. They were frozen there, Rick pinned up against the house with Simon obliviously tonguing his ear, and Spencer standing in the mouth of the alley looking as pallid as if he’d just found a Walker mauling the leader.

Rick’s mouth hung open, slackened by shock.

In that breathless moment, he caught the younger man’s eyes as they dipped downward where Simon’s hands were now digging into his waistband, and Rick’s face burned even hotter.

They remained like that, Rick stunned by his shame and Spencer the silent witness to his debasement, until Rick seemed to crash back into his body. This time, instead of shoving Simon back, he leaned forward in imitation of the way Simon was nuzzling him and opened his mouth wide over the arch of the other man’s trap muscle.

In surprise, Simon emitted a harsh bark. As Rick dug his teeth in, feeling an eerie sense of deja vu, he felt a large hand yank back on his hair. He held on.

Rick continued to cling until the thigh between his legs jerked upward and connected bluntly with his groin. Then Rick lurched back, releasing Simon and buckling to the ground.

“Holy shit, you fucking piece of…”

On his hands and knees Rick was clenched up and panting, one wrist pressed to his aching crotch.

“Little bitch!”

Slowly, Rick raised his head and peered between his curls toward the mouth of the alley.

Spencer had gone.

Before Rick could register more than that, however, Simon’s booted foot connected hard with his side and Rick was curling over again convulsing.

In the beating that followed, the blows were centralized to Ricks midsection and legs. It was as if Simon was consciously avoiding his face, like he didn’t want to leave any noticeable marks there. Rick stored this information away.

When it ended, Simon dragged him to his feet in a rushed, tactless maneuver that felt in itself like another painful blow.

Standing, Rick could see Simon better. Out from beneath his collar peeked a broad red blemish. He hadn’t been able to tear away skin but the bite had been deep enough to draw blood and leave a mark.

Try explaining that shit, Rick thought. His minor victory must have shown on his face because soon after, Simon punched him hard in the stomach. The Savior didn’t let him buckle again but held him up by the collar of his jacket.

When Rick righted himself, he saw that Simon had shrugged his coat more snugly around his neck to cover the bite.

Rick was a little surprised when he was shoved back out into the street, huffing and panting and wiping the blood from his mouth, that nothing more happened. Simon, who followed grudgingly
behind him, didn’t summon the Saviors to punish Rick further. He didn’t say anything as he went to
rejoin the Saviors’ search.

Rick was left hastily tucking his shirt in with fumbling fingers and struggling with the prospect that it
was really over. It was done. He felt undeserving and distrustful of the wave of relief that washed
over him.

Now, as he lay in his bed, thinking back on the pickup, Rick could still feel that cool rush of relief.

The whole thing, while awful and painful, had reaped something of value.

Simon had not wanted to publicly punish Rick. He’d had a chance to do it. He could have made
something up, said Rick had attacked him and none of the Saviors would have questioned it. Negan
might’ve. Then he might’ve wanted to know what had gotten Rick so worked up, and how Simon
had come to allow the Alexandrian leader to get close enough to bite him.

It seemed like Simon didn’t want it to get to that point though. The way he’d avoided leaving any
visible marks on Rick, and hadn’t broadcasted to the other Saviors what Rick had done, which was,
as Negan would say, a “Big No-No”. The only explanation Rick could figure was that Simon knew
he was doing an even bigger No-No.

Rick had felt fairly certain of it that first day in the kitchen, based on the way Simon seemed as eager
as Rick to keep the other Saviors from walking in on them. If that hadn’t been enough, the way
Simon always hung back during Negan’s visits was also telling. Part of Rick had thought it was
some beta male thing that kept Simon at bay, that he was keeping to his station while the alpha
worked, never reacting even when Negan got especially “handsy” with Rick. Now, Rick saw it as
only further confirmation that Negan had no idea what Simon was doing and Simon wanted to keep
it that way.

The knowledge that Simon was hiding something from Negan should have been empowering to
Rick. It should have given him a certain amount of leverage over the Savior lieutenant. Yet,
somehow he only felt crippled by the knowledge.

Even as he lay there, badly bruised and aching from the beating, and still reeling from what the man
had tried, Rick knew he would do nothing with the information. Like Simon, Rick didn’t want
anyone to know what happened. Even if his confession could make it stop, the prospect of reprieve
was not enough to make Rick speak.

It all came down to Carl.

It was bad enough that his son had to see him like this, bending to these cruel men. If the boy knew
that things had been taken further…Rick didn’t think he’d ever be able to redeem himself in his son’s
eyes. Already, the boy was proving stronger and wiser than Rick had been at twice his age. He was
quick on his feet, brave and selfless and he made Rick immeasurably proud. The idea that the boy,
who Rick thought so highly of, might be driven to think so little of him, was too painful to cope with.

He decided instead to tuck the information away. There would be another way out of this. He just
needed to be patient. It would show itself.
Chapter End Notes

Guess what's next :)  
Next update's gonna be a fun one. But I guess my idea of fun is a little questionable ... 
Luckily, you guys seem to enjoy it :)  

I hope you guys liked the chapter! As usual, I'd love to hear what you think.
This was punishment. It had to be. There was no other explanation.

It had been two weeks, and in that time Rick had dared to hope Negan would somehow forget or move on. He saw now how foolish he’d been.

Negan had always been a man of his word.

“Would you look at that. There it is, ladies and gentlemen! There it is.” Negan’s eyes left him momentarily to sweep the crowd of armed Saviors and spectating Alexandrians. “There's the Rick Grimes Pout, right on schedule. In the flesh.”

Rick looked down at his boots.

“I scour the damn desert, brave the cities, go to the ends of the Earth just to find this man a goddamn grade-A, mint condition, Tempurpedic Mother-Fucking-Mattress to lay his head down at night. And
he still has the nerve— nay, the audacity— to stand there with that look. Dammit, Grimes, there’s just no pleasing you, is there?"

“I won’t...” Rick said, at last summoning the voice that had been trapped in his throat while the men were unloading the boxspring. The sight of the thick mattress that came after, along with the feeling of all of Alexandria’s eyes on his back had been the final straw.

“I won’t,” he said again, with force. “If you leave that here, I— I won’t—“

“I swear to God, Grimes.” In an instant, Negan had closed the distance between them. “If I come back here and find out that you haven’t been sleeping in this bed— this bed right here— I swear to God, I will bend you over my knee and spank you so raw, Rick Grimes, you won’t be able to wear pants for a week.” His weighty gaze and stark shift in demeanor read danger to Rick. Still, he didn’t miss the faint curve of his lips at the last statement.

Rick blinked and looked at the ground, suddenly very aware of the crowd of people around them. Feeling like a publicly berated child, his face burned.

It had taken so little for the Savior leader to round on him, shedding away the veneer of bravado and showmanship as if it were nothing. Gone was the Negan who sang Slayer at him in a church, and here was the Negan who’d killed Glenn and Abraham so needlessly and laughed as he did. It was alarming how quickly he’d dispensed of the mask and Rick was still reeling from it. It was only more proof to Rick that that Negan was never very far away.

A chill ran down his spine. If he looked up, it would be too much like that night. He needed a moment.

“Dad, it’s alright. Just take it.” Carl said, from behind him. The teen had been silently watching the delivery as well.

Rick knew he should let it rest. He should at least wait until Negan cooled down. He’d already tested the short-fused man enough for one day. To push more would be dangerous. He ought to listen to Carl. He ought to just take the damn bed now and deal with it later.

At last he looked up.

Negan was eyeing him down his nose, daring him it seemed. Rick knew he should heed the warning. It would be wise.

He swallowed.

“Negan—“

“Don’t.”

“Just—”

“Do. Not.”

But Rick was already going.

“I can’t sleep in that when everyone else is sleeping on sheets and— and newspapers,” Rick blurted, feeling the words rushing from his mouth as if he’d been damming them back for years. “How can they follow me if they see I’m sleeping like a— like a—“
“Oh my God. Jesusmaryandjoseph. Are you fucking kidding me, Grimes?”

“There are children here, elderly — sick people. How would it be if I’m telling them to make sacrifices when I’m going home every night to…to… If you leave that bed here, you have to leave one for everyone. I can’t take it. I won’t. I’m not…ungrateful, I just—“

“Oh, you’re not ungrateful, Grimes? Cause that’s exactly what the fuck it sounds like.”

Rick took a breath, and willed himself to hold Negan’s gaze.

“Please,” he lowered his voice and moved in closer to the taller man. “Please, don’t make me take this. The only way for this— this arrangement to work is if I’m able to lead my people. But I can’t lead them if they don’t respect me. I know you understand that. I know you…you understand.”

By the end of it, Rick had stepped back and was staring at the ground between them. It was a belated display of deference but at this point, Rick hoped every little counted. Denying Negan was no small thing.

Still, the Savior leader had to know how bad this made Rick look — to his people. Accepting what would now be the only bed in Alexandria, while everyone else slept on the thin blankets and rugs the Saviors had left them as reprisal for Rick beating the shit out of Simon that day.

Simon.

Rick didn’t even want to think of what Simon would say.

Must be pretty damn special to get one of these, huh? What’d you do for it, Rick?

The Savior lieutenant hadn’t come along on this pick-up and Rick wondered idly how he'd dealt with the bite.

Rick blinked the thought away, licking his dry lips. “Please, there must be something…I could…I could.”

“Jesus, Rick.”

Rick’s attention drifted upward to see Negan’s eyes once more sweeping the faces of his men.

“After all that fuss he made when I took his beds away,” he announced. "The man is actually begging me not to leave him this mattress.” Negan shook his head, eyes rolling skyward as if praying for strength. “You are backwards as fuck, Rick.”

“Just take the bed, Dad,” Rick heard again over his shoulder, closer now. He didn’t turn, keeping Negan in his sights. He almost had the man, could feel his stalwart presence waning just slightly. Rick had gotten to him, he could see it. Now, he just needed to hold firm.

“I’ll make it up to you,” he pressed, ignoring Carl’s palpable artsiness at his back. “Just please, give me this.”

Negan’s eyes, which had momentarily shifted back to Carl when the boy spoke up, were back on Rick, studying him.

Then Rick felt something jerk from his arm. He looked down breathlessly at his own empty hand, almost expecting severed fingers.

Rick had grown so used to the feeling of Lucille’s handle in his grasp that the sudden yank of its
departure was a shock to his stiff fingers.

When he looked up again he found a disproving look on Negan's cunning features, and Rick got the odd and unsettling feeling he'd just been stripped of his Lucille privileges.

"You’re right, Rick," Negan said, hoisting the bat over his shoulder and inclining his head at him. "I do understand. I fucking get it. You gotta be the example and all that shit."

Rick released his breath.

"But that doesn’t change the fact that you are refusing my gift, the gift that I hand-picked for you. That’s rude as shit, Rick. And if there is one thing I can’t stand, it’s when someone flat-out rejects a gift that I put a lot of time and thought into. Do you know how that feels, Rick?"

Rick’s eyes flickered over the crowd which was growing visibly restless. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides, distantly noting the new weightlessness of his left hand.

"Why, that would be like me refusing to take your tribute this week, after you slaved and scrimped to pull it all together for me. And you want me to take that tribute, Rick. You know what happens when I don’t get my tribute. That’s a failure to hold up your end of the bargain. When people don’t hold up their ends, Lucille here gets real thirsty. We gotta get her that tribute so she doesn't start taking it out on your people. And we all know what happens then.” He twisted theatrically to present the query to the crowd, who visibly shrunk beneath the attention.

"No, no.” Rick stepped forward. "No, I’ll—I’ll take it."

"What was that?" Negan swung back around to look at him.

"I’ll take it. I’ll take it."

"You will?"

Rick nodded frantically. "Yes. Yes."

"Fan-fucking-tastic, Rick. You know for a minute there, I was starting to get a little offended. Carry on, boys. Get that brand new bed up to the master bedroom,” he made a swirl with his finger. “Papa Rick’s gonna sleep good tonight!” He flashed his smile back at Rick before sauntering toward the truck.

Like that, the mask was back up.

Rick was left shaking, the rush of what had nearly happened catching up to him.

He turned around and found Carl watching him with a quivering lip, his own fists tight at his sides. It became all the more clear to Rick what his stubbornness might have cost him.

At some point during all this, Negan found out about Judith.

It was inevitable. Rick could only hide her for so long.

The second set of Saviors carrying the mattress were looking for the master and stumbled into her room.
She’d started crying and Rick gave Negan only the briefest harried glance before he went bolting into the house, Carl hot behind him.

It wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been, considering the man who’d just threatened to take another one (or more) of Rick’s people from him, was now standing in his little girl’s bedroom. Still, it was bad.

Negan was elated and acted as if he was meeting a new addition to his own family. Rick flinched when he called himself “Uncle Negan.”

When he finally handed Judith back over to Rick, the Alexandrian realized he’d been holding his breath.

“You gotta run this town, deal with that little hellion,” Negan tossed a nod to Carl, who was glowering by the door. “And you have a baby? A fuck—sorry—a baby girl, Grimes?”

Rick shushed softly against Judith’s hair. Over her head, his eyes burned into the other man.

Negan sighed and ran a large hand over the girl’s curly head.

“You do need a bed, don’t you?” His eyes lingered on them a moment longer, before rounding up his men to leave.

Olivia was an outpouring of apology. Rick told her she’d done fine. She’d closed Judith’s door and tried to ward off the Saviors as best she could, but there was only so much she could do. Really, it was only a matter of time.

As uneasy as it made Rick that Negan now knew about Judith, Rick had to admit that things could have turned out much worse. Who would’ve guessed that Negan, the madman who’d killed Glenn and Abraham with a baseball bat, had such a soft spot for children? Rick guessed his lenience with Carl had been some indication though.

He assured Olivia again that he didn’t blame her and she left, still apologizing.

Carl avoided Rick for the rest of the day. Rick could feel the tension radiating off of the boy when they were in the same room. He knew not to press him, and gave him his space.

It wasn’t until nightfall, after Rick had put Judith to bed and was preparing to lie down for the night himself, that Carl came to him.

It was a surprise that Carl approached him, when it was normally Rick who sought out the elusive boy after disagreements. Rick was glad he was in his t-shirt. He’d been careful ever since Simon’s pickup the previous week to wear a shirt to bed, but sometimes he stripped it off without thinking. The marks were fading but still very visible and he didn’t want to risk Carl or anyone seeing them.

As if he’d meant to catch him in the act, Carl walked in just as Rick was laying a blanket down on the floor.
“Dad, what are you doing?”

Rick glanced up at him briefly. “Going to sleep.”

“What about the bed?”

For the first time since the Saviors had left, Rick looked at the stacked mattress and boxspring in the center of the room. He hadn’t considered what he would do with it yet and still wasn’t ready to address the issue.

“Yeah,” he said, and went back to arranging the blankets.

“Well,” Carl sighed, frustration already bubbling. “Didn’t you hear what Negan said?”

Rick needed no reminding. He only hoped, after enduring the public scolding from Negan only hours ago, that he wasn't now about to get a second serving from his own son.

“What about it?” Rick retorted, ignoring how petty it sounded.

“Dad, regardless of what Negan said, you do need rest. You work harder than anyone. If anyone here deserves a bed, it’s you. Just use it.”

“That’s not true, Carl. Plenty of people here could use beds, certainly more than I could. Anyway, it wouldn’t be right for just one of us to have a bed. If anyone here is suffering, we’ll all suffer with them. That's what we do. We're in this together.”

“Maybe you’re suffering more, Dad.”


“So, we’ll just have a bed and no one’s going to use it?”

“No,” Rick said, laying down another blanket and leaning over to align it with the one beneath it. “I'm not using it. I didn't say you couldn't. Go ahead, you take it.”

“No, Dad, it’s for you. Come on. I'll sleep in it if you do,” the teen bargained.

Rick sighed, shaking his head and folding a third blanked into a makeshift pillow. “I can’t do that, Carl.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not.”

For a moment, Carl looked as if he would come back with something else, but saw no point in it. With an adolescent huff, Carl strode from the doorway. As he moved further down the hall toward his own room, Rick caught fleeting grumblings of “waste” and “so stupid.”

Rick slept on the floor.

The following day, everyone met at the church and Rick laid out the plan for the week. Before even asking for volunteers for scavenging teams, he already anticipated the faces beneath the raised hands.
He could always count on Rosita and Aaron to step up for runs.

Spencer had been a surprise though.

Rick swallowed and gave the younger man a nod.

“Good,” he said. “It’ll be you and Rosita.”

Spencer nodded back and Rick’s eyes lingered on him for a moment. They hadn’t spoken since it happened and now when Rick saw the other man, he couldn’t help searching his eyes, prodding for some acknowledgment of what the other man had seen. If it was there, Rick couldn’t find it.

Overall, there was an odd chill in the room and a lack of engagement that went beyond the usual ambivalence about the Savior situation. Rick was glad to finally end the meeting.

As the people cleared out, he overheard a few murmurs about how “well-rested” he looked. With his face burning, Rick ducked out of a side door before anyone could approach him.

“You could just tell them you’re not using it,” Carl said as they walked back to the house. The boy was almost jogging to keep up with Rick’s hurried strides.

“No,” Rick said hastily. As ridiculous as Negan’s prescribed punishment, Rick didn’t want to know what the man would really do if he got word that Rick wasn’t using the gifted mattress. He certainly wouldn’t risk letting it slip to the townspeople on the off-chance that the Saviors staged some kind of inquisition. It was a thought bred from pure paranoia, Rick knew, but he wouldn’t put that sort of thing past Negan.

“Well, if people already think you’re sleeping in it, Dad, you might as well.”

“I’m not doing that, Carl. Drop the subject. I won’t say it again.” He could feel his son’s frustration beside him, but the boy didn’t press it further.

And so they had the only mattress in Alexandria and didn’t use it.

Carl was openly sore about it and took every opportunity he could to air his grievances before Rick inevitably shut him down.

Rick held firm. Even if everyone in Alexandria thought he was sleeping on the deluxe mattress every night and resented him for it, it was himself he would have to live with if he actually did. Even the thought of it made his stomach churn.

It turned out that Michonne didn’t share Rick’s reservations about the new bed.

Fresh from her weekly hunt, the woman collapsed shamelessly on top of it. In the doorway, Carl laughed harder than Rick had heard in some time.

Michonne even took no issue with spending the night in it while Rick stuck resolutely to the floor next to her. Like a loyal dog, he thought, somewhat sardonically.

Now that at least someone was putting the bed to use, Carl let up a little on fighting his father about it, and Rick was glad for the break. He still had Michonne to deal with, however, and she seemed to find it more amusing than anything.
“It’s the principle of it,” Rick grumbled, tired of having to explain himself to the people in his house. He rolled over to find a more comfortable position on the thin sheets.

“Whatever you say,” Michonne said from the bed, and he could hear the grin.

“Oh, shut up.”

“Can’t hear you. Too comfortable.”

They would have to leave early for this run. They’d be going out much further than before. Rick gauged it would be almost a full day there and back, not counting the scavenging time in between.

Aaron was in high spirits, as always. Rick didn't know how the man maintained that kind of positive attitude in a world like this.

As Rick shut the driver-side door, he gave a last apologetic wave to Eric who’d met them at the gate to see them off.

It wasn’t like Rick was forcing Aaron to come along with him. He would never even ask. Aaron wanted to be there. Still, Rick sensed that Eric wished the leader would do more to discourage his partner from going on every run. Rick really had tried a few times, but admittedly his heart wasn’t in it. Not only did Rick need the help and appreciate the safety of an extra set of eyes, especially since the Saviors had taken all their guns, but he genuinely enjoyed Aaron’s company. The increasingly long and often dangerous supply runs would be much bleaker without the other man’s easy humor and optimism.

And this was certainly going to be a long run. They would only get longer as they were pressed to scrounge up more supplies to appease the Saviors while also keeping their own considerable population fed. They’d need even more if it was Simon on the next pickup, (and Rick gauged it would be since Negan’s spasmodic visits never happened twice in a row). After those damn "magic guns", Rick knew he was still in the hole with the Savior lieutenant. He hated to think of having to make it up some other way.

He shoved the thought back as they rolled through the gate, Rick taking first shift.

As they built up distance from Alexandria, Rick soon sensed Aaron's eyes on him. When he glanced over, he saw that the other man was smiling.

"So, how’s that Tempurpedic?"

In the middle of a drowsy spread of walkers, Rick pulled the van over.

"Alright, get out."

Aaron laughed.
Yeah, there's shamelessness here, I know. And I know I said to expect no Richonne, but I guess I just can’t keep off of that woman.

As always, I love hearing what you think. Of course it encourages me to write more, but it also lets me know what aspects I could spend more time on for your clarity and enjoyment.

Lastly, I know you guys are eager to know how Negan will react when he learns what happened. Just know it’s coming. It’ll be a little while but it is coming.

Thank you for reading!
The Threshold

Chapter Summary

Simon heard about Negan's last visit.

Later, Spencer confronts Rick.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, Please mind the warning!

Maybe the sight of the bed had done it. Maybe it was always coming.

Simon had missed the delivery but must have heard about it from someone. He went straight to the master bedroom. Standing silently in the doorway, he took in the stacked box spring and mattress in the center of the room.
Rick stood by, feeling somehow even more invaded. Simon was only looking at the empty mattress but from the look on his face it was as if he was watching a whole scene unfold on the bed before him.

He didn’t go in.

After a pause that was too long for Rick, the Savior moved back down the hall, where Rick learned that the bed wasn’t the only thing Simon had heard about in his absence.

Simon didn’t like kids, certainly didn’t have that easy camaraderie Negan had with them. Rick could tell by the way he regarded Carl and Enid like they were insects. Unlike Negan, Simon didn’t see the point in keeping kids around if they weren’t able to pull their weight, and he certainly wouldn’t treat them with the same amused lenience Negan did when they messed up or lashed out, as Carl so often did. But Simon didn’t need to understand kids to see that there wasn’t a damn thing in the world Rick wouldn’t do for his.

Rick gripped the crib railing tightly as if it would be dragged away from him.

They didn’t need to be in there. There was nothing there for Simon. What did it matter to him if Rick had a baby girl? Nothing. It meant nothing.

“I said stand aside,” Simon said again. They were in a toddler’s room but Simon held his gun at the ready as if he’d entered a hostile environment. It was a threat, Rick knew, but not on his life.

Rick shook his head, eyes fixed on the other man’s, his hands wrapped even more securely around the wooden railing at his back.

“Just wanna see what else Poppa Rick made,” Simon gave a big-toothed smile that made him no less threatening.

Rick didn’t budge but held his breath as Simon leaned close to him. A head taller than Rick, Simon only needed to peer over Rick’s shoulder in order to see into the crib behind him.

“Shit,” the Savior hissed, near Rick’s ear. “Well she would be pretty, wouldn’t she.”

It was a disgusting compliment. Rick’s eyes followed Simon as he leaned away again, the taller man still holding the gun close. Rick eyed it disdainfully.

“Why don’t you pick her up?”

Rick’s eyes snapped back up.

“She’s sleeping,” he said levelly.

Simon gave a shrug. “Best be gentle then.”

Incredulous, Rick shook his head.

It took him a while to get moving. When he finally did, Simon was still smiling.

Bending over the railing, Rick reached in and picked up the sleeping toddler, careful to support her head as he pulled her to his chest. When she began to stir, Rick rocked her gently in his arms,
making soft shushing noises into her hair in a way that was second nature to him now.

Even after her breath had slowed and her body had gone limp again, Rick continued to rock her gently. It felt better having her in his arms, fastened to him like this, than leaving her in the crib, where she seemed so exposed. He too felt more secure holding her. Her small but dense mass on his chest felt like a kind of shield. The feeling intensified when he glanced over her head to find Simon’s eyes locked on him. Rick quickly looked away.

Although Simon hadn’t made a move or said anything since Rick had picked up Judith, the intensity in the man’s gaze weighed heavily on Rick. He felt that the longer he held Judith in his arms, the longer he could put off whatever came next.

In the end, Rick decided it was cowardice to keep drawing it out, and a misuse of Judith who was an innocent in all this. Rick wanted to keep her that way.

So, with a last kiss to her impossibly soft head, Rick at last returned his daughter to her crib. It felt eerily like saying goodbye, and Rick steeled himself as he straightened again, arms light and chest feeling cool where the hot bundle of his child’s body had been. At last, he let his eyes trail up to Simon’s face where he found no more traces of that chiding smile.

With his lips slack and slightly parted and brown eyes hooded over, the Savior looked to Rick like he was in a kind of trance.

Rick had been dreading some form of punishment for keeping the existence of his second child from Simon, but now it looked like the Savior had forgotten the girl completely.

The gun now hung at his side.

Rick noticed the finger still hovering near the trigger.

“Close the door,” Simon said at last, voice low and face unreadable.

Rick was feeling light-headed. His baby girl was now within arms reach but if he moved to the door, he would no longer be the buffer between her and Simon. Rick didn’t like the idea at all. Still, he liked less the idea of challenging Simon while the Savior wielded a gun in his baby’s bedroom.

Could Simon really hurt a toddler, he wondered. Would Negan abide him hurting a toddler? But then, would it matter what Negan abided if Judith was already—

Rick felt himself moving toward the door. He didn’t turn away, but kept both Simon and the crib in his field of view. Behind him, his hand reached for the knob.

“Quiet now,” Simon warned softly. “Don’t want to wake the baby.”

The moment the door clicked into place, the Savior was closing the distance between them.

Rick was beside himself as Simon towered over him, anger and confusion making him see spots.

“S-Simon...” He searched the other man’s eyes.

“Turn around.”

“Simon.”

“Do it, now.” The command was as softly spoken as the others, but Rick saw no room for argument.
Over Simon's shoulder, Rick glanced at Judith's crib. Mechanically, he turned around.

As he stared into the door, Rick rejected what was happening, shaking his head like it would shake away this reality.

Simon wouldn't. Not here. Not even Simon was capable of something like that.

Still, every surface of Rick's body broke out into a cold sweat.

When he heard the sound of metal joints clicking, he knew that the Savior was shifting his gun to his back. Freeing up his hands— hands, which were on Rick moments later.

Diving beneath his shirt, Simon’s hands found Rick's belly and chest. Rick’s own hands rose up at once to brace himself against the door as he was crashed upon by the wave of damp, forceful touches, washing over him and pummeling his defenses. Rick was trapped there between Simon and the door, the heat of the Savior’s body enveloping his back and his baby girl mere feet away, sleeping in her crib.

Rick breathed through his teeth as his shirt was shoved up to his chest, leaving him open to the cool air and Simon’s roaming hands. A second hand dove down Rick’s front, groping at the crotch of his jeans. Through layers of cotton and denim, Rick’s sex was fondled by vigorous fingers. Instinctively, he tried to close his thighs as fingers dug between them.

With a calloused thumb worrying at a nipple and the other hand groping at his crotch, Rick barely noticed the hot breath on his neck as Simon shushed him. It was a mockery of tenderness as the man's hands abused him.

Rick didn’t trust his voice and tried to clamp his mouth shut. He couldn’t help his startled gasp however when Simon violently unhooked his belt buckle.

This was not like the last two times. Here, Rick felt crippled by the third presence in the room. They were a poison infecting a sacred space. If his daughter awoke, she too would be infected. Only the thin veil of sleep protected her.

Frantic, Rick was shaking his head, emitting quaking, desperate breaths as Simon got to work on unfastening the button of his jeans in a way that was all too familiar to Rick.

Rick closed his eyes and tried to distract himself. He thought of Judith, of Carl, of their innocence, of keeping them safely ignorant and apart from all of— this. If he could just get Simon away from here, Rick thought he could bear it. He would let Simon do what he wanted— he swore he would. He said it aloud, in desperate, moaning whispers. Anything, he insisted. He told Simon they could go to the bedroom— Rick would get on the bed. He promised he wouldn’t fight him. Just anywhere but here, where he’d just laid down the sweetly dozing bundle of his baby girl moments ago. It was growing harder to keep his voice quiet in his visceral panic.

“Please, Si-Simon—“ he tried again and gasped once more as the Savior, impatient, yanked apart both the button and zipper of his jeans. “I'll— I’ll do whatever you… Just not…not like this. Not—”

But then Rick heard another sound, distant but unmistakable: the front door opening downstairs.

“Dad!” Came Carl's voice.

There the two men were frozen— Rick braced against the door, Simon at his back with a hand shoved down the front of his pants.
Carl couldn’t be there. He couldn’t find Simon in Judith’s room. What would he think when he put together that Rick had lead the violent— armed— Savior straight into his baby sister’s room? In a flash of clarity, Rick himself couldn’t believe he’d allowed it.

His breaths came hurried and shallow as he tried to form a plan of action. With Simon there, however, Rick didn’t see how much control he’d have over the situation.

“Hush, now, Rick,” Simon breathed behind him, voice somehow calm and even. “Don’t want your boy to hear, do you?” Rick didn’t realize how harsh and loud his own breathing had become. “Don’t want him to catch us, see what a little slut his daddy turned out to be.”

Rick shuddered at the words, flinching away from lips grazing his ear. He was disgusted with Simon but also himself. There was truth in his words; Rick had brought this on himself— on his family. Unconsciously, his arms went rigid as if to barricade the door in the event that the boy did come running in.

As Rick listened intently to the sounds from below, Simon’s hand slid beneath the band of his boxers. Rick’s mouth opened in a silent gasp.

Somehow, Simon wasn’t concerned enough about the sudden arrival of Carl to stop what he was doing. His hand was ever diligent.

Was this some game to him? Shaking his head violently now, Rick urged Simon to knock it the fuck off, shooting him looks over his shoulder. Simon, for his part, was unfazed and kept shushing him softly and in a way, Rick realized, that was a sick imitation of how Rick had been shushing Judith earlier.

Nauseous and panicked, Rick fought an uphill battle to keep his breathing under control as he gripped at the wrist still pillaging his boxers. He couldn’t stop seeing flashes of the look on Carl’s face.

Amidst the raid, which Simon had incited with some new ludicrous accusation, the young man must have noticed Rick’s disappearance. It wasn’t unusual for Simon to shove Rick aside. Certainly, it had been happening more often lately. When Rick sensed it coming, he usually tried to send Carl away so he wouldn't have to see it, but the boy never stayed away for long.

Rick’s attention was once more abruptly split as he felt his pants pushed roughly down to his thighs. If they were destined to be found, it seemed that Simon was going to get as much out of the situation as he could in the meantime. Had Rick not been burying his face in his elbow, his alarmed gasp would have surely given them away.

“Think of your boy. Think of your boy,” the Savior whispered and Rick knew in his heart that he would be the one to kill Simon.

Whenever Rick’s struggles began to build up anew, the Savior would remind him of Carl, of what the boy might think seeing his father this way, not that Rick needed reminding. Sounds of the very boy shuffling around on the story below kept carrying up and wrenching at Rick’s heart. It was almost enough for Rick to forget the violation of the thick and calloused fingers rubbing and caressing his naked sex.

“Hush now,” Simon cooed again. “Just be good and he won’t have to know, won’t have to see what a little bitch his daddy is.”

Simon seemed to take Rick’s absent nodding as consent to continue. Really, Rick was rallying
himself, pulling to the forefront of his mind the most important things in his world— Carl, Judith— over which nothing else took precedence, not even Rick’s own self-preservation.

As the facts of Rick’s existence were cemented in his mind he felt course fingers pressing in his most intimate place. Immediately, he bit the skin of his arm to muffle his own sounds as Simon began pressing inside him.

“Simon,” he groaned into his arm. Whether it was a plea to stop or to just get it done with, even Rick didn’t know. Either way, it only excited the other man, who made a deep rumbling sound against Rick’s ear and pressed himself more firmly into his back, leaving only enough space to pry at Rick with spit-slicked fingers.

It hurt more than he’d expected, but the crook of Rick’s elbow muffled most of the groans. The sounds of his son’s strides downstairs were a horrifying distraction as Rick endured the painful stretch.

Each time Simon added a finger, he announced it into the back of Rick’s head.

“Oh fuck,” Simon groaned, almost too loudly. Rick thought he heard Carl’s movements downstairs halt for a moment. “So fucking tight, Rick. Thought you’d be looser. Can feel you sucking me in—”

When the fingers were swiftly withdrawn from him, Rick choked down another grunt. The footsteps were nearing the front door again and Rick feared for a moment that the boy would suddenly turn and climb the steps up to them.

Go. Please. Just go.

Rick heard the faint ruffling below and felt a warmer, thicker mass press against his sore entrance. For the first time, Rick reached back and grabbed a fistful of Simon’s shirt to stop him.

Simon kept pressing and Rick shoved back harder in return, turning back to shoot him another fierce look.

Wait, he mouthed with tight lips; he still hadn’t heard the front door. Simon eyed him amusedly from beneath heavy lids, but did pause.

Finally, the front door opened and shut and Rick couldn’t contain his sigh of relief.

But then footsteps were on the stairs.

Evidently, Carl had changed his mind about leaving and was now climbing up to the second floor.

Rick panicked. His vision flashed and his mind raced as he reinvigorated his silent struggle, pressing back with renewed urgency at Simon’s chest to get the man off of him.

Simon was shushing him softly again, though Rick barely registered it in his frantic state.

“Hush now. Hush now, Rick. Just keep quiet now.”

Carl had arrived at the other end of the hallway.

“Think of your baby girl, think of your baby girl.”

These words did break through the swarm of Rick’s thoughts and he felt the struggle begin to leave him and his breathing steadily slow. The arm that was pushing back against Simon eased.

Just as the thought was beginning to bring Rick a sense of purpose and stability, Simon shoved into him, his blunt girth only eased by saliva and the brutal work of his fingers.

The impact set Rick’s eyes fluttering and mouth agape in a mute scream as he felt like the wind had been knocked out of him. It might not have mattered if he’d made a sound though because Simon’s large hand was clasped firmly over his mouth.

For what felt like ages, Simon held him there against the door, impaling Rick completely.

On the other side, Carl’s footsteps shuffled in what Rick vaguely determined was the direction of his bedroom. Likely grabbing supplies.

Rick’s eyes fell shut.

Slowly and deliberately, Simon slid his cock out of him, leaving Rick feeling like he’d taken the last of his strength along with it. If he weren’t solidly pinned between Simon and the door, his body would have slunk to the ground.

When Simon shoved back in, it wasn’t very hard but it was thorough.

Again, Rick was robbed of his breath. His mouth hung open in a mute scream and he might have been drooling beneath Simon’s palm.

The footsteps moved very near them, and Rick felt more than heard Carl pass by. For a breathless instant, his son had been mere inches from him, and it ached deeply not to call out to him or receive some form of acknowledgment.

It struck him suddenly that Carl hadn’t stopped to check on his sister. The thought was brief and left Rick with a small but irrepressible feeling of parental disappointment, but was quickly gone when Simon began moving again.

Rick swallowed a groan as the larger man’s hips rocked in shallow pumps against him. Simon kept a narrow range but hit deeply with each thrust, bottoming out inside Rick.

The sharp sting of being so stretched slowly dulled and Rick felt he could bear it. The boy passed the door again, moving slowly as if not to wake Judith. Once more the brief nearness made Rick’s heart leap to his throat before the warm presence was too soon moving away again toward the end of the hallway and descending the stairs.

Rick felt both relief and unbearable loss as he finally heard the sound of the front door open and close, signifying Carl’s departure. The heavy silence that followed indicated that Carl was really gone this time.

With the loss of his son, it was as if the last of Rick’s fight had gone too.

Still inside him, the thick appendage was pulsing and felt like it was growing bigger. Rick knew with a sense of cold resignation that Simon would come inside him.

Simon had removed his hand at some point and Rick now had his face pressed into the door.

Simon was fucking Rick in his baby girl’s room while she slept mere feet away, and while Rick was biting his own lip to keep from crying out from the pain and humiliation of it.
“Oh, fuck. Clench up like that again. Just like that.”

With whatever was left in him, Rick would keep this from his daughter. He didn’t make a sound, to the very end.

“That’s it, sweetie. Suck it in, just like that. Show me how much you love my cock. Oh, fuck…oh fuck, oh—I’m gonna… I’m gonna…”

Rick managed to convince Simon to leave through the back door. It had already taken a lot out of Rick to ask it but nothing was worse than the way the Savior had then patted him on the cheek and smiled as if Rick was a good pet that had earned the small favor.

As much as it disgusted him, Rick stomached that too. He couldn’t have Carl seeing Simon leaving the house.

There wasn’t much medicine and Rick lamented having to use it, but the sting had grown too powerful to endure and he kept finding blood.

Olivia looked perturbed as she marked the loss in her inventory list. Rick nodded assuringly to her and in a way he also hoped would convey that this would stay between them.

In the master bathroom, Rick rallied himself.

It stung.

It wasn’t an injury he’d ever had to treat on himself, nor anyone. He would have preferred to ignore it but the worrying ache in his steps soon outweighed the humiliation of addressing it. He was glad at least that it was a wound he could reach on his own and that he wouldn’t have to seek help with it. His face burned at the idea of asking Carl. The location was sensitive enough but there was no way around the implications. Carl would know then and everything Rick had done to keep it from him would mean nothing.

Rick bit down as he tried again to relax.

Oh, but it stung.

He pushed it from his thoughts as he pressed deeper.

“Hey, Dad.” There was a knock on the bathroom door. Rick jerked and hissed.

“Uh—hey. Hey, Carl. Hang on.”

Rick slid gracelessly off the countertop and lunged for a towel. He’d locked the door, not that Carl would just barge in. Still, Rick felt mortified at being caught in such a position.

“You okay, Dad?”

“Yeah. Yeah, Carl. Ha-hang on. Let me just—“ he shoved the ointment and cotton balls beneath the
sink and fumbled to secure the towel around his waist. “Let me just—“

“It’s alright, Dad. I’m just heading to Enid’s. Wanted to say bye.”

“Oh—oh?” Rick leaned toward the door to better hear his son’s voice, still fighting with the towel as it kept sliding off of him. “Uh, alright. You gonna—you gonna be back later?”

“Uh, I might,” Carl said in a distant tone that still bothered Rick, though it had become natural in the boy’s age. “Will you need me for Judith?”

“No, no. It’s alright,” Rick said, at last getting the towel to sit snuggly on his waist. He then swung open the door and found his son standing there blankly. Lately, the teen hadn’t been wearing his hat and wasn’t now. Rick wondered what that was about. “I’ll…I’ll just get Olivia or Tobin if I need to go somewhere. You go. Be safe.”

Carl nodded and let Rick pull him in for a one-armed hug (his other hand was occupied holding the towel at his waist). Carl returned the embrace however with a certain obligation.

Rick’s parting hugs had grown longer lately. He didn’t mean to linger but couldn’t shake the dread he felt every time he parted with his son— or with any of those he’d come to care for over the last few years. Since that day their group was intercepted by the Saviors, every one of the people Rick lead had become immeasurably precious to him. Carl and Judith more so than anyone, and Rick felt a primal urge to express it before every parting.

He pressed a kiss above the boy’s bandage and held it. Sensing that he’d about reached Carl’s limit for this level of intimacy (not helped that Rick was only wearing a towel), Rick let the boy go at last. He was pleasantly surprised when Carl gave him a small smile before turning to leave.

It was in those quiet moments when Carl was gone and Judith was asleep when it would all close in around him.

In the daytime, the church was usually occupied by either worshippers or a few scattered prayers. So it was to his back porch where Rick went to escape the unbearable silence of his house and the prying eyes of his people.

It was also there, two days after Simon’s visit, that Spencer found him.

Rick was sitting on the steps with his head in his hands when he heard the sound of footsteps rounding the side of the house.

"Rick, I...Uh..."

The former deputy looked up with stinging eyes to see the young man, who paused at the sight of him. Rick knew how he must look. He hadn’t slept in days and the few passing glimpses he’d caught of himself in reflections revealed red eyes in a pallid complexion and a crease in his brow more pronounced than his age had earned him.

“Spencer,” Rick said softly, letting his hands fall from his face and fold in his lap.

Another time, Rick might have brushed Spencer off, told him that now wasn’t the time or something dismissive like that. At the moment, however, Rick just didn’t have it in him.
“What, uh...what is it?” Rick asked and sniffed.

“Sorry,” Spencer said instinctively, despite the complete absence of blame in the other man. “I knocked first. No one answered. I just had a feeling I’d find you back here.”

“Yeah,” Rick said, clearing his throat in an attempt to rally himself for the unexpected company. “Carl’s off with... Enid, I think.”

Spencer nodded as if this was relevant to him, and they were both silent for a while.

“What do you need, Spencer?”

“Oh, I just wanted to see how you’re doing,” the younger man said, voice dropping to something that sounded like real concern.

Rick was taken aback by the tone— by the man really. This was a side of Spencer he wasn't familiar with. Rick might have been sitting, but the youngest Monroe seemed taller, more imposing somehow than Rick remembered. Rick thought he possessed a certain level of confidence he hadn’t noticed before.

“I brought this— I promise I wasn’t hiding it,” Spencer added quickly with a slight curve to his lips. “Rosita and I found it out on the last run. The Saviors won’t miss it. It’s totally unaccounted for.”

It was an unopened bottle of wine. Rick didn’t know much about wines. This one had a name he couldn't pronounce.

After considering it a moment, Rick reached up and took it, feeling vaguely like he'd just accepted a kind of peace offering.

“Well, thank you, Spencer,” he said. "That’s real… that’s real nice. You didn’t have to.”

Distantly, Gabriel’s warning echoed in the back of Rick's mind. Disregarding it, he tried to smile. It must have been a sad attempt because Spencer chuckled softly and fixed Rick with a tender, almost pitying look. Rick flushed with embarrassment and looked away.

Awkwardly, he fumbled for something else to say, and did what only seemed natural at the moment.

“I, uh, I don’t have much right now but would you like to come in? I could fix us up something.”

“That would be nice,” Spencer said, smiling broadly.

Against the protests of his aching body, Rick lifted himself from the steps and lead the younger man inside.

In the kitchen, part of Rick expected Spencer to bring up what he’d seen that day in the alleyway. As much as Rick dreaded it, he felt it was only a matter of time before they would need to address it and he supposed now was as good a time as any. Might take his mind off other things at least.

Surprisingly, it didn’t come up though. Instead, Spencer engaged him about the Alexandrians. Not surprisingly, he wanted to have a more active role in the community. It was starting to sound a little like the usual Spencer talk, but there was something different in it, something that made Rick want to hear him out.

“I know I’m not as good as you guys out there. Rosita had to pull me out of some pretty tight situations more than once,” Spencer said with a soft laugh Rick also wasn’t familiar with. “I don't
want to step on your toes or anything. I just want you to feel safe when you’re not here, and know that I can take care of things. You can count on me.”

Rick regarded him, traces of that same wariness still lingering. But there was just something in the younger man at that moment that was swaying him. Rick doubted seriously that he was of the right mind to give this proposal the level of consideration it deserved. Still, despite himself, he felt his will bending to Spencer. Whether it was his own exhaustion or that the whole Savior situation had irrevocably knocked something loose in him, he could't be sure. Whatever the cause, the helping hand Spencer was offering was really starting to sound good to Rick. Nobody else was offering to share Rick’s burden. Why not Spencer?

As if to demonstrate his infallible presence, Spencer even seemed to stand taller, looming over Rick.

The effect was mystifying. Rick regarded him thoughtfully a moment more before nodding to himself.

“Yeah, you’re right.” He said at last. "There needs to be a ... a stable figure here while I’m away, watching over things, letting everyone know what’s going on.”

“I can be that person, Rick,” Spencer asserted, taking a step toward him. It wasn’t a threatening move, but Rick couldn’t help the way his body tensed up. Fearful that Spencer had noticed, Rick’s eyes darted elsewhere, suddenly restless.

“Yeah. Yeah,” he said quickly. “That’s— that’s... real good to hear. They know you. You’re Deanna’s son and they all trusted Deanna. It should be you.” As he spoke, he really wanted to believe what he was saying but there was a hollowness in his chest. It didn't help that he was beyond tired. He’d only invited Spencer in out of courtesy and as a sort of repayment for the gift. Now, much of what Rick was saying was to hurry the visit along. He needed to try to get some rest in the little time he had before he’d have to start preparing for the next run.

After Rick escorted his visitor to the door, Spencer gave him one last winning smile before patting him on the shoulder and leaving Rick to assess what he’d agreed to.

The next day, at the weekly gathering, Rick announced that he would be going further out to find more supplies and would be gone a few days. He hesitated then, his eyes drifting over to the younger man looming near the head of the room. Rick licked his dry lips then continued, telling the group that in his absence, if anyone needed anything, they could go to Spencer.

As expected, Aaron volunteered to accompany Rick and the meeting was adjourned.

As they all cleared out, Rick avoided Gabriel’s eyes.

It was going to be another long run.

They’d set it up so they would make it back in time but part of Rick still feared they might be cutting it close. In truth, he always had that fear. If it was Simon on the next pick-up, he couldn’t afford to be late.

He shoved the thought back as they rolled through the gate, Aaron taking first shift this time.
Through the side-view mirror, he caught Spencer's eyes. The man had come to see them off. Rick guessed that as the interim leader in Rick’s absence, Spencer felt a certain responsibility.

He thought he caught something then in the man's eyes through the mirror but he was too far away to tell. Rick's throat went dry and he directed his focus back to the road.

There and back. Just there and back. It wouldn’t be too long. They'd be back in time.
Chapter Summary

Rick had been wrong on two counts: First, when he’d assumed that Simon would be leading this pick-up, and second when he’d dared to think that any extra effort on his part could stop the death count.

Chapter Notes

Visual Aid:

Where the hell was everyone?

Sweat stung Rick’s eyes as he scanned the barren streets for someone— anyone.

His own body’s weight was taxing enough to hold up, but with nearly all of Aaron’s swathed on top of it, Rick’s aching legs wobbled with every step. The Saviors at the gate hadn’t killed the younger man like Rick feared they would as he’d watched by the van, made mute and useless by his own horror.

No, they’d let him go, but only after beating him— badly.

Now, Rick had to get him help. Any help. *Fuck*, but where was everyone?
Rick wouldn’t remember later whether he’d seen the crowd or heard the screams first. He was propelled forward, instantly forgetting the burden of Aaron’s greater weight draped over him. He only knew he had to get there. Had to stop whatever was happening, because something was definitely happening.

But he was too late.

It was as if time had stopped, hovered, then suddenly kicked back into motion at hyper speed. Within a second of assessing the scene, Rick learned he’d been wrong on two counts: First, when he’d assumed that Simon would be leading this pick-up, and second when he’d dared to think that any extra effort on his part could stop the death count.

Chaos engulfed him then as all at once, Rick heard wailing sobs, furious shouting, and his own name.

Before Rick knew what was happening, he was being dragged away by the scruff of his neck, and shoved stumbling up the steps of his porch and into his house.

Sometime later, Rick was standing in his kitchen with Negan shouting and gesturing wildly in front of him.

The Savior was pissed off at something. Why was he pissed?

It was only the two of them there; Negan had slammed the door behind them, sending a clear message that he and Rick were not to be disturbed. Only Carl was allowed to follow. Not that Negan could have stopped him. The second the door slammed shut behind them, the Savior barked at the teenager to go upstairs and see to Judith, who’d started screaming during all the commotion. That left only Rick and Negan.

The lingering ache in Rick’s neck from the other man’s coarse handling was only a distant tug at his attention as he tried with all he had to understand what the man was saying to him.

Every now and then he caught a hissed “late.” It all seemed to come back around to that.

Rick already knew he was late. It wasn’t helped by the hold-up at the front gate with the damn note. Then Negan was saying something about Carl, Olivia… and then a shave. Had Negan shaved here? There was more. Something about lemonade and spaghetti and a pool table. At once, Rick’s vision was hijacked by the image of the gutted body in the street.

“Hey, cool your shit, Rick,” Negan barked suddenly. But he was the one shouting. Rick was just standing there, leaning against the counter top, feeling like it was all that was keeping him from falling over.

With his drifting vision, Rick could barely keep focused on the man in front of him. At intervals, his eyes would latch onto Negan’s hands as they gestured wildly at him, finding the red stains in the finger nails. Then it was a short distance to the smatters of deeper maroon on his white T-shirt, and then on down to the dagger in his belt. Then Negan would do another aggressive gesture and Rick would be drawn to his hands again, and so on. He cycled through the triangle repeatedly, feeling more light-headed with every dizzying round. Every time Rick blinked, he saw flashes of lumpy
tendrils spilling out of a wide gash.

The body was still in the street.

“Hey, Rick—Christ, I said rein in your shit.”

Rick blinked and met the man’s eyes. Hating him. Hating him.

It seemed Negan was making an effort at controlling his volume. “Stop looking at me like that.” he said, “Like I just stomped on your pet guinea pig.”

His brown eyes were blown wide. As drained as Rick was, Negan was wired.

“You didn’t hear the twisted shit this guy was saying, Rick.” He moved his head to stay within Rick’s drifting gaze, keeping Rick present.

This guy. Spencer.

“If you’d heard him. If you’d just heard him,” Negan kept saying.

Rick needed him to go. He needed him to leave so Rick could salvage what was left of his people.

But Negan wouldn’t go. And he wouldn’t shut up.

“Smarmy fuck,” the Savior hissed. “If you’d fucking heard some of that shit. Told me about you and his mom— tried to make it like you were unhinged. Said you weren’t fit to lead anymore. Talking about how it might be time for you to step down, let him take the lead. Not just that—he wanted to make you kneel, Rick. I make people kneel but I’m not fucking getting off on it like this creepy fuck just talking about it. Yes, Rick,” he enunciated as if in response to something in Rick’s eyes. “Your little VP back there was getting a fucking chubby talking about you on your knees. By the way— good fucking call leaving him in charge when you were away. He told me about that too. What the fuck, man? Was the devil not available? That the kind of thing you go for, Rick? If so, I gotta say, you’re a real shit judge of character.”

Rick’s fists were shaking at his sides. His breathing was picking up now, hot fury rising to meet the euphoria.

Negan had done it again, taken one of Rick’s people. He wanted to lunge at the man, batter him with a hailstorm of fists and even teeth if he could, wanted to drag his nails down his face and into his eyes until he felt the warm blood burst from them.

He kept seeing him there, almost bouncing on his heels as Rick had walked up to the clearing in the street. There was a manic glee there on the newly shaven face, like Negan had actually enjoyed it, actually reveled in disemboweling a man. The memory of it called forth echoes of Glenn and Abraham, and in Rick's mind their bodies morphed and interchanged with Spencer’s in the street until it was all one and the same.

Taking it like a champ!

Rick’s breath caught and the tightness in his fists at once fell away.

“Oh, I played along,” Negan went on. “Let him ramble on to see just how far he’d take it. And Let Me. Tell. You, Rick. This fucker took it far. Talking about some Babylonian-era-decapitated-head-rolling-down-the-darn-pyramid-steps shit! He wanted to make you beg for your place here— call him King Fucking Spencer!”
“He— he said that?” Rick croaked out despite himself. His sluggish mind struggled to keep up with Negan’s rapid-fire tirade, which was sounding more like madness by the second, but he somehow caught that.

Negan froze then, monologue disrupted. His large eyes honed in on Rick.

“No,” he said. “No, he didn’t say that. Jesus, Rick, I was reading between the lines. It was the way he fucking said it, man. I know pervert nut job when I see it. He would’ve had you following him around like a little bitch on your hands and knees, probably left you chained up in his fucking basement at night. I’m not gonna say— ‘cause you got that little angel upstairs— but that’s not all he would’ve had you doing for him, Rick. You get me? This guy was a fucking sicko. Do you get what I’m saying? Do you have any idea what the fuck you had living next door to you?”

This part stuck. Negan might have been rambling like a lunatic, but there was something too close to truth in those words.

Suddenly, Rick felt even heavier on his legs than when he’d been supporting Aaron. He was glad Negan had started pacing the room and didn’t notice the way Rick leaned further on the counter for support.

“But serious shit, dude,” Negan rounded on him again. “You gotta get a handle on your people, Rick. How long has that shit been brewing?”

That shit. Spencer.

Rick shook his head. He’d been so occupied with keeping Simon pacified over the last few months and hadn’t considered the possibility of foxes in his own coup. This latest revelation about Spencer rattled Rick deeply.

He tried to speak but after grasping a while for words, gave up, his gaze falling to the floor.

“The fuck, Rick,” Negan sighed. He’d stopped pacing and stood in the middle of the room.

Rick shifted uncomfortably, grasping the counter top at his back. He felt the other man watching him.

“The fuck would’ve happened if I hadn’t been here to stomp that shit out?” The edge hadn’t left Negan’s voice, but when Rick looked up, he found something like real concern in the other man’s eyes.

Fully braced against the counter, Rick couldn’t back away when the Savior stepped into his space.

When Negan spoke, his tone had softened and he seemed to be arranging his words carefully. “Listen,” he said, “I can…leave a couple guys behind to, you know, keep an eye on things, if you… Hey! Don’t give me that look! I can’t fucking be here all the damn time watching your ass, Rick. Making sure another King Spencer doesn’t pop up out of the woodwork to put you on your back, ‘cause apparently, you don’t have a damn clue what the fuck’s happening— literally— in your backyard. I’m trying to extend a limb here, Rick.”

The gentle moment was short-lived and Negan was shouting again. Rick couldn’t bring himself to care.

The unexpected gentleness in Negan’s demeanor was quickly blotted out by the insanity of what he was offering.
Rick couldn’t believe how far he’d allowed himself to be lured down Negan’s backwoods trail of logic. He’d actually let himself feel a measure of fault for what had happened with Spencer— as if Rick’s inattention had directly lead to his death, as if his hand pressed in the knife.

Madness.

And now Negan was offering to post a constant Savior presence in Alexandria— as a courtesy.

Rick almost laughed. The affronted look on Negan’s face didn’t help.

Weekly visits from Simon already tested Rick’s capacity to endure, but the idea of having the Savior lieutenant looming over his shoulder daily, waiting for Rick to drop his guard long enough to slink into his personal space and invade him in more ways than Rick thought possible... Rick’s mind rejected the thought.

“Rick. Rick.”

He blinked the other man into focus. Negan was looking down at him, and had seemed to regain some measure of composure.

“Look,” the Savior said, making a clear effort at patience. “With you in charge here, you guys are good providers for me. Damn good even. And I got enough shit on my plate without having to worry about one of my best supply lines getting all fucked up just ‘cause the man in charge got himself thrown out of commission. You know what I’m saying, Rick?”

lia-fucking-bility, Rick thought with little surprise that it was in Negan’s voice.

Negan watched him levelly, waiting for something. Now it was Rick’s turn to read between the lines.

Of course. With their current arrangement, Rick was able to get things done, able to keep the steady stream of supplies flowing back to Sanctuary while maintaining the peace. Negan wouldn’t want some new guy he didn’t know or trust coming in, not when things were working out so well as they were. Rick understood. He needed to keep providing for Negan without mishap. He needed to show Negan that he was doing fine on his own, that Alexandria could keep functioning normally without any further Savior interference, and that this…set-back hadn’t changed anything.

“Look if you don’t want my help, fine. But you gotta make me believe you can handle your own shit. Can you handle it, Rick?”

Rick swallowed and nodded, returning Negan’s gaze as steadily as he could.

“Yeah,” he said at last. “Yeah, I got it.”

Although Negan didn’t look fully convinced, Rick held his gaze as firmly as he could until the Savior was at least satisfied to leave it at that.

After the Saviors were gone, Rick went immediately up to Judith’s room, where he smoothed a hand over her sleeping head before rounding on Carl. In hissing whispers, he interrogated his son until he was sure Negan hadn’t harmed them. He was still rattled that the man had spent so much time with his children in Rick’s absence and found it hard to accept that they would just be sitting around
talking and—*eating spaghetti,* had Negan said?—as they waited for Rick’s return.

But Carl didn’t deny any of it and kept trying to wave it off as if Rick was being dramatic.

Rick couldn’t believe it. The boy acted as if he hadn’t seen the body in the street. As if he hadn’t been there with Abraham and Glenn. As if he’d forgotten that this was the same man who’d done all those things, the man who’d proven he was still capable of it.

Still, Carl grew impatient with Rick’s concern and kept trying to shift the subject— to Spencer.

*Spencer.*

It was Rick’s turn to be evasive.

It turned out that Carl had been listening in on them, as Rick had feared. Not that any room could contain Negan’s thunderous timber. Rick guessed from Carl’s questions that he hadn’t caught all of it though. Still, even if he’d only overheard pieces of Negan’s often explicit tirade, it still made for a conversation Rick didn’t want to have. There were too many holes to fill in and Rick himself wasn’t ready to see the full picture.

As the boy grew more frustrated, Rick reached for him, trying to calm him.

Carl seemed to sense how exhausted his father was and didn’t press him for long. He allowed Rick to pull him into another one of his long hugs and even wrapped his own arms around Rick’s waist to return it.

“Was it true?” he asked after a while, from where his head rested on Rick’s shoulder. “Was Spencer planning something all this time?”

Rick opened his mouth, closed it. He had no idea how to answer.

Carl pulled away enough to look at him.

“I don’t…I don’t know,” Rick said honestly, and he was relieved when Carl didn’t press further.

Rick gave his son’s shoulder a final reassuring squeeze before excusing himself.

He lamented leaving his bed behind but needed to check on his people. As he stepped out, noticing the darkening sky he felt the added weight of one more thing he would now need to keep from his son.

He swallowed it down.

He needed to do his rounds.

Since he’d arrived earlier, stumbling upon the gathered crowd before being promptly thrown into his own house, Rick hadn’t seen anyone. It only now occurred to him that Spencer might not have been the only one to suffer the Saviors’ wrath. It had taken so little for them to beat Aaron like they did.

As he passed it, Rick tried not to look at the dark, sprawling stain in the middle of the street, marking where Spencer’s body had been.

As he headed up the main road, he noticed a small trail of smoke rising continuously. The sight made something in Rick’s gut twist.

When he came to Spencer’s house, it became too much, and Rick had to peel off between two
houses to vomit behind a bush. When he emerged again, dragging his wrist across his mouth, his legs were shaking. It had been non-stop ever since he and Aaron had left for the run three days back. They’d stopped twice to rest in the van, but Rick couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a restful sleep. Despite his hunger and utter exhaustion, he couldn’t go back and face Carl’s heavy gaze again, not just yet.

Before he knew where he was going, Rick was striding up the churchyard. When he burst through the double doors, it was like all of the exhaustion and anger and frustration and hunger and impotence Rick had been fighting off for weeks, all hit him at once, as if physically stopping had allowed it all to finally catch up with him.

From where he knelt at the head of the room, Gabriel turned around. The priest’s hands were clasped together as if Rick had caught him in prayer.

“I was,” Rick croaked, breathing heavily. “I was wrong.” Then he blacked out.

Before Negan left, he leaned in close and looked Rick dead in the eyes. There wasn’t a threat to the closeness. Rick didn’t even get the sense that Negan was trying to get under his skin like he often did. No, there was something else in the slight crease of his brow, and the measured way that the brown eyes first held then shifted between each of his own. There was a deep sense of age and stillness in the look, Rick wasn’t used to seeing there. It reminded Rick of the day he’d tackled Simon through a plate glass window. Later, as he’s sat in the grass, avowing responsibility for the scuffle to keep Lucille from claiming Aaron as her third victim, Negan had knelt before him with a look that Rick had been too ruffled and strung-out at the time to place.

It was as if Negan had known all along and was only waiting to see if Rick would fess up to it.

Rick came to some time later, sprawled on a bench with Gabriel over him, holding a water bottle to his lips. Rick took a few sips then waved him off gently.

“I’m sorry,” Rick said, as he groggily sat up. He wasn’t sure whether he was apologizing for interrupting Gabriel’s prayer or for something else.

Gabriel seemed to understand.

“You couldn’t know,” he said, taking a seat beside him.

“Oh?” Rick huffed and almost laughed. “You knew. Knew it a long time ago. Even tried to tell me.” He brought the water bottle back to his lips. “I was just too stupid to listen,” He mumbled as he
twisted the cap back on. It had a bitter taste.

“Not stupid...Arrogant,” Gabriel tested. “Pigheaded, maybe.”

Rick breathed a laugh and turned to see the faint smile on the priest’s face.

Gabriel proceeded to tell Rick about what he’d missed, about how the Saviors had taken Spencer’s body with them when they’d left. Rick took this in, remembering how he’d seen the smoke rising outside the gate and somehow known.

Gabriel said he’d tried to stop them, but even now Rick thought his recount sounded half-hearted.

“Sick fuck doesn’t deserve a proper burial,” had been Negan’s response apparently. The priest hadn’t cursed of course; Rick’s own imagination colored that in.

Offhandedly, Rick asked if Negan and Carl had really been drinking lemonade on the porch and Gabriel confirmed it. It was a strange thing and Rick had to sit with it.

At one point the other man had been gently rubbing his back but stopped, and now Rick missed the soothing contact.

Rick might have dwelled on how strange it was to be in such a position of unguardedness in front of the other man, with whom he’d had such a rocky start, and stranger still to have Gabriel taking such care with him, but it felt natural somehow. Rick guessed it was just Father Gabriel’s way.

“I knew something was wrong,” Gabriel said suddenly after a long stretch of silence. He’d been staring ahead as if a sermon was going on. “I saw it. I just…didn’t know he would go to Negan. That was…”

“You couldn’t have stopped him,” Rick offered softly.

“Neither could you,” Gabriel came back quickly, turning to him. “You had no fault in what happened, Rick, really. Spencer doesn’t even deserve all the blame for that. That was…that was Negan. Only Negan.”

Rick guessed he was right—about Negan. Rick wouldn’t say it, but he still couldn’t shake the weighty boulder of guilt in his gut, which only seemed to grow heavier.

Somehow, Rick didn’t blame Spencer. The man was young and everyone he loved in the world had died gruesomely. Rick knew the feeling of loss well, but he at least still had Carl and Judith, and even his people were an extended family to him. Still, Rick could understand the kind of mindset it took to do what Spencer had done. When Rick had been in his darker places, he’d done much worse.

He had to admit though, it had taken courage to approach Negan that way. He didn’t know Spencer had that in him. Early on, Rick had always pegged the younger man as a coward.

Because he’d written him off so soon, Rick wasn’t surprised by how Spencer had reacted when he found Simon and Rick in the alleyway that day. Someone else might have taken in Rick’s clear distress and the way the larger man was pressing him bodily against the side of the house and stepped in. Not Spencer. He’d ducked out without a sound before Simon could detect him. Rick didn’t blame him for that either. Based on what Rick now knew about Simon and what he was hiding from Negan, it was possible that if Spencer had stepped in, he would have been dead sooner, but not by Negan’s hand.
Still, something in their last interactions had shifted the way Rick saw Spencer. It seemed so foolish now, but he’d almost been convinced.

He should have known the old Spencer hadn’t gone far.

Gabriel had been right about Spencer planning something. From what Negan had said earlier, he’d been right about something else too.

*Spencer’s been watching you,* Gabriel had said those weeks ago now. *There’s something in it, something dangerous.*

Had that been what Negan was talking about? Rick didn’t tell Gabriel about what Negan had said and after lingering a few moments to finish his water, he rose to leave, thanking the man again.

Rick only returned to his house after checking on Aaron and after he was certain Carl had gone to sleep.

As he lay on the floor in his bedroom, he thought again about Spencer, about how he’d never noticed any of the things that Gabriel or Negan had pointed out. What else had Rick missed? What were his people doing while he was away on long supply runs? He had to make a change. He couldn’t keep going out that far, not when so many things could go wrong in his absence, as they had today.

As misguided as Spencer had been, he’d been right about one thing: his people needed a stable presence there, someone they could go to. If Rick couldn’t trust anyone to stand in for him, he needed to make an effort to be around more, to be present for his people. If he could keep the Saviors satisfied while providing a stable beacon for the Alexandrians, he had to try.
The night before Rick and Aaron left for the long supply run— the run that would change everything in Alexandria— Rick got another visit.

In his bedroom, Rick was packing a small duffle bag with clothes and basic amenities so that in the morning he’d be able to grab it quickly and go. Carl was out and he’d already put Judith to sleep. Rick didn’t realize he’d been lost in his thoughts until he heard a voice, deeper but somehow softer.
than Carl’s.

Rick rose to his feet when he saw the man in the doorway.

“I’m sorry,” Spencer said, raising his empty hands in peace. “I was knocking for a while and no one answered.”

Rick looked at the ground as if he could see the front door through it. He couldn’t remember hearing anything.

“The door was unlocked and I saw the light from this room, so I just thought…” Spencer trailed off, grinning in a sheepish way that accentuated his boyish features.

“I… I didn’t hear,” Rick admitted.

Part of him knew he should be upset by the intrusion, but he was too embarrassed at being caught so unaware. It wasn’t the first time someone had brought his recent distractedness to his attention. Only the day before, Carl had had to shout at him across the kitchen table to rouse him when Rick had zoned out while feeding Judith. Rick came to, finding the boy’s wide, incredulous eye on him while Judith had been eagerly appealing for another spoonful. Rick had felt irresponsible, negligent. And he could offer no more explanation for it then than he could now.

Feeling the familiar heat of shame climb his face, Rick apologized to Spencer. For an instant, he thought he saw something pass over the younger man’s face, but it was gone quickly.

“What can I do for you, Spencer?” Deanna’s son had never just entered Rick’s home like this, without invitation. Rick wondered, with a flash of panic, if something had happened with the Alexadrians in the short time he’d been there.

“No, no. Everything’s fine.” Spencer said hastily, noticing the sudden alarm on Rick’s face. That winning smile made another appearance. Rick thought he could have been an actor in another life. “I just wanted to thank you for… what you did earlier. Saying that at the meeting.” Another bashful flash of white teeth.

“That’s alright,” Rick said, and in want of anything more to say, he looked about the floor for something else to pack.

“Also, I wanted to check on you,” Spencer continued. “You seemed a little distracted earlier, a little off in the clouds.”

Rick spotted a crumpled pair of boxers he’d missed beneath his boot.

“Thank you for checking on me, but I’m alright,” he said and knelt down again to quickly fold the undergarment before placing it in the bag.

What the other man said next made Rick pause.

When it finally caught up to him, it hit him like a solid mass, making Rick feel unsteady even as he knelt.

“It is, isn’t it?” Spencer went on, voice coming from the end of a long tunnel. “It’s about Simon.”

The hand that was suddenly on Rick’s shoulder brought him back to the present and he looked up in a daze to find Spencer kneeling in front of him, eyes full of concern.
“Everyone knows you’re doing what’s best for the group,” Spencer said, voice dropping as it had when they last spoke in Rick’s kitchen. “It’s just so hard to see him taking so much from you— It’s hard for all of us, watching you give so much…”

The hand on Rick’s shoulder squeezed and held. When Rick felt his eyes begin to burn, he looked down at his pack.

“Watching the way he’s breaking you down, it’s… unbearable.” Spencer reached out with his other hand. Rick looked down where it rested on his forearm. The thumb traced slowly over his skin.

“You must be so tired. It’s tiring watching you.”

“Spencer.”

“God, Rick, he has you spreading yourself so thin. You can’t keep going on like this. It’s like every time he’s here, he takes more from you, breaks you down, piece by piece. How much more can he take, Rick? How much more will you give him?”

“Spencer.” This time, Rick looked up. Spencer opened his mouth to speak again, but nothing came out, as if Rick’s stare had choked him.

“Thank you for checking on me, Spencer,” Rick’s said and rose to his feet, where he looked down on the other man. “I think you oughtta go now.”

Spencer rose too then, but looked a little unsteady. His round eyes were locked on Rick with a restiveness that hadn’t been there moments ago. It was clear he had more to say, but Rick’s leveling gaze muted him.

The confidence and assuredness he’d exuded when first appearing in the doorway had fallen away. Now, here was Spencer the boy, Spencer the fearful son of Deanna who couldn’t now fill her considerable shoes and never would.

Rick’s cool eyes held his, unwavering. Spencer seemed to absorb the full weight of it. Despite being much larger than Rick, he seemed to visibly recoil, like a spider from a blazing fire.

“Let me speak to them,” Spencer uttered, all pretenses gone. “I can get us a better deal.”

“No,” Rick said.

“I can—“ his voice cut off the moment Rick turned away to resume packing, sensing rightfully that he’d been dismissed.

In the corner of his eye, Rick saw the man moving to leave but at the last moment, stopped him.

“Spencer,” Rick said, looking up. “Three days. No later. If the Saviors get here before us, you don’t talk to them. You tell them to wait.” It was every bit an order and Spencer knew it.

With his jaw tight, the younger man nodded and left.

After the gate vanished in his rear-view mirror along with Spencer, in what would be the last time Rick saw the man alive, he hardly thought back to that night. When he did, it was less about Spencer and more about his own blindness.

Now, after it all happened it seemed so clear and Rick felt more and more foolish for having missed
it. Hindsight was like that though. You only noticed the important things when it was too late.

Rick addressed it at the following meeting.

It was simple. When Rick was away for his long supply runs, not only did he risk missing a Savior visit, but he wasn’t able to function as the leader his people needed. Both of those shortcomings had resulted in Spencer’s death, Rick was sure of it. If Rick had been there, he would have noticed it sooner, would have been able to stop it before it got to where it did.

The solution was that Rick would go on fewer runs and less distance.

While he didn’t say that explicitly, he announced that he would need more volunteers for runs. People were still shaken after what happened with Spencer but the scene seemed to have opened their eyes to the true face of the Savior situation. Somehow out there now seemed less bleak than Alexandria, whose inner walls had been tainted by the Saviors’ oppressive presence, and whose streets had been painted with the blood of their own.

Among the new hands that rose to volunteer their service was Carl’s.

Rick’s eyes lingered only a moment before passing over the stern features. In the end, he was able to collect two extra teams, one headed by Rosita and the other by Tobin. Aaron, who was still recovering, wouldn’t be going out this time.

Later, Carl stormed ahead of him back to the house. Rick followed slower behind, allowing him his space.

Carl had to know Rick wouldn’t just let him go. Still, he seemed to take it as a personal blow to his stature as a man, which was ridiculous. Rick knew Carl could handle himself— better than most in Alexandria. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to send him outside the gate. Even as dangerous as the inner walls of Alexandria had proven to be, Rick felt better having Carl close.

He did have some ulterior motives though.

The arrangement with the Saviors had driven a visible wedge between him and his son over the past few months, and Rick was sure it was as much from Carl’s frustration with their compliance as with Rick’s frequent absence. With this new effort to be a more present leader, Rick also hoped he could be a more present father.

He soon found, however, that being “a more present leader” in Alexandria came with its own unique set of challenges that he hadn’t anticipated.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, A little interlude here before the next full chapter— Hey! don’t throw things!

I guess I needed a little more Spencer ;p The next chapter’s a fun one— and I mean actually fun. I'm excited! Hope you guys enjoyed! Update will be up soon!
The Leak

Chapter Summary

Since Rick made the decision to be more present around Alexandria, he's had time to address more domestic issues.

Chapter Notes

“It closed just fine last week, and now…”

Rick eyed the threshold a moment, turned to the old woman, then back to the threshold. Again he tried to close the door, and just like before, it got jammed in the frame.

He cleared his throat. “I'll…I'll see what I can do.” He nodded to her.

“When?” Mrs. Muller asked.

“Well, I… I’ve got a couple other houses to hit today, so I'll have to—”
“Well, are you doing anything right now?”

“I’m…” Rick licked his lips. “Not right now, no, but—”

The old woman’s brows rose high on her forehead.

Because Rick couldn’t fix a house foundation that shifted during the dry season, he sanded a good quarter inch off the top of the door so it would shut again.

“Really, you have to let me thank you. Please, Rick. Take this. You’re so skinny.”

“Mrs. Muller, I—that’s not necessary,” but she’d already thrust the wrapped dish into his arms.

“Thank you,” Rick said and left as the woman smiled after him.

Of all the jobs Deanna delegated in Alexandria, Rick wondered how she never thought to designate a handyman. Rick was way out of his depth. Still, if people needed help, and Rick was available to give it, he wasn’t one to shrug off responsibility. That was one part of going out on runs less: Rick was more available when his people needed him—and for whatever they needed from him. It was a different kind of hard work from being out there, and anyway, it was better than sitting around his house all day waiting for the teams to return from their runs. He swore he was going crazy for a couple days early on.

As he descended Mrs. Muller’s porch steps, Rick looked across the street and his chest swelled.

Hammer in hand, Carl was pounding a nail into Mr. Ferguson’s fence. It was one of many fences around Alexandria that suffered during the Wolves and Walker breaches, and one of three Rick planned to get around to mending this week.

Rick made his way over.

“How’s it going?” He asked the crouching young man.

Carl squinted up at him through the sun. He wasn’t wearing the hat and Rick thought it would have been a nice day for it. He hid the sting beneath a smile.

“It’s good, Dad,” Carl said before turning back to his task and laying a particularly hard wack that sent the nail straight home.

Carl didn’t want to be there, Rick knew. The boy—who was really more of a young man now—would much rather be out scavenging with the teams. This probably felt like an insulting waste of his talents.

“Thank you again,” Rick said, digging his boot into the grass a little. “For volunteerin’ to help out with this. I know it’s… not what you want to be doin’. I just want you to know, I’m…I’m grateful, Carl.”

All the while Rick spoke, Carl had stopped what he was doing and listened.

“It’s fine, Dad. Really,” he said at last, and Rick searched his hard features to gauge that it really was “fine.” After a moment, Carl turned back to his task and Rick supposed it was all he could reasonably expect from the teen today. At least Carl was speaking to him. It had been a surprise when he’d first volunteered to help with the tasks after nearly a week of nothing but nods and monosyllabic grumbles in Rick’s direction. He’d probably felt a certain obligation though, since all of the other able young bodies were out on supply runs. Still, Rick appreciated it.
Sensing that he’d already made great strides with his son for one day, Rick decided not to push his luck. Shifting the casserole plate to one hand, he fished his folded list out from a back pocket.

It was a long list but at least they were making a dent in it. He had four names crossed out already, and Mrs. Muller would have made the fifth if hers was planned. In fact, the woman had waved Rick inside from the street as he was passing by and he found he couldn’t say no to her. She was a new widow and had always been so kind to Carl and Judith.

Now, there were seven orders to go today and Rick wasn’t sure he would get around to them all, even with Carl’s help. Still, the feeling of purpose and usefulness it gave him was more satisfying than he could have predicted when he’d first made the decision to lend his services around Alexandria.

When Rick peered down the street to his next objective, he saw Mr. Crowley waving him over from two houses down. Rick waved back before peering up at the sun’s position.

“You want to have lunch in a little bit?” Rick asked Carl, indicating to the plate of casserole. “I didn’t ask but I think Mrs. Muller put the raisins in how you like.” Rick hated raisins but knew Carl liked them. Knowing how hopeful he probably sounded, he tried not to stare at the boy.

“Alright,” Carl said and gave Rick a nod that held more power than he could have known.

After looking at Mr. Crowley’s grandfather clock and concluding that he didn’t have the tools to fix it, Rick assured the older man that he would send a list of the appropriate tools with the next scavenging teams and left to meet Carl.

Where they sat on the curb, they didn’t speak much but Rick was happy for his son’s company. Another big motivation for increasing his presence in Alexandria was spending more time with Carl, with whom Rick had felt a growing estrangement ever since the Saviors had arrived. Of course he couldn’t tell Carl that he’d been a large part of the decision; the teen would probably think he was being overbearing or clingy. Carl really was growing into a man before his eyes, but it didn’t make letting go any easier for Rick.

When Carl finished eating, he gave a nod, to which Rick smiled, and went back to Mr. Ferguson’s fence. Rick dispensed of his own half-eaten lunch then fished in his back pocket to consult his list again.

Olivia’s name leaped out at him and he frowned at the scribbled note next to it. Although he’d told her he would get to her early today, this was one task Rick had been avoiding. Biting his lip, he folded the paper and stuffed it back into his jeans.

One downside of living in one of the new self-sustaining communes with its own power grid and water system was having to deal with the inevitable plumbing issues.

“Really, it’s fine, Olivia. It’s the least I can do after how much you've helped with Judith.”

It wasn’t really fine and Rick was uneasy about the whole thing, but he assuaged Olivia’s sheepish smile with a hand on her shoulder before turning to faced his new task.
Rick didn’t know the first thing about how to fix a backed-up kitchen sink. Back in the day, he’d just pour half a thing of Draino down it and hope for the best—a full bottle in extreme cases.

He cursed again after tightening a pipe, which he’d thought was the source of a sudden leak, only for another to spring out from a different connection. As he quickly loosened the pipe again, hissing and trying to contain the water as it sprayed out on him, he heard someone come into the kitchen.

“Dad, it’s Negan.” It was Carl’s voice.

“What? Now?” Rick craned his head to look out from beneath the sink. With his limited view, he could only see his son’s legs, followed by Olivia’s coming up close behind.

“Yeah, he’s here,” the boy intoned.

“Shit,” Rick hissed. “Well alright, I’ll be out there. Give me…just gimme a minute.”

“No, Dad. He’s here.”

Rick looked again and saw a third pair of very long legs joining the first two.

“I swear, Rick. It’s like every damn time I’m here, you’ve found your way out of another shirt.”

Rick froze for a moment then scrambled out from beneath the sink, nearly bumping his head on the pipes in the process.

“We all get it—you have a nice bod. It’s cool man. Hey! Here’s a thought: how ’bout try a little modesty for once. I don’t know, maybe a little humility. Christ, Rick. Makin’ a guy look bad in front of the ladies.” Negan flashed a wolfish smile at Olivia, who scowled back at him. “I get it, sweetheart, I can’t compete. Would you two give us a moment?”

Olivia opened her mouth, shut it, then looked to Rick for guidance.

“It’s alright, Olivia,” Rick said, and quickly pulled on his shirt and began working at the buttons. “Would you please just take Judith back to the house. I’ll get this cleaned up. Carl.” He nodded to his son to accompany her out.

Olivia eyed him a moment, but Rick sensed it was Negan making her apprehensive. Oddly, she seemed more reluctant to leave than Carl, who’d lately adopted only an air of low-simmering annoyance when Negan came around. It was a welcome break from the unbridled rage he embodied during Simon’s pick-ups, which was getting harder for Rick to contain. It made Rick wonder if, despite his efforts, the boy was catching on to the nature of their relationship.

Carl gave a nod to his father as if to say he wouldn’t be far, then before turning to leave, fixed Negan with what appeared to be a warning look. Rick stiffened.

“Carl,” he hissed.

“Easy, killer,” Negan said low, holding the boy’s gaze as he passed.

“You’re early,” Rick said when he was sure they’d gone. It was redundant but he felt agitated and wanted to express it any way he could.

Negan tutted and sauntered further into the kitchen. “Any time I’m here is exactly fucking on time, Rick. You know that. Just call me Gandalf.”

“What?”
“Gandalf,” Negan said again, as plainly as it should explain itself. “Never late, never early. Arrives precisely when he fucking means to.”

Rick shifted where he stood, feeling as if he’d missed something.

“Galdalf. Gandalf the Grey Wizard.” The man’s already large eyes were blown wide. “Jesus, Rick. Lord of the Rings? Frodo? Sam? The fucking One Ring?”

Rick blinked.

“Well, I’m done with this conversation. Answer me this, Rick, why do I even fucking bother with you? That is just—that is fucking sad, Grimes. No. Just…”

Rick felt the initial dread that had first lodged itself in his chest upon hearing the man’s name from his son’s mouth, slowly subside. His tight expression fell into one that had become customary whenever Negan came around. It was a tired look, one of hijacked patience, a look that plainly said he would prefer a more hands-on approach to compelling the man to get to the point.

“Easy. I’m not here for a pickup. Call it a social call. Just checking in. Thought we might have a little lunch. No point now that I lost my damn appetite.” He shot Rick a pointed look as he moved to stand next to him by the sink. “How’s that bed holding up? Sleeping well?” There was a faint curve to his lips. “Or not sleeping— I saw that samurai chick heading out on my way in, and God. Damn. I bet I saved your floor a fucking beating.” He sucked his lip into his teeth, and Rick tried to ignore the way his eyes seemed to wander. “Lucky mother fucker.”

Rick looked away. It unsettled him that Negan had somehow caught on to his and Michonne’s relationship purely from the few interactions he’d witness between them. Still, his assessment wasn’t all right. In fact, nothing like that had gone on in the bed. On the rare occasions when Michonne was there, she only slept on it, and alone. Rick only now considered what that said about the state of their relationship.

Negan moved on, but instead of pursuing the topic further, he began questioning Rick about the sink.

Wary though he was of Negan’s impromptu visit, Rick was relieved at least that the Savior leader was in high spirits. Rick didn’t sense any danger, at least not immediately, and if entertaining Negan’s questions kept Alexandria on the up swing of his erratic moods, Rick would play along.

Negan leaned his lanky body against the counter to make himself more comfortable while Rick set about explaining the backed-up sink. He told Negan about the issue, about what he’d done so far to address it. He told him about the sudden leak that started somewhere in the process and how he would now have to deal with that. Rick was no plumber, but he’d had his own home before all this happened and he’d had to deal with his fair share of household maladies.

He didn’t know how long he’d been speaking, and the way Negan was standing there, listening silently to him, almost made Rick forget who he was talking to. For a moment, he could’ve been passing time with another Alexandrian just stopping by. It was eerie how comfortable he’d been for those few brief moments. There was something strange in Negan’s presence there, something that lured Rick into a sense of calm. Rick couldn’t tell if it was that the Savior leader was missing his trademark leather jacket and scarlet scarf or that he’d just never seen the man go so long without talking. That was it, he decided.

Rick’s explanation petered out and he found Negan still watching him, autumn eyes focused and fully attentive.
“God damn,” Negan said at last, those eyes still holding him. “That accent, man!” He whistled and his whole body was swinging back for emphasis.

The misplaced calm that had momentarily taken Rick was gone then, replaced with irritation.

Rick’s lips tightened and he breathed deeply through his nose.

“You really are from Georgia, aren’t you?” Negan went on. “I can just picture you as one of them sweet, down-home good ol’ boys, right down to the hospitality and mama’s cherry pie, no doubt.”

Of course Negan hadn’t heard a damn word. Rick felt ridiculous for bothering with the man and shook his head at the ground.

“Let me see it,” Negan said after a pause.

Rick blinked up at him, taking in the sharp tongue pressed between gofer’s teeth.

“The leak,” Negan elaborated.

Rick looked down at the small puddle he was still standing in. "Why?” He asked after a pause.

“Why?” Negan hooted. “You think you’re the only one who can get his hands dirty around here, Rick? I told you like fifteen times that’s what this whole arrangement is about. Thought you might get it by now. Shit’s broken, Big Daddy Negan comes and fixes it right up. It’s the benefit of you keeping up with your shit. Jesus, Rick, you thought you were just busting your ass for nothing? That would be a real shitty deal on your end. Being honest, I’m a little offended you think I’d screw you like that.”

Rick shifted uncomfortably, looking around him. He thought he remembered something in the deal about getting the Saviors’ protection and assistance. Still, he didn’t think it extended to leaks in kitchen sinks.

He lingered, studying Negan’s neighborly smile a moment longer before stepping aside and allowed the larger man to kneel down in his place.

For the better part of an hour, the two men were set up on the floor in Olivia’s kitchen with towels and papers spread out beneath them to absorb the spillage, which grew larger every time Negan called out for Rick to turn on the faucet. Partially hidden beneath the sink, Negan's disembodied voice cursed and commented, while Rick sat nervously beside him, handing him various tools when Negan called for them. Rick couldn't help feeling like the assistant to Negan's foul-mouthed and questionably-certified doctor.

“Shit, Rick, hand me that fucking…fucking…the—shit, that fucking… Phillips!” He held his hand out from beneath the plumbing.

“The wrench?” Rick offered. There was nothing in this repair that required a Phillips screwdriver.

“Yeah, the fucking wrench, Rick. Bingo. Just fucking give it here.”

Rick handed him the tool, wondering not for the first time since they’d started there, whether he'd made a mistake in accepting Negan's help.
At one point Carl had come back to check on them, and for a while loomed in the doorway, taking in the sight of them there on the floor. Rick tried to smile at him but it was more of a wince. He was glad when the young man left again without a word.

As Negan set to work with the wrench, grumbling curses beneath his breath and making worrisome grinding and clanking sounds of mental against pipe, much of his work remained hidden from Rick. His legs, however, long and extending out into the middle of the room, were on full display and served as indicators of Negan’s growing frustration; they kicked and stomped intermittently, rolling and rocking as Negan shifted the weight of his considerable body in the uncomfortable position.

“And where the fuck is Simon?” the Savior leader hissed at one point.

Rick was glad that the man was submerged beneath the plumbing and couldn’t see how he’d stiffened at the name.

“Oh, you don’t even know— you’ll get a kick out of this shit, Grimes— Simon used to be a damn plumber. We oughta get his ass in here. Fix this mess. Fuckin’ A.”

“Wasn’t a mess before, ” Rick mumbled to himself. His eyes scanned the expanse of towels and newspaper they’d had to lay out to contain the worsening spill.

“Oh!” Negan huffed. One of his long legs gave an indignant stomp. “So this is my fucking fault, I guess. I’m sorry. I thought I was being a fucking help here. I’m not the one who can’t keep up with my home maintenance, Rick. I’m not the one throwing myself through every damn window I can find. If I had to guess, I’d say you were trying to run these houses into the ground. Jesus. Oh, and by the way, I went by your house— nice solution to that window. Real fucking classy.”

Rick couldn’t help envisioning the patchwork plastic sheet taped over the jagged hole that had once been his kitchen window. Rick set his jaw, swallowing a retort.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Negan said. “Why don’t you make yourself useful and hand me that damn… fucking…shit.” He snapped furiously at a tool by Rick’s knee. “That fucking…bent mother fucker over there.”

“Allen wrench,” Rick said, holding it out.

Negan snatched it.

By the time Negan had crawled out from under the sink, Rick felt fairly secure that whatever the Savior leader had been before the end, it had nothing to do with household repairs.

Negan was damp all over, his dark hair clinging in thick, supermanesque swirls to his forehead before he slicked it back with a hand. His white t-shirt, which was nearly translucent now, was smudged with pipe rust and mildew. The leak itself, which had begun as a slight trickle, had grown into a steady pour— now clogged by angry layers of duck tape.

“Yeah, well, I said it was Simon who was the fuckin’ plumber, didn’t I, Rick?”

Rick had to wonder why Negan had offered to fix it in the first place then, instead of just sending Simon over. Not that Rick wanted more time with the second-in-command. He caught Negan’s eyes trailing down to his shirt and Rick realized he too was soaked through. Sheepishly, he grabbed one of the least drenched towels he could find and worked at drying himself.
“You know, you and your boy do that same thing.”

Rick was kneeling down and had begun wadding up the soaked papers when Negan said this. He looked up to find the man watching him as he was running a towel up his long arms.

“What?” Rick said.

“You both get all fuckin’ weird when I mention Simon, like I just brought up your dead dog at Sunday brunch.”

Rick didn’t know if he was meant to answer and went back to salvaging Olivia’s kitchen floor, all the while uncomfortably aware of the Savior leader’s eyes still watching him.

Rick had made a note to not talk about Simon, whether to Negan or Carl or anyone. It wasn’t only because the mere thought of the man made his stomach churn, but also because he feared that the people close to him would sense something in his voice or in his face and it would instantly give him away. Negan, in particular, who had somehow sniffed out Rick’s and Michonne’s relationship, worried him most of all.

So, it was in Rick’s best interest to let the subject slide. Yet something Negan had said suddenly caught up to him.

“When did you talk to Carl?” The idea of Negan spending time with his son, whether to talk about Simon or anything, was daunting to Rick, and the question rushed from his mouth nearly as soon as it occurred to him. Only after it was out, did he remember the day he’d come back hours late from what had been his last long run, to find Spencer’s gutted body in the street. During the hours Rick had been held up, Negan had spent much of his time with Carl.

When Rick looked up, he saw in Negan’s face that he too realized Rick’s mistake. As if taking pity on him, the Savior didn’t respond.

There was a lump in Rick’s throat as he went back to collecting the rags from the floor.

“Well, Rick,” Negan said after a while, and tossed his towel so it landed wetly in the corner. “I just helped you fix a serious leak in your kitchen sink. What do you say to me?”

Rick stood up then. The subjugation was bad enough without being on his knees too.

“Thank…thank you,” he said and nodded at the other man. The movement was as jerky and unnatural as the words, and his head remained lowered afterward.

When Negan didn’t respond for a while, Rick looked up to see the other man’s features soften and his brown eyes watching him.

“Thank you, Rick.”

After Negan had gone, Rick explained to Olivia that he’d fixed the leak (that hadn’t been the problem to begin with) and that the sink was probably still backed up, but he would come back first thing in the morning to try again.
He’d expected her to be upset, but instead she frowned, taking in his still-damp hair and water-logged clothes, then burst into laughter.

After a moment of confusion, Rick looked down at himself and realized what had caused the reaction. Glancing over to the window, where Carl stood holding Judith, Rick saw that the young man too was shaking with silent laughter.
It wasn’t long after Michonne moved out that Rick realized he had to let Carl go.

Over time, Rick began trusting him to go out on runs. It was a tough decision, but helped by the fact that they didn’t really have much choice. They needed every able body they could get, and Carl was not only eager, but strong. In their time in Alexandria, his son had grown considerably and Rick
couldn’t keep ignoring it, certainly not when Eric had started lending them clothes so Carl would have something to wear while they worked on scavenging him up a new wardrobe.

During one of his visits, Negan had even taken notice of the teen’s growth spurt.

“Whoa, son, where’s the flood?” he hollered, large eyes honed on the hem of Carl’s pants which ended a full two inches above the tops of his shoes.

Carl scowled back, but Rick caught the soft coloring in his cheeks.

Carl even went to Hilltop on occasion. He traded messages to and from Maggie, Sasha and Jesus. Although it was good for Alexandria to have another scavenger for runs— and such a gift to be able to communicate more regularly with the others in Hilltop— Carl’s absence never failed to make Rick uneasy. It worsened the longer he was away. The boy would tell him to relax, that he wasn’t new to any of this, and that he could handle himself. Rick knew Carl could take a Walker. Of course he could. But things were different now that they didn’t have guns. And anyway, there was more to fear out there than just Walkers.

Enid, who was also growing like a weed, usually went along with Carl, but that didn’t make Rick feel any better. To him, they were still just kids.

When Aaron recovered, he began volunteering to go with them, which helped to ease some of Rick’s anxiety.

“You can come along, you know,” the man had said one day by the gate. “If you’re worried I mean.”

The three of them were about to depart for Hilltop when Arron fell back. He was watching Rick closely now and Rick guessed his restlessness showed.

Finally, Rick dragged his eyes away from the boy up ahead. “Nah,” he said, regarding Aaron seriously. “I’m sure Carl will protect you.” He held his gaze until the tension broke and the other man was smiling again.

“Yeah, I’d say you’re right about that,” Aaron said and turned to look at the tall, inexplicably broad-shouldered teen, who was waiting by the car.

Rick shook his head. “He’s just about bigger than me now,” he sighed. Where had the time gone?

He supposed that since they’d come to Alexandria, food hadn’t been as scarce as it used to be. Even now, with the Savior arrangement, Carl was usually able to get his three square meals in, and Rick thought it suited him well.

“Yeah,” Aaron observed. “Voice is even deeper than yours.” Rick shot him a look and Aaron laughed.

“Hey!” Enid called, poking her head out from the driver-side window. “You coming or what?”

Aaron waved to the girl but turned back to Rick. “Really, Rick,” he said, voice dropping again. “You can still come along. We can wait for you if you need to grab your things. Maggie and Sasha would love to see you. And this place will be fine for a little while. If the Saviors come when you’re away, Gabriel will just tell them you’re on a run.”

In his eagerness, Aaron’s natural charisma was coming out in full force. Rick regarded the bright eyes and expressive features. “I…I can’t,” he said at last, and looked down. “I can’t go out that far.”
He felt a tugging in his chest.

Rick was grateful when Aaron didn't press him further, although the leader sensed his friend wanted to. Aaron understood. What happened with Spencer was still fresh in both their memories and, despite what Gabriel might say, Rick carried the weight of responsibility with him always.

When they cleared the gate, Rick pulled it shut behind them, catching Carl’s gaze in the side-view mirror before the boy looked away.

Carl more than anyone seemed to resent Rick’s new initiative to stay in Alexandria. Although the young man had been there that day with the rest of them, he didn’t seem to understand what Spencer’s death had to do with Rick staying back more. He didn’t see how Rick’s presence could have prevented it. Or he didn’t care.

If Carl was affected by what had happened to Spencer, he didn't show it like the rest of Alexandria, certainly not like Rick. In fact, the young man seemed to be of a mind that the whole thing was justified. Rick even suspected he sided with Negan on the way he’d handled it.

Whenever Rick heard his son outwardly expressing this view, he would stomp it out immediately. Spencer was a living person, Rick would say. And he was one of theirs. It was true that he was flawed, and scared, and sure, he’d made a lot of mistakes, but nobody deserved to die like that.

The handful of times Rick had had that talk with Carl, he couldn’t help hearing traces of Morgan in his own voice, and thought that the man would be proud to hear him talking that way.

Carl was unmoved though.

The young man would usually drop the subject then but not before grumbling something biting, sometimes even referencing what parts he’d overheard from Negan’s rant to Rick that day. Rick would immediately clam up then, unready and unequipped to address that side of the events. To him, it was somehow easier to remember Spencer as a man who’d only wanted to kill him.

Overall, Carl seemed to grudgingly accept Rick’s new resolution to stay close to Alexandria, even if he didn’t know the whole reason why.

As much as it stung to let Carl go out on those long trips, there were times when Rick was glad to keep the boy away.

He thought on it days later, as he sat in Olivia’s kitchen sharing a piece of toast with Judith. He was going to meet Tobin to work on some of the warped roofs around Alexandria and was spending the morning with his daughter before leaving her with Olivia for the day. It had been his routine for the last month or so.

As they sat at the table, Olivia took the opportunity to thank Rick again for fixing the back-up. Her sink had been working like a dream ever since.

“Never thought I’d miss doing the dishes,” she said and flashed a smile at Judith on Rick’s lap.

“Not a problem,” Rick smiled back. “Just glad we could finally get it fixed.”

Olivia stood up to retrieve the pitcher of orange juice from the counter. While bouncing Judith idly
on his knee, Rick’s eyes followed the woman across the room. The sight of the sink and the cabinets beneath recalled the feeling of cold tile beneath Rick's knees and the sound of a belt buckle coming loose behind him.

_Don’t worry, Rick. I’ll walk you through it._

He blinked and smiled up at Olivia as she poured him more juice.

“She just loves that beard doesn’t she?” Olivia observed as Judith tugged at Rick’s face.

Rick breathed a laugh. “Well, someone’s got to.” He smiled down at the giggling girl. “I really need to shave this thing. Tobin’s been calling me Grizzly Adams.”

“Maybe a trim,” Olivia said. “It looks good on you.”

A little later, after kissing Judith’s head and waving them both goodbye, Rick headed toward Tobin’s house.

On his way, he passed two Saviors poking around one of the broken solar panels that had been damaged during the Walker breech. Rick remembered he’d been so distraught that night after Ron shot Carl that he charged back out into the swarm of Walkers, barely thinking as he fired his Python at everything that moved and probably some things that didn't. The others soon joined him and when it was all over, an entire row of solar panels was out and a chunk of Alexandria was off the grid.

Rick had long chalked it up as a loss but then Negan had sent over those engineers and they’d been steadily getting them up and running again.

“You prosper, _we_ prosper,” Rick remembered Negan saying once.

Not long after they’d flooded Olivia’s kitchen trying to stop a leak that hadn’t been the problem to begin with, Negan had sent over a crew of Saviors with various levels and facets of maintenance expertise to run a full-scale inspection of the community. Negan had evidently told them about Rick’s “honey-do list” and had given them express instruction to help him complete every item on it. Negan must have underestimated how much work was needed around Alexandria though, because what was supposed to be a one-time thing had since stretched out across five weeks. And the requests just kept coming in.

When Rick realized that Negan was just going to keep sending more Saviors until all the jobs were completed, he berated himself for not getting more of the tasks done on his own. As the maintenance went on, the Saviors’ weekly visits became triweekly.

Sometimes it was Negan leading the crews. The man would plod through town, poking around, making odd, nonsensical observations about things and even doing some tinkering when Rick couldn’t stop him. Because Negan had such a vast network to run though— and Rick still had no idea how many communities he had under him— he couldn’t be everywhere, not really. So, more often than not, it was Simon heading the maintenance teams. As Rick and Tobin were working on the roof, swapping the warped shingles with fresh ones from the vacant houses, the Savior lieutenant approached.

“Hey, Rick!” Came the call from the yard below.

Both men froze. Rick, who was bent over, holding one of the shingles flat for Tobin, felt the warmth drain from his face when he saw the tall man strolling up the lawn.
“Why don’t you come on down here,” Simon called up, using his hand like a visor. “Got that part you needed. Let’s go check out that unit.”

Rick stared down at the man a moment before nodding to Tobin and carefully making his way over to the ladder.

When he got down, another Savior immediately climbed up the ladder behind him.

“Don’t worry,” Simon said. “Jerry here was a roofer. He’s gonna help your friend finish the job. Ain’t that right, Jerry?”

Jerry the Savior shot them a thumbs up.

Rick waved to Tobin over his shoulder and said he’d be back later.

Simon didn’t seem interested in the outdoor repairs; he never leant a hand in mending the fences or warped roofs, or in pruning the rotten limbs from the many live oaks within the walls.

No, it was the indoor repairs that interested Simon most, the smaller jobs in closed-off spaces that required only one or two people to complete. It was the leaking pipes in the basements, or the cracks in the shower grout, or the hole in the closet drywall.

Today, it was the faulty garbage disposal unit in Rick’s house. Simon seemed to find more and more need for repairs there.

Rick hardly noticed the disposal unit; he and Carl used it maybe once or twice since they'd been there. But Simon had found it one day, prowling from room to room, flipping switches, poking his head into closets and cabinets, looking as if he meant to make an offer on the place. Although Rick had told him it was far from a priority, Simon insisted.

The Savior made a show of it at first, really looking over the unit, commenting offhandedly on its specs and even dipping beneath the sink to get a better look. He was every bit the plumber Rick would have pictured back in his other life. It was only an illusion though. The show always ended.

“Come on over here, Rick.”

Slowly, mechanically, Rick moved to the sink.

“Didn’t think I was gonna do all the work, did ya? Don’t worry,” Simon said, and moved behind him. “I’ll walk you through it.”

Rick steeled himself as Simon’s long arm reached past him to flip on the switch that powered the disposal unit. Although Rick had expected it, he flinched at the loud whirring sound that suddenly filled the kitchen.

“Easy there Rick,” came the voice near his ear. “Just a faulty unit. No need to get all strung out about it. Big Daddy Simon,” Bid Daddy Negan. “is gonna fix that shit.”

Rick gripped the rim of the sink tightly and stared ahead.

“So, nothing’s happening but power is getting to it,” Simon explained over Rick’s shoulder, in a storybook tone like he was talking a child. “So first thing we gotta do is check if something is caught
down there jamming up the blades or one of the gears—“

“Already checked,” Rick said flatly. “First thing we checked. There’s nothin’.”

The presence at his back grew warmer as the larger man brushed up against him.

“Did you check it while it was running?”

After a moment’s pause, Rick turned to eye the man over his shoulder.

Simon proceeded to explain in a tone that suggested he was being completely rational that the best way to eliminate potential causes of the problem was to feel around inside while the thing was running to see if what parts of the mechanics, if any, were still functioning, and where the hold-up was. No matter how slowly Simon spoke, it sounded completely ludicrous to Rick.

“You follow me, Rick?”

Rick looked down the dark pit of the drain. The whirring sound continued even though there was no actual mechanism to accompany it. When he first realized it wasn’t working, the first thing he’d done was check for a jam. There was nothing in it. He’d have heard it rattling if there was.

“Let’s go Rick! Burning daylight!”

Dazedly, Rick nodded.

“Alright then!” Simon said. “We’re all on the same page. Now why don’t you reach on down there and have a little feel around for me.”

After a stretched pause in which Rick did nothing, he felt Simon’s hand brushing over his bare forearm beneath the rolled-up sleeve, and sliding downward to take hold of his wrist.

Rick shook his head rigidly and tried to pull his hand away. “Simon,” he hissed.

The Savior was shushing him and Rick felt the course mustache and stubbled beard scraping against his ear. Now the other long arm came around Rick’s waist so he couldn’t twist free. Maintaining his firm hold, Simon guided the wriggling arm down, down toward the roaring drain.

From the iron grip around his wrist and solid mass at his back, Rick knew he was trapped. “Si-Simon,” he pleaded, but down they plunged, the Savior’s large hand wrapped around Rick’s wrist and Rick’s hand shoved down the disposal.

“That’s it,” Simon was cooing into his ear. “That's it. Get that dainty thing down there.”

Rick gulped for air. He’d hit the solid base of the disposal’s housing and felt the jutting gears and parts along the inner walls.

“What do you feel, Rick?”

Fighting the anxious bile rising in his stomach, Rick took a moment to breathe before assessing the cramped space. Willing himself to focus, he felt with twitching fingers for something lodged or loose that shouldn't be there—not that he would have any idea what should or shouldn’t be there.

When he told Simon through clenched teeth that he couldn’t feel anything, the other man didn’t let up.

The whole damn unit was vibrating. It made Rick sure that any second it would cut on and shred his hand to pulp right up to the wrist. What would happen if he did manage to find the source of the jam and dislodge it? Rick seethed. Shoving the thought away, he tried to feel for what the man described, but either from his own blinding panic or lack of experience, Rick found nothing.

Finally, Simon released his arm and Rick jerked it from the disposal, feeling the icy tingling of blood rushing through it now that Simon’s grip no longer obstructed circulation.

Rick felt a chill over his back where the warm mass left him. With both hands, he gripped the rim of the sink, panting and gathering himself.

Behind him, Simon huffed. “Guess it’s just a fucking faulty unit.”

Simon disconnected the broken garbage disposal and radioed another Savior to have a replacement ready by the next maintenance day. Afterward, Rick went with him upstairs, where his pants were yanked down to his thighs and he was shoved face-down on the bed.

As Rick’s booted feet dangled off the quaking mattress and he buried his face in the sheets, he didn’t regret that Carl was away.

“Where’s that scary-ass boy of yours? I feel all skittish when I can’t see him… like he’s gonna fucking pop out of a bush or something and shiv me in the ass.” Negan scanned the street, looking suddenly wary of the bushes in their vicinity.

Rick opened his mouth about to answer. Carl was still in Hilltop in what had become an extended stay and Rick almost forgot that the Saviors didn’t know about their connections there. He closed his mouth at the last moment. “Supply run,” he murmured at last.

As Negan took a moment to assess this, his eyes looked over Rick in a kind of wonder. “Damn,” he said. “Momma hen finally let the chick outta the coop.”

Rick frowned. He supposed it was better than Negan calling him the rooster. Briefly, he wondered at how the man had passed up an opportunity to say the word “cock.” Still, there was no condescension in the tone; Negan wasn’t making fun of him. In fact, when Rick looked up into the large brown eyes, he thought he even saw genuine condolence there, as if Negan understood a measure of what it took for Rick to send his son out there.

That wasn’t possible of course. As natural as Negan was with young people, it wasn’t the same as having a kid of his own. He couldn’t know the feeling of sending his own child out into that twisted world where dangers hid around every corner, and without a real weapon with which to defend himself. Every time Carl cleared that gate without him, Rick felt like he was losing one of his own limbs.

Rick sniffed and looked around for something to change the subject. “Should be a clear day for it.”

As they walked together, Rick was vaguely aware of a lingering sting in his stride. It reminded him of the last maintenance day.
Simon was always rougher on the bed.

After removing the garbage disposal, Rick had hoped the man would just do it over the sink. Or even on the floor like in Olivia’s kitchen when he’d fed Rick instructions and Rick fumbled with jerking hands to follow them while his whole body quaked from the repeated impact.

Simon liked the bed though. He was convinced that that was where Negan took Rick, and the idea of his famed leader doing the same things in the same place excited Simon somehow. Rick knew this because all the while Simon was on him, he pried Rick for details of what Negan did.

Rick hardly responded but Simon never seemed to mind. He got off on the idea of it.

The last time, Simon had been particularly interested in one of Negan’s previous visits when he’d seen the Savior leader dragging Rick inside the house.

“He fuck you like this in here, Rick? Did he fuck you like this? That what y’all were doing?”

Rick had had to think back on it. In fact, the day Simon was referring to, nearly a week ago now, Negan had been bursting since he’d come through the gates and wasted no time in dragging Rick inside before proceeding to pitch him his idea to paint Judith’s room a cotton candy pink they’d collected from one of the other towns. Negan, who seemed to associate every pink thing he found with Judith, had seen the paint bucket and instantly snatched it. After Rick had flatly refused the idea, Negan threw up his arms and stormed out as if Rick was being unreasonable.

Simon didn’t seem to care about the truth though, and had taken Rick so hard that he found blood afterward.

Now, the constant reminder in each step, along with having to deal with Negan’s aimless rambling, had Rick feeling increasingly agitated. He didn’t have the patience to deal with the Savior leader today.

More and more Rick got the impression that Negan’s visits were more perfunctory, especially since his Saviors were already taking care of all the repairs and needed little guidance beyond Rick pointing them in the right direction and staying the hell out of their way.

Rick had to wonder why Negan even bothered coming. Even his occasional presence at the pickups felt redundant. Alexandria was subdued; there was no more threat of rebellion. And if there had been, it was promptly stomped out with Spencer.

As he endured more than listened to the other man while they plodded along, Rick felt the sudden urge to just ask him outright, to finally just cut through the bullshit. None of it had anything to do with Rick, and Rick hardly ever responded anyway so it couldn’t have been much use to Negan either. So if his visits were just wastes of both their time then why the hell did the man keep coming? Why did he keep forcing Rick to lead him around, keep talking to him about shit that didn’t concern him?

He wished the man would just go and let him be. It made no difference for the better when he came, and Rick was now convinced that it made things worse. If Negan only stopped coming once and for all then Rick wouldn’t have to keep hoping for it. He wouldn’t have to keep dreading the days he didn’t see him at the gate. He could just keep trudging along, taking it until it didn’t bother him anymore, and there would be no more bad days or better days because they would all just be the same and he could know what to expect.

But these slow, quiet moments with Negan were teases. In many ways, they were more cruel than
what Simon did to him. With Negan, Rick felt like a starved, freezing urchin on a rainy street, looking in through the glass on a feast. Rick was barely holding himself up while Negan was the walking embodiment of abundance. Yet, try as he might, Rick couldn’t reach the sustenance he so badly needed. His fingers always met glass.

“Jesus Rick, you look like you’re gonna fuckin’ fall over. Sit down. Sit down right there. Hold on.”

There was suddenly a small bench behind him. Slowly Rick sat down as he was told and when Negan returned, took the bottle of water held out to him.

“Heat gotcha, huh? Thought you were from Georgia, sport.”

Someone walked up, another Savior, and Negan was gone again, talking with the woman. Something about inventory.

Rick found he couldn’t stop staring at Negan even as the Savior leader seemed to forget Rick was there. For some reason, the man’s presence there just seemed completely incongruous to Rick in that moment. And the longer Rick stared, the more impossible it seemed. He kept blinking to try and make sense of it. The entire idea of Negan was suddenly beyond Rick’s ability to comprehend.

“Why,” Rick croaked out.

In the middle of his sentence, Negan broke off to look over at him for a moment. Turning back to the woman, he finished his instructions and dismissed her.

“Why what?” Negan said, without looking up from his clipboard. Idly, he flipped through the pages, a vague concern furrowing his brow.

“Why are you… here? Why do you keep…” Rick’s throat felt too constricted to continue and he looked down at the bottle in his hands.

"Well," Negan said and looked up at last. “I missed you.”

Rick looked up again and saw the big smile spreading across Negan's lips

Negan left late in the day, but not before retrieving something from his truck and handing it to Rick. Maybe Rick was still a little light-headed but it took him a moment of staring at the stack of denim before he realized what it was.

“Are these…are these for…”

“Can’t have a badass dude like that walking around looking all goofy in kid’s pants. People laughing at him behind his back.”

It wasn't lost on Rick that Negan was only one to ever laugh at Carl for his increasingly ill-fitting pants.

“Anyway,” Negan said. “Us long-legged guys gotta look out for each other.” He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jacket and seemed suddenly very interested in the street around them. Rick realized after a while that the other man was avoiding his eyes.
“Thank you,” Rick said, because he didn’t know what else to say, and because, really, the man had just gifted him with clothes that his son needed.

“Not a big deal. We got a few tailors back at the base. Can never find a damn thing that fits.”

Rick studied Negan as the Savior rocked on his heels, still looking around at his men gathering at the gate.

Rick had just thanked Nagan, voluntarily even, and the man hadn’t pounced on it, hadn’t even blinked.

That day, Rick realized something had changed between them, might’ve changed a while back but Rick only now saw it. Somewhere along the way, Negan had dropped that barbed edge in his tone, stopped messing with Rick for the sake of messing with him, started caring whether or not his son had pants that fit.

Rick watched them go and thought about it.

He was still thinking about it later after he’d made his rounds, marked off his master list to indicate what had been completed that day and what new tasks they’d started. As he lay on his floor beside the empty bed, he realized he didn’t remember the last time Negan made him hold Lucille— didn’t even remember the last time he’d seen the famed bat. Either Negan had finally grown bored of it or Rick had crossed over some initiation period and there was no more need for such hazing tactics. Whatever the reason, something had definitely shifted somewhere, or maybe it had been happening steadily for a while now.

It would be another couple of days before the maintenance teams came back and Rick was immeasurably grateful for the break.

It wouldn’t be much longer now before all the major repairs were complete and they would fall back into their weekly arrangement with the Saviors. Rick couldn’t believe he was looking forward to only having to deal with pickups.

Chapter End Notes

Holy Moses! This chapter was a pilgrimage to write. Passage of time is rough. Near the end, I was just lopping chunks off, shoving chunks back in. Just picture me with scissors and a glue stick, just going at it. Anyway, so please let me know if it flows alright. That was my main concern.

Okay, also I have to apologize for this:

“Got that part you needed. Let’s go check out that unit.”
As I wrote it, I was laughing, like *I'm not really gonna write this* and then I did. Why is it so easy to picture Simon in a 70's porno?

Alright, thank you guys for reading! I love hearing what you think!
Although it was weeks ago now in the early days of all the maintenance, that last time with Michonne stayed with Rick.

When he thought back on it, really he should have seen the end coming. He’d been so overworked with the Saviors’ increased presence and keeping Carl from pulling further and further away from him, that he didn’t notice that Michonne too had been slipping away.

“Rick,” he heard from somewhere above him, and jolted awake. He feared for a moment that he’d
woken her up with the nightmares that had started up recently. Some nights he would bolt up in the sheets, throat stinging and chest heaving and so wet he didn’t know if he was sweating or if he’d pissed himself.

But he didn’t remember dreaming, and her voice had no worry in it.

She slid down on top of him as if she’d been doing it every night and the last several months with the Saviors hadn’t happened.

Their bodies first clashed then melded together.

It had been a long time but they somehow found their rhythm. His lips rediscovered those familiar paths that made her gasp and arch into him. Where his hands stumbled and faltered, she guided them over her body.

He’d been so exhausted from the day that he’d collapsed fully dressed on the floor, something that wasn’t uncommon. Now, her hands deftly loosened his belt buckle and freed him.

When she found his sex, he couldn’t contain his moans and she quickly swallowed them in a deep kiss.

It had been so long since he’d felt anything like this. A warm lover, soft and pliant, strong but gentle.

He missed this. God, he missed it. He wondered vaguely what he’d done recently to deserve it. Only later would he learn that it wasn’t a reward, but a goodbye.

She took mastery of him and Rick gave himself over to her willingly.

It felt good to be so utterly vulnerable for someone who wouldn’t abuse his moment of weakness. In return, she even gave herself over to him—trusted him, as if she felt he wouldn’t abuse her either. She couldn’t know how much he cherished that trust, as misplaced as it likely was. She couldn’t know how shaky he was and how many others might have been better suited for such a responsibility. It was almost reckless how fully she gave herself over to him.

Yet her unconditional trust in him made Rick’s own trust in himself soar to live up to it. He felt stronger in her arms than he’d felt in…he didn’t know when.

It had been a long time since anyone had trusted him so much. It hurt to be so trusted.

She gave so honestly to him in her touches and lingering stares that it made him want to give and give to her. He did in kind. He kept giving and giving himself and he even forgot how little he had left after Simon’s course hands plied and tore at him leaving less and less of himself each time.

If she found him lacking she didn’t show it.

Rick might have cried at some point, silent, endless tears. If Michonne noticed that too, she said nothing, though her lips traced up the wet trails, leaving chaste, tender kisses in their wake. It only made Rick ache more.

As he became lost in the growing ecstasy of their joined bodies, Michonne spoke into his ear.

You are beautiful. You are strong. You are a survivor.

No “we” in this chant, but Rick wouldn’t notice until later. He was too overwhelmed, too enveloped in the agonizing, wonderful feeling that was so far from anything he’d known in so long. It filled
him.

He wanted to keep this moment with him and end it all at the same time. It was agony and unspeakable pleasure. He was dying but he was going to heaven.

There was no place in this world for this kind of joy—no place in Rick’s world. The longer it lasted, the harder and more painful it would be when he’d have to let it go and return to his routine of slowly trudging through each day, holding the needs and pains of everyone else above his own.

Here, he had someone with which to share that burden. He could even let himself break beneath the weight of it and Michonne would think no less of him.

While this lasted, he would take it, he decided. For as long as he could.

*So beautiful. So Strong.* She went on. And Rick let himself be lost in her.

In the morning, Michonne was gone and somehow he knew she wouldn’t be back.

Now when he thought back to that time, Rick was glad Michonne was gone. He couldn’t stomach the thought of her sleeping in that bed.

Rick could still smell her dusty, salty scent beneath him on the quaking mattress. Although she hadn’t been there in weeks, She was the only one who’d ever slept there and the spot was still fragrant with traces of her. He let the scent of her envelope him like a warm cocoon until he was nuzzling the sheet beneath him.

After Simon finished, the larger man climbed off the bed, leaving Rick feeling exposed and raw as he always did. Still, Rick found it hurt less and less each time.

Carefully Rick pushed himself up off the mattress and pulled up his pants. As he worked at fastening his belt, Simon waited, leaning against the door, already presentable.

The house was empty, as it usually was when Simon came around. Rick made it so.

“Did you send them away just so you and I could have the house to ourselves?” Simon had said when he’d first arrived. “Knew you’d be gettin’ some dick today, huh, Rick?”

Rick shuddered as he always did when Simon brought up his kids. Since that first time in Judith’s room, when Rick had been pinned against the door and caught between letting Simon use his body freely and alerting his children, they’d crossed the threshold into a new phase of their relationship. In choosing the former, Rick had given Simon all he needed to know. It was true that Rick had something on Simon in keeping their situation secret, but Simon had something on Rick too—two very big somethings.

Rick would even wager that he cared more about keeping this a secret than Simon did. It was that important to him that Carl and Judith not be involved. Simon seemed to know that too.

Downstairs, Rick told the Savior to leave through the back, taking no care with his tone. Before
Simon did so, he sauntered over to Rick and leaned down from his considerable height. For a moment it seemed like he meant to kiss Rick, but he stopped, patted Rick's cheek and slid past him.

Rick didn't find blood that time, but there were bruises.

He didn’t notice them immediately.

Carl had just returned from a prolonged stay in Hilltop and Rick was still getting used to having him around the house. The young man was gone more often than not lately and Rick suspected it was out of disgust with his father’s inaction. Despite Carl’s frustration, however, Rick noticed that he tried to make it back in time for the scheduled pickups, as if he felt a certain responsibility to be there when the Saviors were.

It was perhaps because Rick had grown so unused to having Carl in the house that he wasn’t as careful.

Rick had just gotten out of the shower and wore only a towel around his waist. His freshly washed clothes were dumped out on the bed and Rick was folding them, thinking back to that last time with Michonne as he did on occasion, and smiling to himself.

With his back to the open door and his thoughts elsewhere, he didn’t notice Carl’s approach.

Rick jumped when he first felt the presence at his back, before quickly realizing who it was.

"Carl," he breathed a laugh. "You scared me."

The young man didn’t respond as Rick resumed his folding. Soon he felt the soft tracing of fingers along his bare sides.

At first, Rick thought Carl meant to embrace him but then glanced over his shoulder and saw the look on the young man’s face.

"Carl?"

Rick followed where his son was staring fixedly. He had to lift his own arms to better see and when he did it was another few moments before it caught up with him.

He spun around. "Car-Carl, what are you doin'?"

"What are those?" The young man asked, sounding dazed.

Stepping around the bed, Rick backed away. One hand adjusted the towel higher around his waist while the other was held out in front of him.

"Dad?"

Rick fumbled with a response. Walker run-in’s had been his go-to excuse back when he was out there all the time, but he hardly left the walls anymore, except to thin out the herds that built up outside the gates. Somehow he felt these marks didn’t fit any injury he might've sustained from a Walker.

Beneath the bandage, Carl’s expression twisted as he listened to his father’s hurried, stuttered
explanation, and soon the teen was moving forward again, grabbing for the towel.

“Carl, stop—“

“What is that, Dad?”

“Carl, it’s fine,” Rick asserted, but the desperation cracked his voice. He gripped the towel tighter with one hand while the other was still thrust out ahead of him as if the boy might charge. “Just… Hang on and—and listen—”

“No, Dad, what the fuck is that?”

Rick hit the window and couldn’t back away anymore.

"Is that..."Carl was tilting his head to see around Rick's shielding arms. “Dad, is that…”

Simon was always rougher on the bed.

Rick shook his head, more to clear it. He was handling this all wrong. He needed to level himself. This wasn’t the right reaction. Carl could see something was off.

Rick thought he felt the floor beneath him give slightly as if the room around him was falling apart. He’d been doing so good for so long. He’d somehow kept Carl away from all of this. It couldn’t just be out in the open now, not after everything.

“I said…” Rick tried again and swallowed to wet his throat. “I said already, we…we were out in the woods, just outside the gates, and a group of Walkers came up on us—surprised us. Aaron grabbed me—saved me, pulled me out of the way. Maybe he was a little rough about it…,” he said, sending a queasy glance down to the twin marks peeking out from his towel on either hip. The bruises looked dark and violent and he couldn’t suppress a wince. The idea that Aaron would ever handle him so roughly was completely ridiculous, threat of Walkers or not, and they both knew it. Despite that, Rick set his jaw and held his son's gaze. Although he’d only just showered, he was already sweating again.

For a tense few moments, Carl looked ready to refute him, but then his eye shifted suddenly to something beyond Rick’s shoulder. As Carl stared out the window behind Rick, the anger in his brow melted away.

Without dropping his guard, Rick ventured a glance behind him to see for himself what had caught the young man’s attention. When he saw it, his already-frantic heart rate quickened.

“Go,” Rick said automatically, turning back to his son. “Go, Carl. See what’s goin’ on and I’ll…I’ll be there in a minute.”

Carl watched him, looking like he was fighting his own urge to do just that. Rick could see he didn’t want to go yet.

“Go now, Carl,” Rick said again, enforcing each word with a familiar if slightly rusty authority. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

He could see the taut muscles in the lightly stubbled jaw and Rick had to pay close attention to his own breathing.

At last Carl left, but not without imparting a final look that very clearly stated, this isn’t over.
Only when he heard the front door close did Rick’s breathing return to normal.

Shoving aside his impulse to run to the bathroom and see for himself the condemning marks he’d somehow missed, Rick quickly dressed. What he’d seen through the window was a growing commotion on the Alexandrian streets. People were running around as if spreading some news. Among them, Rosita stood out. the woman was approaching the house.

As much as Rick had wanted to stop the confrontation with Carl before it got too far, he really needed to know what was going on, and knew Carl could get to the front gate faster. Sending him away was as much a diversion as a necessity.

“It couldn’t be the Saviors again,” Aaron said later, falling into step beside Rick as they made their way to the front gate.

Rick shook his head and set his jaw.

It had only been a couple of days ago that Simon had been there. It was then that he’d left the marks, Rick realized bitterly.

The damn bed.

And anyway it couldn’t be another maintenance team. All the major repairs were finished.

When they finally arrived at the entrance, Carl was already there and had opened the gate. Outside, there were no trucks, no men with guns or barbed bats. There was only a single car.

Relief washed over him when he saw the two women emerge.

“Heard you couldn’t leave,” Sasha said, embracing him. When she pulled away again, her almond eyes were shining.

Maggie bounded forward next. Rick caught her and held her, feeling his throat constricting.

“So we came to you,” she said. He felt the wetness on his cheeks and didn’t know if it was from her tears or his.

She pulled away with a strange smile Rick didn’t understand. Then, from the back of the car, a third figure emerged.

He was dressed all in black and his shaggy hair had grown even longer since last Rick had seen it.

Rick was moving without any heed of his legs. Within an instant, the distance between the two men was removed and they were locked together.

It took Rick a while to notice Daryl was crying; he’d been too busy sobbing himself.

The other man’s large arms were wrapped around his middle while Rick held his shaggy head close.

Daryl was still broad, still lumbering, still the steadfast, unyielding mass he’d always been. Although Rick’s eyes scanned him frantically for missing limbs or new burns, he found when they finally pulled apart from each other, that his friend was whole, if a little worse for wear. At some point since Daryl’s return, they must have gotten him a bath, new clothes and even a shave, from the looks of it.
As a result, Daryl looked very much like the man who’d been dragged away that night nearly a year ago.

Rick did notice, however, an added hunch to the man’s shoulders and a fitfulness in his stance, as if he might recoil from any sudden movement.

Rick glanced up to see the blue, beady eyes peering out at him from beneath the draping locks. The ocean blue orbs were scanning Rick’s own body, as if Daryl too was checking him for some change or injury he’d sustained in their time apart. Rick wondered what the man saw.

When the archer seemed satisfied, he pulled away further and Rick realized he was grabbing something from his waistband.

When Daryl presented it to Rick, the former deputy could only stare for a long time. At last, he glanced up to find Daryl watching him firmly, expectantly. Once more, Rick felt a welling in his eyes.

Breathing in deeply through his nose, Rick squared his shoulders and took his gun.

Jesus too had come along, and he and Rick nodded their greetings to one another before they pulled the car inside and all headed in.

Together, the six of them made their way to Rick’s house, stopping briefly along the way as Alexandrians ran up to greet and embrace Maggie and Sasha, whom they all knew.

Gabriel was among them. The priest hugged the women but when he got to Daryl, placed a hand on the archer’s thick shoulder and gave him a look that seemed to hold some meaning for Daryl. Rick couldn’t read it. He thought for an instant that the priest’s eyes flickered toward him before returning to Daryl, but it was very fast.

When they got to the house, Rick was torn. As much as he wanted to stay and soak up all the time he’d lost with these people, his family, he had a meeting to attend at the church and as the leader, he, more than anyone, was expected to be there.

He told his four visitors to make themselves at home and that he wouldn’t be long. The weekly meetings were usually about supply runs and tributes for the Saviors and Rick doubted very much that the three rogues would want to sit in on a meeting all about serving the tyrant who’d imprisoned one of them and brutally murdered two of their loved ones. Or maybe it was Rick who couldn’t stomach the idea of them being there, seeing him facilitate such a meeting.

Carl stayed with them and Rick was glad of that too. He felt fairly sure that the young man wouldn’t say anything about what he’d seen earlier, and it warmed Rick’s heart to see him with them again. It felt so good being among them all like that that Rick had a hard time pulling himself away when it finally came time to go to the meeting.

Since Rick’s initiative to be more present in Alexandria, he’d been asking for more volunteers to take up the longer runs.
Although he missed accompanying Aaron on those extended trips, he was pleased when Eric began stepping up in his place. Aaron too, who’d been uneasy at first, seemed happy with the new arrangement.

It was the couple who were first to raise their hands when Rick asked for teams. Then came Rosita and Enid.

“That’s great,” Rick said. “Now, we could use one more pair to split off.”

They all stared back at him and Rick felt a familiar chill fill the room.

“Come on, guys. I know it’s hard. No one wants to go out those gates, but we need this. We all need this. And you’re strong now. You know what’s out there. You can defend yourselves.”

“Yeah, that was when we had guns,” someone said. Rick turned to see where it had come from but couldn’t find them.

“Why don’t you go?” Came another voice and Rick caught the source this time. It was an older man Rick knew. Jeffrey was his name. He usually didn’t have much to offer at these meetings but was visibly agitated now, like he’d been sitting with something for a while. There was something else about him, but Rick couldn’t place it now. A recent issue.

“Why do you need us risking our lives when you’re safe here, surrounded by walls and cozied up in your big king-sized bed?” Jeffrey went on. “I suppose it’s easier sending us all out to risk our lives. You’re the one who got us into this mess. You should be the one out there fighting those…those things!”

There were some murmurs of agreement at this.

Rick raised his hands to quell them, pleading with them to hear him out.

“Yeah, we never agreed to this deal!” Another townsman called out to more rounds of agreement.

“Now, just wait,” Rick insisted. The room was fast getting away from him.

It was Father Gabriel who finally stopped it.

The priest stood up from where he sat and turned to the room.

“You all must listen to Rick,” he said. “He knows how to handle the Saviors. You’ve all seen how much more violent they get when Rick isn’t here. You all remember what Negan did to Spencer. Rick was on a supply run then. If you don’t remember, he used to lead all the supply runs—“

“Used to.” Someone mumbled.

“Come on, guys,” Aaron said now. “Rick is no stranger to putting his life on the line. He’s been out there a long time, much longer than any of us has. But he can’t be two places at once. We can all stand to pull our weight a little bit more.”

“Putting ourselves in danger is one thing, but what about giving our lives?” It was Jeffrey again.

Rick studied the older man and realized what it was he’d forgotten.

“Is getting through another week worth sacrificing our lives for this man? The lives of our… of our children?” his voice broke off.
That was it. He was Brad’s father. Brad had volunteered to go on a longer supply run two weeks back and returned in a bag.

There was a thick silence.

“I know how you feel, Jeffrey,” Rick spoke up, voice strained. “I know how hard it is having your son out…out there.”

“You don’t know,” the man shot back. “Your son came back. Talk to me when he get’s cornered by a group of those— those things, and get’s torn to pieces, leaving nothing left of him to bury but a half-eaten torso!”

Rick stared at the ground, letting the imagery sink in. He’d heard what happened from the others who were with the young man on the run. Rick allowed Carl’s face to replace Brad’s and felt a sharp pain in his chest.

“Your son,” he began again with difficulty. “Was brave to volunteer himself like that, Jeffrey. No one made him go, but he stepped up.”

“For you!” The man screamed.

Rick nodded.

“And all for this ‘deal’ with the Saviors. But nobody wins here but them. We all lose! And why? Because you’re too scared to do anything!” His voice was venom and Rick felt it course through him. “We shouldn’t be negotiating with the Saviors!” Jeffrey addressed the group now. “We shouldn’t even let them through the gates!”

The room erupted again and this time Father Gabriel’s attempts to assuage them went ignored.

“Invite him in and kill him!” Someone suggested, to more roars.

“Listen! Wait! Listen!” The priest urged, “They have all the guns! They have more men! Wasn’t it you all who urged diplomacy when we first got here? Wasn’t that what Deanna wanted for us all?”

“And look where that got her!” Someone jeered.

“Wait! We need to give this a chance. Just give Rick more time!” Gabriel pleaded. “He’s already changed so much with the Saviors!”

The people began rising from their benches as Rick raised his hands to try and calm them. It was hopeless.

“Hey!” Came a shout from the back of the room. Everyone turned to the dark, shaggy-haired figure in the back row.

Rick hadn’t noticed Daryl come in. His eyes trailed the back row and found Sasha and Maggie there as well.

“The only reason any of you whiny assholes is alive is ‘cause of Rick. Y’all woulda been dead a long time ago if Rick wasn’t here protectin’ you, teachin’ you how to handle yourselves.”

The Alexandrians all stared at the scruffy, bulky man in black, who few recognized from his brief and reclusive stint in the community. Rick noticed Aaron and Eric beaming.

“And this business with the Saviors.” Daryl shook his shaggy head. “It’s bad. It is. But… Rick’s
doin’ the best he can for y’all. And I’d like to see any one of you pussies try to take his position. Go ‘head, give it a shot.” He was looking at Jeffery now. “See if you’re not shittin’ your pants the next time one o’ them Saviors looks at you.”

Aaron capitalized on the dense silence that befell the room after Daryl finished.

“Daryl is right.” The man said. “You all weren’t there that night the Saviors met us in the road. You didn’t see…” he said. He seemed to need a moment to compose himself. Eric rubbed his back. “Rick is doing the best he can. Every day he takes the worst of it for us. We have to trust that he can get us through this.”

“Spencer thought he could do what Rick does,” Gabriel spoke up. “He was every bit as capable as any of us, but it wasn’t the same. Rick understands them. He can… change them. We’ve seen it already with the way the Saviors have been working around Alexandria. That was Rick’s influence. That has to mean something.”

This point in particular seemed to sink into the group. The tension left over from Daryl’s blunt outcry had melted into something pensive. Rick too was taken aback by the priest’s words. He had to wonder if Gabriel really thought that or if he only meant to pacify the rabble.

The thoughtful silence in the room dragged on until it was abruptly broken by a loud whistle from the entrance.

Everyone turned to the back of the church, where Jesus stood in the doorway.

“They’re here,” he said. “A lot of them.”

No one had to ask.

Amidst the growing bustle that erupted, Rick’s thoughts raced.

It didn’t make sense. The Saviors had just been there two days ago. What did they want now? And so many of them?

“Daryl,” Someone said and Rick looked up to see Jesus stepping forward, pale blue eyes looking somber beneath his cap.

Rick then looked to the back of the room where Daryl wore a similar expression, but with a shade of guilt.

“Shit,” Rick said.
It was time for some more Richonne. I just love the idea of someone fucking Rick’s worries away. Hope you guys don’t mind. I think you know the man needed a break.

Also, WHAPAAAAH! Daryl’s here! Whaaaaaat?

Alright, thank you guys for the comments. They seriously keep me motivated.

The next chapter is gonna be bananas, like B-A-N-A-N-A-S. I’m so excited. Hold on to your butts!!
The Animal

Chapter Summary

Daryl has escaped from Sanctuary but now the Saviors have come looking for him in Alexandria. Rick has to find a way to keep them occupied.

Chapter Notes

They were inside the walls.

As Carl lead the way to the back wall, he explained hastily how he and Enid used to attach posts to the metal framework to climb out.

Rick was horrified by the offhanded confession and wanted further details but Carl was waving his hand dismissively. “No time, Dad. We gotta get them out.”
As much as it wounded Rick to learn that his son had kept that from him, now really wasn’t the time to get into it. Certainly not now that Carl had been traveling beyond the walls regularly for months. Rick swallowed it down. Maybe if they had time after all this, after they'd gotten the others safely away from here and things simmered down, they could discuss it then.

“I’m gonna climb over with them and show them the way,” Carl said.

Rick nodded. That was best. If the Saviors got violent during the search, Rick would rather Carl not be there.

“Okay. Be safe—wait.” From his waistband, he pulled out his gun and held it out. “Take it.”

If things got bad, it would also be best if the gun wasn’t within the walls. Anyway, he’d feel better knowing Carl had it.

After a glance down at the gun then back up to his father, Carl nodded and took it.

Rick pulled his son’s head to his, said a final goodbye, then went to quickly embrace the others.

It was cruel and unfair. He’d only just got them all back and now they were going again, and Rick didn’t know the next time they'd all be in the same place.

He wanted to stay and be sure that every last one made it safely over the wall but he’d already been there too long. It wasn't wise to leave the Saviors unsupervised within the walls.

At last he pulled away from Daryl, who’d been his final goodbye, nodded at the archer and bound off toward the heart of Alexandria.

Rosita found him on the way. She’d met the Saviors at the gate and confirmed to Rick that they were there searching for Daryl. Apparently, he’d escaped their compound a couple days back. They’d split off into teams to rake the surrounding areas and nearest communities. Their biggest team was sent to Alexandria.

Rick took in the information silently, not breaking his stride.

“Simon’s leading it,” Rosita said.

Of course he was.

“Where are they now?” Rick asked.

“Gabriel took them to the church.”

The massive crowd of Alexandrians and Saviors was stopped in the street outside the building, all looking toward the center of the circle, where something was happening.

Craning his neck over the wall of people, Rick saw, in the middle of the clearing, four Saviors huddled around a body curled up on the ground. The bald head was shielded by arms and hands as his body was assailed by kicks and the butts of rifles.
“Stop!” Rick roared, shoving through the brigade of Saviors. “Stop this!”

When he got through the throng, he could see that Father Gabriel was bleeding from a large gash on his head and dark liquid was spilling from his mouth.

“Rick,” Simon said, looking up from a particularly hard kick to the priest’s middle. “Wondered if you slept in.”

Gabriel wheezed.

“What the hell is this?” Rick moved further into the scene.

“Hey, stay the fuck back, Rick. This doesn’t concern you. Your little priest here thought he’d play a little prank.”

Rick studied Gabriel, balled up on the ground and fully subdued. When the priest finally met his eyes, Rick caught an almost imperceptible nod.

Whatever Gabriel had really been up to, Rick got the feeling it had bought them the time they needed to get Daryl and the others out.

“We came looking for one Daryl Dixon. MIA. Your priest here lured us into the church. Said he had something important to show us, something ‘pertinent to our search.’” Simon rubbed his palm over his chin as he regarded Gabriel. “Then the fucker locked us in.” He kicked the downed man once more and spat.

Rick lurched forward.

“No,” Simon barked. “We’re gonna sort this out. And while we’re doing that, you can start thinking about how you’re going to make up your tardiness. Boys.” He indicated to the other Saviors to continue beating the priest.

“Wait! Wait—” Rick was suddenly held back by two Saviors on either side of him.

“Relax, Rick,” Simon said flashing those too-straight teeth. “You’ll get your turn.”

He swung back one long leg, winding up for another kick.

“S-Simon! Simon!”

“Goddammit, Rick!” His boot just missed the priest’s head. “Can’t you see we’re busy beating the devil out of this holy man?” He grinned at the other Saviors.

“Simon, we can—we can work this out…let me just…” His eyes went again to Gabriel, who was trying to shield his head with his arms and bloodied hands.

“Just… just—please!” Rick cried.

Something in his cracked voice must have gotten through to Simon then, because the lieutenant raised a hand and the other Saviors stopped beating Gabriel.

A moment later, Rick nearly stumbled when the two Saviors holding him suddenly let go.

With a wave of his hand, Simon indicated for Rick to continue.

Seeing he had the floor, Rick swallowed and righted himself. “Please, I can—I can…” If he looked
at Gabriel he wouldn’t be able to think; he stared at Simon’s boots.

“You can what, Rick?”

“We can… we can make an arrangement. I’ll—I’ll,” he kept swallowing but the thick lump remained in his throat. “I’ll do…”

“What will you do, Rick?”

“I’ll… I can…”

Every time he looked up into Simon’s face, he stopped short. What could you possibly give me? The deep-set eyes taunted. What could you give me that I can’t take? It was a truth that hit Rick hard and sank deep.

Really, what did he have left to bargain with? When they were done here and after the Saviors had had their fill of beating Gabriel—maybe even killed him—would Simon not drag Rick aside to some vacant house or hidden corner? While the rest of the search party continued scouring the town for Daryl, would Simon not shunt Rick’s clothes aside and shove into him with only his spit to ease the way? Would Rick not grit his teeth and wait it out as he always did?

If they both already knew it was coming, what value did Rick’s promises have?

Rick’s eyes traveled down the expressive features, past the broad nose and handle-bar mustache, down the long neck and prominent Adam’s apple, finally stopping on the familiar marks peeking out from his collar. The scars were fainter now but no less gruesome reminders of the brutal act that put them there.

It was always with a grim satisfaction that Rick noticed how Simon avoided his mouth. The man had never overtly tried to kiss him, though Rick could see him considering it sometimes. The brown eyes, drowsy and hooded by then, would drift downward and Rick’s lips would curl back instinctively. The flash of teeth wasn’t usually intentional but was always effective. Rick could see the man go a shade paler as if remembering what it felt like to have those teeth digging into his own flesh. It was one of the few things Rick held over the Savior lieutenant.

It was likely because Simon couldn’t use Rick’s mouth that he liked to talk about it so much. When Rick was pushed up against a wall or down on his stomach with Simon behind him, drunk on Rick’s capitulation, the Savior would hiss filthy things into his ear, things that Rick couldn’t always block out. Sometimes there was a wistful quality to them.

“Ya’ll disappeared a little while? Were you on your knees this time? Bet he used that mouth of yours. Looked all puffy and pink after.”

Simon liked to recall that first meeting especially. The night they lost Glenn and Abraham. It was Simon himself who’d put them all on their knees but Rick had only been kneeling for Negan.

“How many times he put you on your knees since then, huh? Bet you’re a fuckin’ pro on that thing now. You take it all the way back, Rick?”

It was out of no luck or divine mercy that Rick had managed to guard himself against that final indignity. No, if Simon thought he could dominate Rick in that way, he would’ve done it. But that day between the houses, when Rick saw red and lunged at Simon, he’d saved himself in more ways than one. That old animal fury was all but gone now but Rick was still somehow living with the fruits of it. Although he hadn’t been spared from all of Simon’s attentions, he’d spared himself from that at least.
Was Rick now considering giving him that too?

It was his final claim to dignity and manhood, but if it could save Gabriel, wouldn’t it be worth it? And really, how much worse could it be than anything Simon had already done to him?

Swallowing the hard lump that must have been the last of his pride, Rick dropped to one knee, then the other.

“Please,” he said, ignoring the hordes of eyes upon him. “Please.”

With stinging eyes, he peered up at Simon.

After a moment, Simon glided forward until he stood directly over Rick. Taking hold of Rick’s jaw, he tilted his head back, forcing the kneeling man to meet his eyes.

Rick was alarmed at how large Simon loomed over him. On his feet, Rick already had to crane his neck to meet the tall Savior’s eyes. Kneeling now, it was staggering how large Simon was. He blot out the sun with his mass. Rick couldn’t remember a time he ever felt so reduced in the face of another man. But then, that was the idea.

As the Savior held Rick’s chin in his large hand, bearing down on him with his intense gaze, he seemed to forget the crowd, who’d all gone silent.

Rick could see that Simon understood what was being offered. He thought for a moment that Simon would do it then. Right there, in front of everyone. And wouldn’t Rick let him?

He still heard the wet, choking sounds of Gabriel’s pained breathing a few yards away.

*Hold on. Just hold on.*

Without turning from Rick, Simon called his men off.

A wave of cool relief washed over Rick and he couldn’t bring himself to care when he was suddenly jerked to his feet by his collar.

“And anybody else tries to interfere with the search,” Simon was saying. “Shoot the priest. Rick and I got shit to discuss.”

Then Rick was being shoved through the crowd in what he was vaguely aware was the direction of his house.

A little while later, he was being pressed down to his knees again. They were in his kitchen.

As Rick looked around, adjusting his legs to a more comfortable position beneath him, he thought it was appropriate that they were there. It was where it all started.

Simon’s hand was beneath his chin again, lifting Rick’s head as he’d done in the street. Rick didn’t resist now either and let his hands sit limply on his thighs as he was once more guided to look up at Simon.

Already worked up, Simon was rubbing himself through his jeans. Rick hadn’t done anything yet but it seemed the sight of him there, on his knees, purged of resistance, was having a profound effect on the Savior. Rick thought it would. The man had only ever seen Rick kneeling for Negan before now.

So close to the man’s crotch, it was hard to ignore what Simon was doing to himself. Still, Rick tried
to focus only on those large brown eyes high above. Rick didn’t think he could curb his disgust if he allowed his attention to drift any lower. It was bad enough to be kneeling there, giving himself over to Simon this way, after all he’d done to him— after what he’d done to Father Gabriel; Rick didn’t also need to witness how much Simon was getting off on it. He would know soon enough anyway.

When Rick felt a thick finger press past his lips and against his teeth, he parted them to allow Simon access.

The Savior hissed the moment he got through as if Rick’s insides burned him. His thumb pressed on Rick’s recoiling tongue.

“Ffffuck yes,” he sighed. “Fuck yes. Such a good little bitch, aren’t you? So good…”

Rick forced himself to hold Simon’s eyes, even as his vision went hazy and he felt warm streams trailing down either cheek; even as he heard the sound of clinking metal and sifting fabric indicating that Simon was loosening his belt and releasing himself from his pants.

It would happen now.

Rick diverted his thoughts to the growing ache in his knees, and to Daryl, Carl and the others, to visions of them all clearing the gate and well on their way to Hilltop or some other safe place.

As excited as Simon clearly was, he seemed to be restraining himself. Rick thought he must be testing the waters with his fingers, making sure Rick wouldn’t bite him before he put something more valuable inside. Rick thought that was probably wise. Still, he had no plans outside of keeping his people alive and buying Carl and the rest of them the time they needed to gain a secure distance.

Simon withdrew his thumb from Rick’s mouth, replacing it moments later with two thick fingers. A third would come next, Rick guessed. The progression reminded him of how Simon would sometimes prepare him on the bed. The similarities were stark and sickening but appropriate.

Simon pressed deeply and invasively as if he wanted to make Rick gag. The taste of dirt and worn metal filled Rick’s mouth.

“That’s it, that’s it. Knew you could go deep. Now suck ‘em. Just like that. Negan taught you good, huh?”

As instructed, Rick wrapped his lips around the digits and sucked lightly, ignoring the bitter taste. It was like nothing he’d done for a man. There was something so intrinsically personal in this, just having a man’s—this man’s— fingers in his mouth. It was somehow worse than holding the bat that slew his friends. The sick feeling permeated him.

If it was only having his fingers in his mouth it would still be awful, but add to that the defeat of being on his knees, and Rick found he couldn’t keep his eyes open anymore. As he shut them, more streams spilled down his face.

Simon didn’t mind.

Although Rick could now block out the lecherous gaze boring down on him, he could do nothing about the constant talking.

The sobs came as Simon pumped his fingers in and out of his mouth, telling him how good he was and how he was going to give him what he needed, how Negan knew a good whore when he saw one, knew that all Rick needed was a fat cock down his throat to make him docile as a kitten.
It was perhaps because Simon was talking so much that the Savior didn’t hear it.

Rick, in his own pit of shame and humiliation, didn’t notice either until the fingers were jerked from his mouth so abruptly he thought for a moment they’d torn his cheek.

He opened his eyes and saw a blue plaid shirt barreling over Simon.

“Car-Carl?” Rick croaked.

The young man was on top of Simon, hurling his fists with abandon.

Still on his knees, Rick could only watch, reeling from the rush of events. He would have to step in, that was clear. It was already bad for Carl but if he killed Simon, that would be the end of it. There would be nothing Rick could do for his son, and that was where the whole Savior-Alexandria arrangement would abruptly end because Rick sure as hell wasn’t giving up Carl.

Finally, he rose up on legs leaden with half-sleep and shock and threw himself over his son. Wrapping his arms around Carl's middle in a bear hug, he pulled backward as hard as he could. But the young man was strong from youth and a primal rage, and wouldn’t be moved.

If Rick had lost the animal in himself, it was clear now that it hadn't gone far. Rick barely recognized the snarling, lurching body in his arms. Carl was a wild creature, hissing and wailing what might have been words. Rick was too caught up in the moment to make out any of it. When he finally managed to yank the boy away from Simon, who looked dazed as he rolled around on his back, Rick was able to decipher the words.

“Knew it knew it I fucking knew it,” Carl was roaring, and “I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll kill you.”

Rick squeezed his son so tightly there would likely be bruises around his ribs later.

“Carl,” he said as shakily as he felt. He needed to break through the rage but the boy was too far gone, too invigorated by his hatred.

“Please, Carl, please, please,” Rick chanted into the long hair.

Carl tore free of Rick’s hold, but instead of charging Simon again he spun around to face his father. “You fucking lied! You lied!” He roared. “You said it wasn’t like that. You fucking lied!” Carl’s face was red and he was crying furious tears.

“Go,” was all Rick said, voice sounding odd and distant even to himself. “You have to go now, Carl. Please.”

As incensed as the young man was, he understood and turned to leave without another word.

Rick hauled Simon up, throwing the larger man’s arm over his own shoulder. Simon, having been caught so completely off guard by Carl’s attack, was dazed but still conscious, so he was able to help Rick carry some of his considerable weight.

Carl had smartly left out the back door so as not to attract Savior attention. By the time Rick got Simon out and handed him over to the confused and stern-looking Saviors, the young man was likely over the wall and fleeing.
Two days after Carl fled Alexandria, Rick is awoken in the night and instantly knows something is wrong.

There was a gunshot and Rick woke up. He’d had a nightmare. Carl was running through the woods toward Hilltop, sweating, panting, with bloody cuts and scrapes visible through his shredded clothes. He’d been running nonstop since he’d cleared the gate, yet the Saviors were hot on his trail, closing in with their trucks and motorcycles. The scene was ablaze with gunfire and every bullet came within a hair of the boy.

As he ran as fast as he could, the patch had long come loose from Carl's head. Suddenly, he looked back and Rick could see on his face the look of sheer terror.

The shot that woke Rick was the one that didn’t miss. Rick didn’t see it; the vision was gone before he could know for certain, but he had a deep sinking feeling.
He blinked, desperate to see the rest, to be sure that Carl had made it out. But he was fully awake now in his room on the floor, and it had only been a dream.

Rick was sweating and his throat was painfully dry. He reached for the water bottle beside him.

The gunshot had sounded so real.

As he upended the bottle, downing half of it, Rick finally noticed the golden light pooling in through the window. Something was happening.

From downstairs came a sudden whine and bang of the front door swinging open hard and hitting the wall behind it, and Rick nearly choked. Moments later, heavy stomps were climbing the stairs.

Instinctively, Rick fumbled around for his weapon but before he could find it his bedroom door flew open, revealing the tall, dark, unmistakable shape of Negan.

“Alright, Rick. You got one fucking chance. One chance to tell me what the fuck is up.”

Rick scrambled to his feet.

In only his boxers, he felt almost naked in front of the fully clothed Savior leader, whose ensemble was complete with leather jacket, scarf, and glove.

“Yeah, I fucking thought so,” Negan said after Rick only stared at him. “Get your ass dressed. I’ll see you outside.” He turned to leave.

Rick was stumbling toward his wadded up pants in the corner when Negan reappeared in the doorway.

“Is she here?” He asked.

Judith.

Reluctantly, Rick nodded.

The Savior appeared to weigh this. “Find a place for her,” he said and didn’t wait for Rick’s response before he was gone again, leaving a chill in the room behind him.

A short time later, Rick was on his knees on the street outside, gut aching, with Negan asking him to remember something he’d said nearly a year ago.

Rick felt the man’s presence drifting around him as he circled the large clearing. Every so often the Savior leader would wander back into Rick’s field of view, cutting through the yellowish haze of headlights before disappearing again to become only a deep booming voice that was so resounding it could have come from anywhere. It disoriented Rick, who was already dazed from the abrupt intrusion and the profound restlessness that hadn’t left him since Carl’s departure two days ago.

“Day one, Rick. Day one,” the Savior said again. “What did I say?”

Negan had said a lot of things that first day. Rick racked his brain for which thing in particular
Negan wanted him to remember as he tried to ignore the throbbing of his abdomen.

The Savior who’d butted Rick in the gut with her gun had been acting in defense of another Savior, whom Rick had punched in the jaw. Both were among the faces now looking out at him from the large gathering of people, along with nearly every Alexandrian and more Saviors than Rick had ever seen in one place.

Rick was glad that Aaron was no longer among them. The younger man had left shortly after Rick had handed him Judith.

Rick had taken his time letting the girl go, placing lingering kisses on both her hands and feet and on her head before finally dragging himself away. At the time he’d thought it was strange that Negan hadn’t rushed him. Now, however, it seemed obvious why Negan had given him so much time to say goodbye to his daughter.

Now Rick had taken too long to answer the question, so the Savior leader addressed a familiar section of the crowd.

“Simon.”

“You told him not to fuck with your people,” Simon supplied.

Rick’s eyes flicked over to the man at the edge of the circle.

The Savior lieutenant stood out in the crowd not only for his height, which was a head above most everyone else, but also because his face was slightly malformed from swelling and spotted with dark bruises beneath a few white bandages. Among the battered features was a broad smile. It was the same smile Rick had seen shortly after handing Judith off to Aaron. Their eyes had locked in that breathless moment and Rick lunged into the crowd. That was when the two other Saviors had intervened, one taking a blow to the jaw and the other delivering one to Rick’s gut.

“Try that shit again,” Negan had barked in Rick’s face after the two Saviors had dragged him to the center of the circle and dropped him on his knees.

Simon had watched him then with the same smug satisfaction he did now. Rick wished he’d kept his gun.

“Right,” Negan commended his Right Hand. “You’re right, Simon. That’s one of the things I said. Did you catch that? Rick, did you catch that?”

Something nudged his back and Rick nodded rigidly.

Negan resumed circling.

Although Negan wielded Lucille readily at his side and loomed in a way that had Rick’s eyes occasionally drifting shut in anticipation, there was something off about the Savior leader's presence there. Rick noticed the deep rumble of his voice was missing some of its thunder.

“We’re all here for justice,” Negan said behind him. “If I am one thing, Rick, I am just. You learned that day one, didn’t you? Didn’t you, Rick?”

Negan nudged him again with Lucille and Rick gave another nod.

“That’s right. You killed a bunch of my men so I killed a couple of yours. Ratio-wise, I’d say it was a pretty even trade. You took my guns, tried to kill me with those guns. I took 'em back, plus all of
As Negan wandered back into Rick’s line of sight, Rick also noticed some of the bounce missing from the long-legged stride. Rick had been so preoccupied with Simon that he only now noticed the weary agitation in the man in charge. Even Lucille swung low and noncommittally at his side as Negan plodded more than prowled around him.

It occurred to Rick that Negan wasn’t going to enjoy beating him to death.

Still, a leader had to do things he didn’t want to do sometimes. Rick understood that.

_Justice, Negan kept saying as he went on. And Day one, Rick. Day one._ Rick heeded little, drawn in and almost mesmerized by the slow, pendulum swing of the bat. He thought of Carl, wondered if Simon’s group had spotted the young man on their way out that day and just gunned him down on the spot, or if they had him locked away somewhere.

Occasionally, Rick felt the toe of a boot or the tip of the bat dig into him when Negan wanted participation and Rick would give it hollowly.

Rick wasn’t stupid. He was only slightly surprised when he’d stepped out and didn’t find Carl already kneeling in the street. The Saviors wouldn’t just abandon a search for the boy and come here, not after hearing Simon’s doubtlessly colorful retelling of events. No, they’d gotten him. Whether Carl was dead now or awaiting it in captivity, Rick’s fate was certain. Just as Glenn had died for Daryl’s misstep, Rick would die for Carl’s. Rick didn’t plan on fighting it. He was ready the moment Judith had left his sight. He only wished he could’ve taken with him the son of a bitch who’d done this to them.

He willed himself not to look to the edge of the circle, where Simon was likely taking great satisfaction from all of this. Rick shoved the Savior from his mind. In his last moments, he wanted to think only of his children.

Still, Negan was making it hard.

“Which brings us to the point of today’s lesson,” Negan concluded, hovering around Rick's periphery.

Rick’s eyes fell shut.

“Justice, Rick. My man. My right-hand man Simon over there. He came here the other day looking for my good buddy Daryl, and what happened? What happened, Rick?”

“Enough,” Rick growled before Negan had a chance to nudge him again. “Just do it.”

Behind him, Negan stopped his pacing.

“Just sit there and fucking wait,” the Savior leader snapped. “All this shit right here, all this shit, is you. Don’t forget that. If you really want me to end this right now, I will, but you’re not gonna fucking like it, Rick. You just shut the fuck up and wait.”

Rick blinked and looked down. Although Negan hadn’t touched him, the sharp change in his tone was like a blade to his throat. Rick felt a fresh coat of sweat beading up.

After a moment, the Savior leader seemed to settle back into his previous temperament. He looked cool and unruffled when he wandered back into Rick’s field of view.
“Since you’re having trouble remembering, Rick, I’ll tell you,” Negan said. “Simon got the shit beat out of him. Look at him. Look at his fucked-up face. I know you saw it when you took a swing at him earlier. Go ahead, look again.”

Reluctantly Rick did.

“And as Simon pointed out, I don’t like when people fuck with my men. That's the same as fucking with my property, Rick. Everybody here knows I can’t stand for that. Hell, I just got done giving a demonstration just yesterday with… fuck… pretty fucker, whatshisname—Mark. Caught him back behind the tool shed making out with one of my wives. He wanted to suck face so I burned off half of his. Eye for an eye, Rick. That’s justice. That’s another example of what happens when people touch my shit. I got examples for days, Rick.”

He circled and circled. Rick felt himself growing dizzy from it.

“So, to recap. You kill some of my men, I kill some of yours. Dude gets half-way to home plate with one of my wives, I burn off half his face. You try to kill me with my own guns, I take my guns back plus all of yours. What have we learned, Rick?”

Large black boots came to a stop directly in front of him and Rick’s eyes drifted up the long body to meet Negan’s. He set his jaw.

“Simon,” Negan prompted.

“Don’t touch Negan’s shit.”

“Exactly,” Negan stomped rapturously. “Fucking thank you! Now repeat that shit.” He swung around to address the whole group.

Reluctantly and unevenly the group repeated it.

“Again.”

They repeated it again, and then again.

Soon the entire mass of people in the street, Saviors and Alexandrians alike, were all chanting in time while Negan conducted them.

“Don’t touch Negan’s shit. Don’t touch Negan’s shit. Don’t touch Negan’s shit.”

Rick felt like he was in a dream. The street was a chorus of classroom-style recitations and the longer it went on, growing louder and louder, the more it sounded like a million bees buzzing around him. Just vibrating noise.

When they were all perfectly synchronized, Negan brought the chorus to a halt. “Yes! Excellent. I love it when we’re all on the same page.” Negan smiled broadly, his big eyes flashing around the large crowd.

The street fell silent again and Rick stared up at Negan. There was a halo of golden light around him from the headlights and the Savior seemed to glow.

Negan wiped a gloved finger across his upper lip before his eyes finally fell on Rick, who was still watching him in a kind of awe. Rick thought he saw something glimmer briefly in the brown eyes then, but Negan wet his lips and turned back to the crowd.
What happened next was too fast for Rick to fully process.

Negan tossed an order to one of his Saviors and then there was an almost instantaneous gunshot.

Rick looked down, half-expecting to see blood blossoming from a hole in his shirt, but found nothing. Then there was a choked cry and his head snapped up.

Toward the edge of the circle, Simon’s mouth hung open in shock. His hands moved to grip at a black shape spreading on his thigh.

“Huh,” Negan said from far away, then said something that sounded like “you were kneeling right, Rick?” but Rick’s ears were ringing and he couldn’t take his eyes off of Simon.

“Ara, the other one now.”

Before Rick had made sense of the first gunshot, there was another one and Simon fell to his knees.

“There we go!”

Rick watched as Negan dragged the downed man forward, Simon stumbling more than crawling on his badly wounded legs. Eventually, they arrived at the center of the clearing, both huffing.

“Jesus,” Negan said between breaths. “You’re a big dude, Simon. Should’ve brought you here, then shot you. That was fucking dumb. Yeah, Rick. I see you. I can admit when I made a mistake. It was fucking dumb as shit, I said it.”

Rick was now sitting only a few feet away from Simon, who was bleeding badly from two nasty holes in both thighs.

Confused and horrified, the Savior lieutenant looked up at Negan standing over him.

“From what I understand,” Negan said. “You got a little handsy with Rick over there, didn’t you Simon? Now, why would you do that, Simon? Why would you touch Rick like that? That’s my property, man. And we all just collectively agreed that we don’t do that. You gave me verbal confirmation of that shit, Simon.”

“He was…”

“He was what?”

“He was hiding … something.”

“Who was hiding something? Rick was hiding something?” Negan jabbed a thumb back at him.

“The priest.”

“Who? Oh, fuck. Yeah, Creepy Father, right. What was he hiding?”

“He was hiding something about…Dixon.” It took more to get the words out as the shock wore off and the pain of Simon’s wounds seemed to catch up to him.

“Right. I see,” Negan said, nodding. “But what does that have to do with you playing doctor with Rick over there? Did you think you’d find Daryl hiding out in his mouth, was that it, Simon?”

For a while longer, Simon blubbered denials and explanations, provided excuses, and pointed fingers.
Almost gently Negan shushed him. “You right-handed, Simon?” He asked when the rattled man had finally settled down.

Simon blinked, looking unsure of whether to answer. Rick didn’t blame him.

“Wait, let me ask you this,” Negan recanted. “Which one of your hands did you use on Rick over there when you finger-fucked his mouth?”

If it was possible, Simon went even paler.

“Should I guess, Simon? Should I just fucking pick one?”

Reluctantly and at a stuttering pace Simon raised his left hand, which Negan took in his own.

“Which ones?”

The whole clearing was silent and still. Rick hardly breathed.

Simon, who had shut his eyes as if bracing himself, opened them again to look up at Negan. His thick brows were contorted in almost innocent confusion.

“Which fingers did you use, Simon?”

Rick couldn’t see Simon’s hand from where he knelt but heard the whistle as Negan surveyed the indicated fingers.

“Christ, Simon,” Negan hooted. “All three? They’re fucking huge, man! How’d you even get these in there?” There was a sharpness to the hearty chuckle that followed.

Simon didn’t seem to trust it either and didn’t respond.

“It was nice, right?” Negan said low. “Having him down on his knees, lookin’ up at you with those soft baby blues…”

Rick felt suddenly very aware of the group around them, and heat climbed his neck. Despite the strong urge to hide his face, Rick found he couldn’t look away.

“Those pouty lips stretched around these mammoth fuckin’ sausages…” Negan almost purred. “Did it feel good, Simon? How far back did you go? Did you make him gag, Simon?”

Now the kneeling Savior was shaking his head as Negan, who’d pulled out his large bowie knife, appeared to tap the edge along the proffered fingers.

“Was it this deep, Simon? Was it here? You know what. Let’s just go right to the knuckle. Let’s be men about this shit. None of that half-ass stump shit.”

“N-no, Negan, Negan—“

Then the screaming started, guttural and raw.

Although Negan’s back was blocking much of his view, Rick knew what was happening.

“Hold him,” Negan said, voice slightly strained from the effort of keeping Simon’s hand still.

Two more Saviors promptly came forward to hold Simon down.
“Alright, Simon, one down. Try to lose this next one with a little fucking dignity, will ya? I swear my wives got more balls.”

By the time Negan was done, Rick had long stopped looking and was trying to phase out the hoarse screams. Negan hadn’t seemed concerned with making it fast—or clean. The blood from both gunshot wounds and the three severed fingers had begun pooling around Simon’s kneeling form, creeping into Rick’s view where he stared down at the asphalt.

When he finally looked up, he saw Simon hunched over, clutching a red, pulpy mass to his chest. He wasn’t shaking anymore. He looked to Rick like he didn’t have the energy for even that. Instead, Simon only swayed slightly where he sat as if a gentle wind might easily blow him over.

“Jesus!” Negan hollered, handing a bloodied towel back to one of his men. “What a goddamn mess. Don’t worry, Rick. I’ll have some guys hang back to clean this up. Christ.”

Rick felt cold. Either the ache in his knees had dulled or his legs had gone numb; he no longer felt the pain there.


He looked up to see Negan approaching Simon again.

“You see anything else needs accounting for here? I’d hate to leave something out.”

Rick looked at the man kneeling across from him, barely seeing him, unsure of how to answer.

“How ‘bout his dick? He try to stick that anywhere?”

Rick flinched then looked up. Negan was watching him plainly and all at once, something became eerily clear.

Rick looked over to Simon just as the lieutenant was turning to look at him. Rick could see he was having a similar revelation.

It was only a scare-tactic, something to make Simon squirm. Negan probably thought Rick would appreciate it. He didn't know.

A chill ran up Rick's spine.

Negan didn't know.

“How?”

Rick blinked Simon back into focus.

The man kneeling across from him had gone rigid and his large eyes were fixed on Rick with a profound desperation. Rick took stock of his wounds, both new and old, from the gunshots and severed fingers to those from Carl’s attack two days prior. Simon looked like a shadow of a man, somehow worse now than when Rick had thrown him through a plate glass window. In truth, Simon deserved death but it might also have been a mercy to him at this point.

In his hands Rick held the power to either end this man’s suffering or prolong it. Really, he had the power to kill Simon. Every part of him told him he should. It would only take one word, one nod even, and Negan would act.

Yet, as the pitiful man stared back at him, pallid from trauma and extreme blood loss and looking as
close to begging as passing out, Rick found he didn’t want to see anymore.

Dragging his eyes away, Rick shook his head.

“No?” Negan said. “Well, shit. All that’s left is the apology then. Simon, apologize to Rick.”

Dazedly, Simon nodded at his boss. Through busted lips he choked out an apology.

“Well,” Negan said, after Rick had done nothing but stare at Simon for several moments. “Do you accept his apology, Rick?”

Rick nodded.

“What was that?”

“Yes.”

“Well. Justice is served. Everybody good?”

Bloodlessly, Simon nodded, still clutching his ruined hand.

“Right. Get him up.”

The two Saviors that had been holding Simon down now lifted him.

Rick didn’t watch them carrying off the man who’d left so much ruin in his life, but let his gaze fall back to the ground where the creeping blood had nearly reached his knees.

“I swear. Between this shit and that Spencer guy, I’d say you got a goddamn target on your ass. The fuck is it about you, Rick?” Negan was crouching down in front of him, nearly level with Rick for the first time that night. His brown eyes traveled over him.

Rick stared back but wasn’t really looking at Negan. He was thinking about Simon, about what it would mean now. Would the lieutenant take this mercy and change his ways? Would he recover and come back seeking vengeance from Alexandria? Had Rick carelessly invited more suffering into their lives by letting Simon walk away from this? He didn’t know.

He blinked when Negan suddenly rose up and turned to the crowd.

“Wait, wait, wait,” he called after the departing Saviors. “Hold up.”

The two men carrying Simon, who’d nearly cleared the crowd of people, stopped as Negan waved them back.

Rick watched transfixed as the three returned to the center of the clearing, where Negan was pressing his fingers to his eyes as if to relieve some tension there.

“I understand that Rick forgives you, Simon. Rick’s a pretty good guy like that. I just don’t know if I can forgive you yet though. I think I need an apology now. Can you just—for me—just apologize one more time.”

Hazily, Simon nodded. He’d lost a lot of blood by now and it seemed to be a real effort to speak. Still, he managed another apology, this time to Negan.

The sound and look of it was as strange and unsettling as when it had been directed at Rick and he had to look away. He stared instead at the blood creeping ever closer to him.
After a while, Rick noticed the two men were speaking, or rather, Negan was hissing something, low and adamant, while Simon seemed to breathlessly deny it. It was too low for Rick to make out exactly what was being said, but then again, he wasn’t sure he cared to know.

At one point, Rick looked up and saw Simon’s ashen face slackened in a kind of bald horror as he shook his head desperately at Negan. Rick looked away again.

Simon’s blood had now reached him and was seeping through the knees of his jeans. It felt cool and not unpleasant. He looked up when he heard his name to find Negan’s eyes on him, impossibly round. The whites were visible all around the sharp irises that looked black now in the dim light.

Whatever he’d been asking Simon, he didn’t repeat it now to Rick, but only looked at him, as if Rick’s face could tell him what he needed to know. Despite the growing effort of keeping his head up, Rick held the gaze.

Whatever Negan was looking for, he either found it or no longer needed it, and turned back to Simon after a while, allowing Rick’s attention to drift downward again.

He was so damn tired. An impossible weight had settled in his bones the moment Carl had fled. Rick had managed to carry it through the last two days but now it had grown too heavy, weighing down every limb and making his head feel like an anvil. All Rick wanted to do now was collapse and he didn’t care that he was surrounded by Simon’s blood.

From above, Negan’s voice cut through the fog.

“You know what,” he said, and there was a rush of movement and a flash of metal. “I do not accept your apology.”

Head swimming and breath caught, Rick watched Simon’s body collapse twitching to the ground in front of him. Black sludge oozed out from a large gash in his neck.
He wasn’t there. He wasn’t even there.

Negan sighed, observing his guest.

“Just startin’ shit wherever you go, huh?”

When the young man didn’t respond, Negan leaned forward on the couch.

“Alright, I don’t think you understand the depths of shit you’re in right now. I’m not a guy with a
whole lot of patience for the kind of stunt you pulled this morning. I hope I made that clear when I put that hot iron to that guy’s face earlier. Shit was gruesome, right?”

Carl waited.

“It’s alright. I get it. You made it this far, what’s a few extra guys standing in the way, right? You gotta think though. Those guys you were waving that big bad gun at— they have families, kids even, some of ‘em.”

Carl shifted slightly but held Negan’s gaze.

“Look, morning shitstorm aside, I heard about Simon. That is not cool, man. Not cool. Guy’s face was all fucked up.” Negan took a swig from his beer.

Carl watched.

“Look, I get it. Simon can be an asshole,” Negan went on, wiping his lip. “Here’s some news though — you’re kind of an asshole. Did Simon go to your house and mow down four of your people for no damn reason? Did Simon hop out of nowhere and start beating the hell outta you when you were just trying to do your job?”

“He said that?” Carl snapped. It was the first he’d spoken since Negan had brought him up to his personal room.

“As a matter of fact, that is what he said.” Negan nodded, observing the shift in his guest.

“According to Simon, he was over in your neck of the woods conducting a search for one Daryl Pain-In-My-Ass Dixon, as per my orders. And right in the middle of said search, out pops Rocky-Motherfucking-Grimes, batshit out of his mind, raining down punches like it’s a goddamn title match. Honestly, can’t find a single issue with that story. Not seeing as how you fled the scene afterward— certainly not after that shit you pulled here this morning. Yeah, Carl, I gotta say that story makes a lot of damn sense to me. Why? You got something to add to that, Stallone?”

Carl bit down hard and dug his nails into the palms of his hands.

It was a waste. The whole thing. The son of a bitch wasn’t even there. He was away on some other pickup and Carl had just missed him. He doubted he’d get another chance.

“Hey, Carl. Seriously. I got nothing but respect for you. Never mind that you came to basically assassinate me— I get that. I do. Honestly, I’m a little touched. But you gotta understand the way you went about it, coming in here, literally guns ‘a blazin’, killing that dude and hurting those other dudes. That’s not winning your people any browny points.”

Negan brought the beer bottle up to his lips as if he meant to take another drink but stopped.

"And why did you fuckin run? That’s what I can’t understand. Did you think I wasn't gonna have a trial? Did you think I wasn't gonna hear your side of it? No, you just thought ‘fuck it, let me go take a huge fuckin’ dump on Negan’s front lawn.’"

Again Negan move the bottle to his lips, stopped.

“The thing that gets me is you could've just fucking come over. We were looking for you, man. You didn’t have to get all elaborate and shit. We would’ve just opened the gates. Sneakin’ in with a goddamn supply truck— Jesus.”

As Negan finally took a swig, Carl scanned the walls for a clock.
It had to have been several hours ago that the pickup teams left. If Carl stuck around, he might still catch them.

"Not to mention what your pops is gonna think," Negan said, bringing the bottle back down. "How do you s’pose Rick’s gonna take it when he hears about you coming down here like this, huh? Probably got the man worried sick. Probably got him waiting up all night doing cross-word puzzles or whatever the fuck he does. Maybe he fuckin’ bakes. Didn’t think about him, did you? And I’m the one who’s gonna have to break that shit to him. He’s gonna give you shit, then he’s gonna give me shit. He’s gonna do that damn beaten-down scowl he’s always sliding me. I get it worse than you, kid. You have any idea how fucking unnerving it is trying to run a goddamn supply chain when you got that tense, pouty motherfucker scowling at you in the corner. Yeah, that’s the shit I’m gonna have to deal with for the next month.”

When Carl didn’t so much as blink, Negan sighed.

“Alright, kid. I got shit to run and not a lot of damn time to sit here and play therapist. So either state your malfunction or I’m gonna have to start thinking up ways for you to pay me back for this avalanche of shit you started.”

The silence stretched.

“Christ. You really are your dad’s son, huh? Alright.” Negan downed the rest of his beer and began to rise, reaching for Lucille propped against the armrest. “Dwight, get the truck. Gonna be late as shit when we get there. Alright on your feet, prick. Let’s get you back to—“

“He touched my Dad.”

Negan looked for a moment like he’d had a ready response but lost it. “What did you say?”

Carl couldn’t repeat it. For the first time, he broke away from Negan’s gaze, staring instead at the coffee table, where his own beer sat untouched.

The Savior leader settled onto the couch again, leaning back as if to better take in the young man opposite him.

“Well shit, Carl,” he said after a while. “I’ve touched your Dad. Dwight over there has touched your dad.” He pointed toward the door where the scarred man gave a peace sign. “And if I’m not mistaken— and I’m fucking not— I’d say that samurai warrior chick has been doing a lot of touching your dad. Not gonna get very far in life if you can’t handle people laying hands on your pops. Guy kinda brings that shit on himself.”

Carl was shaking his head as Negan spoke. " No," he said. “No. It’s not like that.”

“What, so,” Negan said slowly. “you mean that chick with the sword and your Dad aren't like...a thing?”

“What?” Carl waved his hand. “No, it's not...that's not what I mean.”

Negan cocked his head at him.

“Well,” the Savior said after another stretch of silence, the playful edge gone from his voice. “Gonna be more specific or you just gonna sit there like a shy fucking child. Fucking spit it out. I told you already, kid, badass gets you far here, but only so far. And you got a lot to make up for after that stunt with the semi-automatic earlier. I’d say I got about three seconds left of patience for you before I’m gonna have to start working off those losses.”
“Alright, alright,” Carl said. He wet his lips and glanced toward the man by the door.

After a moment, Negan told Dwight to step outside and they were soon left alone.

Carl needed another moment and Negan didn't rush him.

Then, as the Savior leader listened in complete silence, Carl began to tell him what he saw.

Chapter End Notes

I'm liking the idea of cover images for each chapter, so I'm gonna try to stick to it. They help that canon feel I think. I've been slowly adding them into the earlier chapters but had some trouble so let me know if you see error boxes. (Also, photoshop may be involved with some of them. I know. Yikes.)

Hope you enjoyed the update, I know it's a short one. Full chapter up soon!
Every hour since Carl had fled, something in Rick’s chest had grown harder. In only a matter of seconds, the stony shell had been shattered to pieces.

One moment Simon was being lifted up and carried out of the clearing, off to freedom and a life half-swept beneath the rug, and the next he was down on the ground, bleeding out what was left of his life-blood from a large gash in his neck, while Negan stood over him, roaring, jabbing his bloody knife at the recoiling crowd.

“Now, I want every last one of you to take a good fucking look. This shit. This shit right here is what happens.” Now he pointed the large knife at Simon and waited until he was sure every pair of eyes in the crowd was on him. “This is what happens when you touch my shit.”
The body was twitching.

“I told you day one of our arrangement, Rick. Day One.”

He was dead but he was still twitching.

“Now I’m gonna ask you again,” Negan was suddenly in from of him and Rick lurched back. “What the fuck did I say, Rick?”

Rick tried. He tried harder than he’d ever tried at anything. But Glenn’s body was right behind Negan and Rick could see his legs still twitching in the corner of his eye and every so often, Sasha made a sobbing sound to his left.

“Who you belong to?” Negan roared in his face.

He stumbled out formless answers, clipped sounds, and hissing breaths.

Negan slapped him across the face. Rick barely felt it but the startling impact was enough to clear his head for an instant.

He remembered.

“You- you,” he said through chattering teeth.


Rick nodded frantically.

“Speak when you’re spoken to!”

“Ye-yes. Yes.” He couldn’t control his shaking.

Dark eyes trailed over his face. When Negan seemed satisfied, he rose again to his full height, allowing Rick a moment to breath.

All the feeling that had left Rick as he’d waited for his death was now pouring back into his limbs causing rivulets of pin-prick sensation to spread through his veins, reminding him that against all odds he was still alive.

From above him, Negan spoke.

“I told you damn near forty times now, Rick. You take care of me I keep you from getting fucked over. I tell you this now because, from the sounds of it, you been getting a real shitty end of the deal, Rick.”

Automatically, Rick nodded, his eyes fixed on the man.

“I like to fuck, Rick. I like it so much I need ten wives.” He flashed a grin to his Saviors who murmured in humoring agreement. “I also like to fuck with people, joke around a bit. And occasionally, if I have to, I’ll even fuck somebody up. Case in point—” he angled his body to Simon—“but I will never. Never, fuck someone over, Rick. What Simon did to you— that is not okay. And you’ve got my guarantee that that shit will never happen again. Not on my watch. You tell Big Daddy Negan when something’s broke and he will fix that shit. That’s the arrangement. You got
that, Rick?"

“Yes.” Rick was nodding before he was finished.

“You sure? I don’t want to have to come back here and tell you again, Rick. You know I hate repeating myself.”

“Yes. Yes.” Rick nodded again and didn’t stop until Negan, satisfied, finally turned to face the crowd.

“Now, it would appear,” the Savior leader said, addressing the group. “That I am short a Right Hand. You assholes better shape up. And if I find out any of you knew about this shit… This—” he indicated again to Simon—“is gonna seem like a goddamn mercy. Pack it up.”

As the crowd shuffled around him, clearing the street, Rick was barely aware of them. A few feet away, Simon had stopped twitching. The blood on the street looked black.

After a while, Rick noticed the gloved hand held out in front of him.

“On your feet, Rick.”

A short time later, they were inside on Rick's couch.

Negan had chosen there for the privacy, and Rick might have been relieved if he wasn't still reeling. Negan had picked the couch, likely as another kindness; Rick, who'd stumbled three times on their way in, couldn't have managed standing for much longer, certainly not after Negan started up again.

At first, it was an near mirror imitation of the scene outside; Rick, jaw set and head down, took the onslaught of allegations like a reprimanded dog, trying to cling to the words while fighting off a tremor that hadn’t left him since he’d watched Simon collapse and bleed out in the street.

Negan had begun with a story, as if to make it simple for Rick, who only had to listen. Still, even that was proving difficult for him now as his focus waned in and out of the present. Soon, however, as the story unfolded, Rick found himself following along more and more, becoming more horrified as each detail sunk in.

Soon, Rick was seething with repressed rage and mortification as he was assailed with Negan's indelicate rephrasing of events.

“He told me how he walked in on you on your knees in your own damn kitchen with Simon’s fingers crammed so far down your fuckin’ throat he could’ve been checkin’ your prostate, Rick.”

When he could, he tried to redirect the focus back to Carl—whether he was harmed, where Negan was keeping him now, demanding to see him. He couldn’t stop imaging the young man locked up in a cage or chained up as Rick had seen Daryl on occasion. Negan, who had his own pressing agenda, blithely assured him that Carl was fine and waved off his harried questions as if Rick was only trying to avoid the “real fucking issue here.”

The same questions kept coming: “what the fuck happened, Rick? What the fuck was that shit?” and, “why do I have to hear it from your son when shit like that happens?” and “were you ever gonna fuckin’ say something, Rick?”
It should have been obvious then what Rick had missed but his mind was still muddled and unfocused. He was too busy trying to keep up with what Negan was asking to realize what he wasn’t asking.

Clinging desperately to rationality, Rick tried sticking to the bare facts of the events. Simon was going to kill Gabriel.

But Negan wasn’t impressed with facts.

“Oh, so you offer up your services instead? What the fuck, Rick? You invite that shit in your own house? With Judith upstairs?”

That had set Rick off. He was depleted from too little sleep, too much stress, and the adrenaline shot of the night's events, and he couldn't hold his tongue any longer. He didn’t owe Negan anything. He only had to answer to his kids. And anyway, he never left Judith in the house when he knew Simon was coming around. Did Negan think he was that damn careless?

That was when Negan froze, the furious color draining from his face. Whatever he'd planned to say next was lost.

Rick’s own mouth was open, ready to retaliate against the next strike. It didn’t come. When next Negan spoke, his voice was softer, slower, the razor edge gone.

“What did you… you said when you thought Simon was…” Negan stared, brow furrowed, body turned on the couch to face Rick fully. “How long…”

Rick thought he missed something.

“You said you never left Judith in the house when you thought Simon was coming…”

Rick didn’t understand what had changed.

One moment Negan was hurling accusations and twisted facts, and the next he was looking at Rick like he’d swallowed a bomb.

“Rick... how long was Simon coming around here?”

He felt a prickling on the back of his neck similar to what he’d felt when Negan had asked him outside if Simon had tried to “stick anything else in there.”

“Oh shit,” Negan said, barely a whisper.

Rick was still at a loss.

But Negan had killed Simon. He’d killed him for what he was doing to Rick. Hadn’t that been what passed between Negan and his second in those final moments— some revelation of the true extent of Simon’s actions? Rick had been mostly delirious but wasn’t that what was happening?

“That first day. That first day. I knew that shit didn’t feel right.” Negan was staring up at the ceiling as if watching some scene playing out there. Rick could do nothing.

“Your shirt,” he said at last, weary dark eyes falling on Rick. "He took it.”

Slowly, Rick nodded.

Of course Negan didn’t know. How could he? Maybe he had an idea after tonight, but he couldn’t
know the full scope of it. Why hadn't Rick seen it? All of his questions, the accusations—they were all still about that one day and what Carl had seen. Little had changed.

Now Negan was sliding his hands over his face and breathing deeply through his nose.

“Shit, Rick. I threatened you. Almost killed your man.”

Aaron. Arat had dragged him out of the crowd, Rick remembered.

“If I knew what Simon was doing, I… Jesus, Rick, when I told you not to hurt my men again, I didn’t mean you couldn’t defend yourself from—Oh, fuck… Did he… Fuck—did he, Rick?”

Rick swallowed, looked away from the eyes scouring over him. Would it be now then? Now that it turned out Rick still had a secret, he didn’t know if he was ready to lose it.

“Christ, Rick, don’t make me fucking... I don’t want to call in a doctor right now, but I’ll fucking do it, so help me God, if you don’t start fucking answering me. Did Simon—force himself—on you.”

Rick was about to fight Negan on the idea of bringing anybody else into this, but was stopped short.

*Forced himself.*

Rick blinked.

It was strange that Negan would choose now to exercise such tact, after using none when all of Alexandria and Sanctuary had been watching.

*“Which one of your hands did you use on Rick over there when you finger-fucked his mouth, Simon?”*

The heat rose in his face now as it had then.

Still, Rick guessed this wasn’t the same man. No sooner had the door closed behind them and they’d left the eyes and ears of their audience had something switched in Negan. Although he was still an imposing figure in his scarf, leather jacket and single glove, he was no longer the showman, performing for his captive audience. The volume of his voice had gone lower, even when he fired off at Rick, and there was even a slight slump in his posture where he sat.

More drastic a change was the way Negan watched Rick here. Out in the street, he’d been cold and strung-out on a hidden agitation. When he’d looked down on Rick then, he was looking down at his property. Rick had felt utterly beneath Negan, controlled, helpless to do anything but yield to the intoxicating influence of the more powerful man.

Here, Negan was watching him tentatively, almost warily. It made Rick regard the space between them in a new light. It wasn’t just Rick who’d pressed himself as far over to his side of the couch as was possible, but Negan too had been allowing Rick a wide berth. As proudly as Negan trampled over Rick’s physical boundaries, he was no less aware of them and hadn’t crossed them here, even when he snapped and hissed like a riled snake.

Rick stewed a moment on the shift in the man. Even now, whether from restraint or caution, Negan didn’t rush his answer.

As disorienting as it was, it gave Rick time to think.

*Forced himself.*
Although he knew what Negan meant, Rick was caught up in the very particular phrasing.

Really, Simon had never “forced” himself on Rick, never needed to. Rick had gone with him each time without resistance. At the time, compliance always seemed the safest option for Alexandria—the safest option for his children. But look where that had got him. Now, Rick didn’t know what to think.

Tension radiated off of the man beside him.

He supposed there had been one time, after that first fight, when Simon really had forced himself on Rick. But that was a while back.

“Rick,” Negan said, and it was clear that he’d nearly reached the extent of this strange new patience.

“No,” Rick answered.

“No, what?”

“He didn’t. Not then.”

“Not then? You mean…”

Slowly, Rick nodded. He felt the tremor worsen and tried to conceal it by gripping his knees.

There was a long pause, then a surprisingly soft curse, like prayer. Finally, Negan asked, “when?”

“Few months,” Rick said, thinking back.

When he saw that Negan’s silence was an attentive one, he went on.

To the best of his memory, Rick began to tell him about the pick-up when Simon had pulled him into an alley under the guise of a reprimand. This had been months after the kitchen incident and Rick, who’d allowed himself to push it from his mind, hadn’t been prepared for what Simon was planning.

As he spoke, Rick stared ahead into the candle flame, which Negan had found and lit shortly after they’d come in (Rick had still been recovering). Rick remained factual in his recount and passed over details wherever possible. Negan didn’t seem to mind.

The Savior listened enrapt, his thick brows drawn together and his body leaning forward as if preparing to leap into Rick’s story at the right moment and intervene.

“That fucker,” Negan hissed. It was his first interruption and Rick was surprised the wound-up man had contained himself for so long. “I knew that smarmy little shit was spineless. King Fucking Spencer. Asshole just fuckin’ watched, didn’t even try to…” He bit his lip and took a moment to rein himself back in before nodding stiffly for Rick to continue.

Rick felt a little sheepish. The next part was always haziest in his memory. It wasn’t unlike when he tried to remember the run-in with the Claimers. Both times, he’d felt more like a spectator. It was hard to believe now that either of those men had been him.

“I bit him,” Rick said at last, and then reluctantly brought his hand up to the base of his neck to indicated the spot.

In the time Negan needed to process this Rick didn’t look at him.

“You fuckin’ bit him?” Negan barked.
It wasn’t with pride that Rick nodded.

“Like one of those flesh-eating fucks?”

No flesh had been torn away but Rick couldn’t deny the similarities and nodded again.

Negan took another moment.

“And that dumbass thought he’d try to stick his dick in there?”

Rick slowly looked over to find Negan grinning behind his hand.

“Holy shit!” the scandalized man fell back into the couch cushions. “Maybe Carl should’ve let him go ahead with it. Justice indeed. Holy fuck, Rick.”

A moment passed, all the while Rick felt the other man’s large, wondering eyes on him.

“And that was it?” Negan finally said.

“Yeah,” Rick said.

“And he didn’t…”

Rick shook his head at the coffee table.

Beside him, Negan took a deep breath.

There it was. He had what he needed to know and could leave feeling satisfied that Simon had gotten what he deserved, and Rick preserved some semblance of dignity in his enemy's eyes. Maybe his son's too, but time would tell.

But was Rick satisfied?

He looked down. Simon’s blood had stained the knees of his pants fully black. Idly, he scraping his nails over the dried edges.

Negan had killed Simon. He’d killed him before he had any reason to believe he’d done anything more than what Carl told him.

Before Rick realized it, he was speaking.

“You didn’t think that he…”

Negan took a moment but seemed to understand.

“No,” Negan said. “I wasn’t sure.”

After some thought, Rick guessed it made sense. After all, Negan had gutted Spencer in the street only after the man had suggested similar intentions. Evidently, Negan took sexual assault very seriously. Briefly, Rick wondered how it would have been if Negan knew the full extent of it.

The rest of Rick’s question must have been written on his face.

“You want to know why I did all that if I didn’t know for certain it got that far?” Negan asked.

Rick gave a small nod.
Negan sighed. “I had a feeling there was more to it from what Carl was saying.”

Carl.

Rick shut his eyes. How much more had the boy said? Again, he cursed himself for the slip-up with the bruises.

“I didn’t know for sure. Carl didn’t even seem sure, but he had a feeling. And I gotta say, I kinda trust the man’s instincts. He came straight to me after all.” He eyed Rick sharply. “So there was that. Also…”

He looked away for a moment appearing suddenly lost in thought. After a while, Rick thought he might’ve moved on.

“When you were looking at me,” Negan said slowly. “Out there. You had this look like… you were so… fragile.” The large man shook his head at his lap and huffed a laugh to himself. “I don’t know. Fuck. I just knew I couldn’t let Simon walk after that.”

He finished with his eyes in his lap, a soft furrow in his brow.

Rick didn’t know how someone who’d caused such carnage only earlier that night could look so powerless now. Negan looked like a child who’d just learned that everyone would have to die someday.

After a deep breath, Negan seemed to compose himself.

“Well,” he said, dropping his hands on his thighs. “Done is done. Like I said. Shit won’t happen again.”

Rick thought he still detected something in his downcast eyes but then the man was rising up and moving around the couch.

Eventually, he too rose to his aching feet and followed the man toward the door.

So much had happened in such a short period of time, Rick could hardly wrap his mind around it. Tomorrow he would have to come to grips with it all over again, probably have to convince himself in the morning that it hadn’t been a dream.

At the door, Negan wasn’t waiting for him and Rick’s throat was dry when he turned to regard the man now half-way up the stairs.

Without turning or pausing his ascent, Negan called down to him. “Got one more thing to settle tonight, Rick.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to hold this chapter hostage. Really didn’t think it would take this long. I’m glad to hear you guys found the last chapter relevant even if it made for quite a cliffhanger.
Next update might be a little polarizing, but I hope you guys stick around.

I hope you enjoyed!
Chapter Summary

Once more, Negan proves to be a man of his word.

Chapter Notes

Hey! Noticed some confusion in the comments about the previous chapter so I recommend going back and rereading just so it's clear before moving forward. It kind of changes everything if the last chapter is misunderstood. So please go back if you need to. Thanks and enjoy!

Also: Some of you may have noticed I had to pull the chapter. A reader noticed a pretty significant detail I missed so I had to rewrite a chunk of it before reposting. Anyway, sorry for the tease. Enjoy!

[5-31-18 EDIT]: Nevermind!! The original version of this chapter has been reposted! I missed it too much! Hope you enjoy. Edits have been made to make the issue less glaring so hopefully you enjoy. The variation doesn't change the story at all, so, if you preferred the second version just let me know and I'll send it to you. Otherwise Enjoy!
From the hallway, Rick could see that the candle in his bedroom was still going. It made the room glow a soft, rippling gold and sent long black shadows stretching up the walls and bending back over the ceiling.

“Let’s go, Rick. Ain’t got all night.”

As he drifted closer to the bedroom, Rick watched the largest shadow move and distort as the unseen man within seemed to strip a layer from himself.

When Rick at last arrived at the door, he moved no further as if an invisible barrier sealed the threshold.

Rick saw that Negan had shed his black jacket and it now lay over the bed. Rick watched as the single black glove soon joined it.

“All right,” Negan announced as his hands moved to the red scarf. “I know it’s late. I know you been through a lot tonight. But guess what— we’ve all been through a lot tonight. Hoped it wouldn’t come to this, Rick, but fuck it. Guess it’s just a night full of lessons!”

The sharp smile and flourish of his arm as he tossed the scarf with the other items gave Rick a flash of the familiar showman.

Negan groaned with relief as he took a seat on the bed, hissing something about soft as fuck.

The sight of him there was completely alien. Rick was angling his head at him, eyes going between Negan, the pile of clothes, and the bed itself.

“All right, Rick. Let’s get this done. Chop chop.” The Savior patted his lap.

When Rick didn’t move forward but stepped back, The easy aura around the Savior flickered. His dark eyes locked on Rick, who was still frozen in the doorway.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Rick. I’m not in the fucking mood tonight. You know what you did. You think I didn’t notice that shit when I came in?” He jabbed a thumb at the blankets on the floor.

Rick looked at where he slept every night then back at Negan on the bed. He shook his head, drifting back further.

Shifting where he sat on the bed, Negan appeared to take a moment to get himself more comfortable before regarding Rick again.

“What, you think I want to do this shit? You think this is how I wanted to spend my day, Rick— getting my people shot up, finding out the man I trusted most was a fuckin’ thirsty little creep, then having to put him down in the same night. And after that heavy shit, I have to come in here and lay down another punishment. You think I don’t have other shit on my mind right now? I’m doing this for you, Rick. I’m taking time out of my busy-ass schedule to make sure you know I’m a man of my word. I admit, it’s a shitty fucking time to have to do it, but I’m not coming back tomorrow for this shit. We’re putting this to bed right now. Tonight. You can drag your feet all you want, but it ain’t
gonna change the fact that it’s happening. I will say the longer I gotta wait, the worse it’s gonna be for you. Now there’s something you can change. I got an empire to run, no more Right Hand to delegate to, and it’s already fucking tomorrow, Rick. I got exactly zero time to spend pussyfooting with you right now. Now hop to it soldier, let’s knock this shit out so I can get home before breakfast.”

Despite himself, Rick felt his body pulled forward. It was the same pull he always felt when caught in the full blast of Negan’s will. He could no more turn around and leave than he could reverse the direction of his blood-flow.

He took a step, stopped. Took another, stopped.

The bitter mention of Simon had jogged something in him.

Downstairs, when Negan had spoken about what he “had to do” to his Right Hand, he had a look that didn’t sit well with Rick. He swore he saw the same tightness in Negan’s face now when he’d said that he “had to” put him down.

The thought wouldn't shake. Negan might’ve said that this was about the bed— and he was a man of his word— but what if this time, this time, he didn’t mean what he said. What if, on some level, he held Rick responsible for having to kill Simon.

Simon had been Negan’s Right Hand but hadn't he been Negan’s friend too? On some level, did Negan resent Rick for having to kill the man? Was he seeking to punish him for it now?

“Is this…it’s this for…” He wasn’t even sure what he was asking, but he needed to know it before he could move. It was important. “Simon,” He choked out finally, before looking down, feeling foolish.

Negan was silent a moment and then seemed to read what Rick was trying to get out.

“No, Rick,” he said with a sudden patience. “This isn’t about Simon. That’s done. This is about you not following specific instructions. That’s all this is.”

Rick nodded, swallowing. He found he could move again, as though a weight had been lifted from him.

He stepped forward.

“Ne-Negan. My—my…”

It was the first protest he’d voiced since crawling into the degrading position.

“Carl’s fine. Judith’s fine,” Negan said, his voice coming from above and behind Rick. “All you need to worry about is me, my hand, and your ass. Me and my hand are right here, and we’re about to beat the holy hell out of your ass, Rick.”

As if waiting for Rick’s consent, Negan remained perfectly still until Rick gave a stuttering nod and put his head in his arms.

Then Negan started.

When Rick had first slid down his pants, he’d shunned any thought of what he was doing. In fact,
he’d forced thoughts of any kind from his head. Rick needed to be as hollowed out as when he’d nearly brought the axe down on Carl’s arm, and when he’d dropped to his knees in his kitchen in front of Simon.

This was different though. Both of those times, someone had stepped in right before the pivotal act. No one was going to step in now.

“Not even the simplest thing. The *simplest* goddamn thing.”

*Slap!*

“Never mind that it was a gift, Grimes—*Slap!*—“Never mind that shit. You just can’t do the simplest. Fucking. Thing.” Each word was punctuated with another hard slap.

Rick had one fist pressed to his mouth as he tried to keep in his grunts, which were as much from pain as from shock.

“Now, you’re gonna sleep—” *Slap!* —“like I tell you to sleep—” *Slap!*

Rick released a shaky breath, his face warm with the blood rushing to it both from the downward position and the sheer humiliation.

“If I tell you to sleep upside down like a damn vampire, you’re gonna fucking do it. Right, Rick?”

Rick hesitated and received a particularly hard slap.

“Ye—yes. Yes.” He nodded.

“That’s fucking good, Rick.”

Negan smoothed his hand over his throbbing backside and Rick emitted an involuntary sound at the unexpected tenderness.

“Yeah. The second you stop being a pain in my ass, Rick, I’ll stop beating the hell out of yours. But that shit ain’t happening any time soon, is it?”

“I’m—I’m—"

Snot was dribbling from his nose. This was a nightmare. He was bent over Negan’s lap, his pants and boxers shoved down beneath his bare ass, while Negan dealt him a punishment reserved for ill-behaved children. Did that make Negan the parent?

*Daddy Negan’s gonna fix it.*


Rick nodded wildly, anything to show his compliance and end this. Anything to give Negan what he wanted—everything he wanted. Just stop this.

“One Week, Rick. That’s how long I told you this was gonna be a bitch to live with. I just don’t think we’re there yet, Rick.”

“N—no. No, plea—*Slap! Slap! Slap!*"
Rick didn’t even realize when Negan had finally finished. He kept waiting for the next splitting crack of firm hand on his raw skin but it didn’t come.

Instead, he heard the soft sound of the unscrewing of a bottle and its contents being smoothed over large hands.

“Don’t,” Rick said, when he felt Negan’s hands return to him, gently now. He was glad his voice was firm.

“Well, I’m not fucking leaving you with giant hand-sized blisters on both asscheeks, Rick,” Negan explained. “Unless you fuckin’ want ‘em.”

“I’m fine,” Rick growled and moved to rise, but hissed and stopped.

“Yeah, fucking sucks, doesn’t it?” Negan said without a trace of sympathy.

Rick almost snapped back at him but let it rest. What further indignity could he suffer? He was laying over Negan’s lap and had spent the last half hour wailing and bawling into the bed as the other man spanked his bare ass raw; If there was anything more humiliating than that, Rick couldn’t imagine it.

Resigned, he let his head fall back into the crook of his elbow and waited silently for the other man to rub the cool ointment on him.

Absently, he wondered if Negan always carried the salve with him for these occasions, but guided his mind elsewhere. He thought of Carl, supposedly safe in Sanctuary, of Judith with Aaron. He'd planned to go get her as soon as Negan was gone but now, it was hard to imagine lifting himself from the spot. The candle was almost out now and most of the light came from the cars outside. Rick was relieved for the little bit of privacy the dark gave him. The bruises from Simon weren’t as bad now but he doubted he would have much better luck explaining them to Negan than he’d had with Carl.

In an attempt to keep himself awake, Rick’s eyes drifted open and he regarded Negan’s trifecta ensemble on the bed beside him. For the first time, he realized something was missing. The bat. Negan hadn’t brought it in with him. Negan hadn’t even used his preferred weapon on Simon, Rick noted, and wondered on it.

He yelped suddenly; Negan had squeezed him.

Rick thought he caught a breath of an apology behind him but didn’t pursue it.

After a while, the drowsiness set in firmly. The night’s events along with the two days of unending anxiety about Carl’s whereabouts finally caught up to Rick. Aaron and Eric wouldn’t mind keeping Judith for the night. They were likely asleep now anyway. And she was safe there. Rick could get her in the morning.

He didn’t know how long he was there like that, with Negan’s oddly smooth hands gliding over him, actually soothing the sting from the inflamed flesh.

Through a fog of drowsy resignation, he heard the voice behind him speak his name.

He realized the hands had left him.
“You’re getting wet, Rick.” It was a plain, solid statement. “You’re leaking on my leg.”

Without a word, Rick was pushing himself up.

Negan didn’t stop him.

Only when his foot hit the floor, did Rick realized his mistake. His hands flew simultaneously to cover himself and to catch his pants from falling to the floor.

He tried to pull them up quickly but yelped as the fabric made contact with raw flesh.

Negan was up and reaching for him before Rick could back away.

“Easy, easy,” he soothed.

The tall man was bent slightly and his hands joined Rick’s at his sagging waistband.

“I told you that shit was gonna fucking smart, didn’t I? No pants for a week. You thought I was kidding.”

Rick’s breaths hissed through his teeth as he glowered down at the man.

“That stuff I put on is gonna make it okay as long as nothing touches your ass. You just gotta be careful. Most fabric’s gonna feel like razors if you don’t do it right.”

Negan was right. It felt like exactly that when he’d tried to tug his pants back up.

Uncomfortably close, Negan helped pull up Rick’s boxers in a way that the waistband only ghosted over the enflamed swell of flesh before snapping snugly to his hips. Rick’s pants were left to fall to his ankles.

Rick watched Negan warily as the man slowly straightened to his full height before stepping away.

Negan had kept his eyes fixed on Rick’s throughout the whole transaction as if to assuage him that he wasn’t peaking. Now in his boxers, Rick was still keenly aware of every downward divergence of the dark eyes.

“Relax, Rick,” Negan said. “Already seen you like this, remember.”

Right. When he’d barged in earlier. Rick wouldn’t soon forget, though it felt more like a dream now. Like now, Rick had been in nothing but his t-shirt and boxers then.

Still, Rick continued to watch him, waiting. He realized he wasn’t sure what to do next.

Like with everything else, Negan took charge here.

“Get on the bed, Rick,” the Savior said, low and almost a whisper.

Rick shook his head.

Negan said it again, and Rick moved, stepping out of his boots and bunched up jeans around his ankles.

Negan told him to lay face-down, which felt like a natural position for Rick on the bed. It was also natural to rest his head in his arms.
He listened to Negan shuffling around, gathering up the blankets from the floor.

“\text{I want you to remember this,}” came the deep voice above him as Negan pulled the sheet up over him in a way that reminded Rick distantly of when he’d tuck his kids in.

Rick thought he would remember it, would catalog it with the rest of his memories with the bed. They were mostly memories of touch; like here, his head had always been down and he mostly only \text{felt} what was done to him. It seemed appropriate that Negan would use the force of his hand to firmly incise himself in Rick’s sensory memories when Simon had used fingers and tongue and all other parts of himself to do the same there.

Rick opened his eyes. Over his shoulder he saw Negan, now fully dressed, crouching down. The Savior brought his fingers to his mouth, licked them, then pinched out the dying candle.

It occurred to Rick that maybe this wasn’t only business to Negan. Maybe, in his backwards way, he thought he was helping Rick.

The dark figure lingered a moment more in the doorway as if to be sure that Rick wouldn’t just climb out of the bed again. Then, without another word, he was gone.

For a while, Rick only lay there motionless, listening to the sounds of car doors opening and slamming shut, watching the golden lights soar across the walls.

When he heard that deep booming voice again, he carefully pushed himself up to better see out the window.

On the street below, Negan, who’d just hollered something cross at his remaining men, was walking down the sidewalk. Most of the Saviors had gone but the few that remained were gathered around a light post with their guns drawn.

Tethered to the post by a strap around his neck was Simon. The tall, unmistakable figure was trying to get at his fellow Saviors but kept getting stopped by the leash.

When Negan neared, the lieutenant’s attention shifted instantly to the large man and he began reaching hungrily for him instead, getting stopped just inches short each time.

After regarding Simon a moment, Negan turned around and peered up at Rick’s window. It was fully dark in Rick’s room and the Savior couldn’t possibly see inside. Still, Rick felt the chill of the man’s eyes on him.

Then Negan pulled out his gun and shot Simon in the head. The Walker collapsed, motionless.

It was far from the first time Rick had lain in the bed in the many months that the mattress had been beneath his roof, but it would be the first time he slept there. And he did sleep, deeply.
Forward Movement

Chapter Summary

Life goes on.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rick felt less guilty about sleeping in the bed now than when it first arrived. They’d scavenged up enough mattresses over the last few months that most everyone in Alexandria had their own now. It didn’t help the way his gut twisted every time he looked at it though. Still, it was better than the flash of horror Rick felt at the idea of Negan catching him on the floor again. No. Rick didn’t dare risk it.

The weekly pick-ups carried on normally, lead by Negan. Rick thought he’d never be able to share a space with the Savior leader again after that night. Part of him even thought Negan would want to avoid him, for a while at least. Yet there Negan was every week, beaming as he strode through the gates. He’d started wearing his leather again and Lucille even made a few appearances. In all, it was as if nothing had changed.

If Negan noticed Rick’s responses had been reduced to curt nods and single-word answers, he didn’t
seem bothered by it. He was in high spirits. It seemed that if Rick was going to wallow over what had happened between them, Negan wasn’t going to let it spoil his good time. Negan’s philosophy seemed to be that Rick could either jump back on the bus or get dragged behind it.

This one-eighty return to the old dynamic confirmed for Rick what’d he’d already suspected, that it had all been necessary business. That night, Simon, the bed. They were just numbers in a checkbook for Negan, and now that they balanced he owed them no more of his attention.

As unsettling as it was, there was a strange comfort in that ceaseless forward movement that Negan brought with every visit. Rick would never be able to forget that Simon had existed, but when Negan was there whistling and hollering and nudging Rick with elbows, it was somehow easier to pretend.

Alexandria, however, was very much aware that Simon had existed and, since most everyone had been present that night, they were equally aware of the brutal way in which he’d stopped existing—and why.

Rick didn’t waste time hoping that they hadn’t all heard what Negan was saying to Simon as his second bled out beneath him. They’d likely heard it better than Rick, who was now sure he’d been half mad at the time. Certainly, Negan had made no effort to quiet his crude comments.

Though maybe that was the idea, Rick realized, to send a message. Maybe it wasn’t only the Saviors whom Negan was warning, but everyone.

It was likely this feeling of breached privacy within his own walls that drove Rick back out on supply runs. After so long, it was a little rough getting back into it. Usually, Aaron or Carl would accompany him. It wasn’t until a few runs in that Rick realized that their insistence to join him wasn’t just because they enjoyed his company.

During the runs, they always put Rick in front, and then never drifted far behind, certainly never let him out of sight. If they didn’t rush at every Walker within twenty yards, they were never more than a stride’s distance away when Rick handled one himself. Early on, when he realized what they were doing, Rick found he was more warmed than insulted by it.

“Gonna trip me up, you keep following so close,” Rick said one day, a playful edge beneath the jab. Really though, the other man was following needlessly close.

He turned and saw the discomfort flash across the younger man’s face.

Aaron had left early the night Negan killed Simon. Rick had handed off Judith to him and he was gone. Rick knew that someone else had likely filled him in on what he’d missed, but beyond the lingering embrace the two men shared when Rick went to retrieve Judith the next day, they hardly spoke of it. Still, Rick caught a certain strain on the other man’s face from time to time before it was quickly hidden beneath that familiar warm smile. He did the smile now.

“All right,” Aaron said. “Didn’t even notice.”


They slowed when they hit a clearing and Rick turned to him. The two didn’t normally delve too deeply into their feelings but unlike with Carl there was no wall between them; Rick had no urge to hide from Aaron. He thought Aaron felt the same.

“Well.” Aaron licked his lips and stared at the ground between them. “That night.”

Rick shifting his weight. He’d been wondering when this would come up.
“When you gave me… Judith. Did you think that…” Aaron bit his lip.

Rick took a deep breath, let his eyes drift around the surrounding woods. This wasn’t what he’d expected.

That night, he’d been so far gone that the memory of it was like a dream within a dream. Still, he remembered what had gone through his head when he found Aaron’s face in the crowd. He remembered what he’d felt when he placed that final kiss to his daughter’s head.

“Did I think that was the last time I’d see Judith?”

Aaron’s eyes snapped up, his face looking suddenly pale. Solemnly, he nodded.

Rick ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t know what I thought,” he sighed. “Had a feeling.”

Looking back, he’d never been so certain for so long that he was going to die than when he’d knelt in that street. He’d even convinced himself that Carl was dead, or on his way, and somehow that made it easier.

“And you gave her to…” Aaron spoke up and Rick looked at him.

“Well, yeah,” he said slowly, working it out in his own mind. “If it was gonna be the last time, I knew I wanted her to go some place safe. Some place she could be taken care of. You and Eric are…well. If I couldn’t be there for her, I knew I wanted her to have a family at least. With you two… well, I thought she’d at least have a chance to be happy.”

There might have been more, but it didn’t come to him. He dropped his hands to his sides.

At some point, Aaron’s eyes had gone red and glossy. Through quivering lips, he released a long breath.

Another moment passed and the two men embraced.

The time he wasn’t out on supply runs, Rick found other ways to busy himself.

He set about plans for a new garden in the unused southeast quarter and visited Gabriel in the infirmary. Although Gabriel never pried about that night, Rick guessed, like Aaron, he knew.

Not yet ready to face a room full of townspeople, Rick sent either Aaron or Rosita to run the meetings for him—even Carl when the young man was up to it.

Really, Rick would have liked for his son to run more of the meetings but Carl was often away, and Rick was too careful around him to ask where he went.

Even when Carl was around, he still seemed distant.

Since it all happened, the young man hadn’t been as upset with Rick as he was cold. Rick was sure his son didn’t blame him for it, but couldn’t help feeling like he owed the young man something. They had a bond the two of them, deeper than words, deeper than blood. Although nothing in this world could sever that bond, Rick had done a damn good job of damaging it.
He’d lied. He’d kept something big from the most important person in his life, and he could see every time he looked at his son how it wounded him.

And wasn’t Rick still lying to him?

I was over a month since the night of Simon’s death and Carl was back from one of his obscure disappearances. Rick was always pleased to see him around the house.

Now, Rick was watching Carl lay Judith down in her crib for the night, marveling as he often did at how grown the boy was. Seeing him take such care with his sister always warmed something in Rick’s chest, but lately there was also a deep ache there.

“You know how important you are to me?” He said. It was the first he’d spoken since he’d been hovering there at the edge of the room.

Carl seemed to have been expecting it.

The young man took his time getting Judith settled before straightening and meeting his father’s gaze. “Yeah,” he said, and Rick didn’t miss the slight inflection.

The soft candlelight danced on the walls, highlighting Carl’s half-obscured face as he watched his father plainly.

“I want to…I want,” Rick began. He’d started so sure and now he wondered if it was the right time.

Carl moved around the crib so nothing was between them anymore. Rick sensed it was meant to show attentiveness but it only made him feel more exposed. He licked his dry lips and searched the ground.

“I…should’ve been more honest with you, Carl. Wasn’t right to hide it from you. It was… It was…” He was sure any moment, Carl would cut in with something biting. Any moment. But it didn’t come.

Instead, Carl only watched him, waiting.

Rick looked down.

“I’m ready to tell you now, if you… if it’s not too late, I mean…”

Again he glanced up to gauge the young man. After a moment, Carl nodded.

So, Rick began to tell his son the full story.

At some point Carl had moved away from the crib to lean against the wall. Rick took the opposite wall.

It felt right somehow to be doing it in Judith’s room, like Rick was confessing to both of his children, even if Judith was asleep and wouldn’t have understood anyway.

It wasn’t all the details— Rick couldn’t bring himself to voice much of it. Still, he felt it was the most important things.

“In…in here?” Carl choked out. “With…” he turned to Judith’s crib.

Rick nodded, looking down at his hands and picking at his fingers.
“A little…a little bit into it, you, uh—“ Rick shook his head. It was somehow worse in retrospect. “You came home,” he said at last.

It was important to say it. If he was going to tell his son what happened, it was important to tell him the worst of it. Rick needed to be held accountable for his actions, needed Carl to hold him accountable.

Carl’s glistening eye had gone somehow wider at that. “While you were… Wait. When I…” His gaze drifted around the room as if he was remembering something, and when it came back it hit him hard.

It was an astronomical weight to have to bear: learning that his father was raped while he’d been in the same house, in the same hallway— had passed by the very room it was happening. Rick understood that burden. After all, he’d been on the other side of that door. He’d had to feel his son’s presence so near him, feel that overwhelming urge to call out to him, and then the final hopeless plunge when he was gone.

Carl choked on his own breath and looked for a moment like he might be sick. Rick tried to keep looking at him. He owed him that. He’d done this to the boy after all. He should be able to face the consequences of his actions.

Still, it was difficult; every time he looked up, it was like watching his child slowly crumbling in front of him. The young man wouldn’t be able to hold himself up for much longer. Rick hated the sight more than anything, hated it more than what Simon had done to him. He took a step forward.

“I didn’t…I couldn’t,” Rick tried. His voice kept getting caught in his throat. “I couldn’t let you…see. If you did, I knew—I knew you'd try to kill him and—“

Carl made a sound between a scoff and a bark. Judith stirred.

Rick pressed on, fighting another wave of shakes that threatened to overtake him.

“I knew if you tried somethin', they’d…they’d kill you, Carl. I just couldn’t let that—couldn’t let that happen. Not you… Not you, Carl. I couldn’t, I couldn’t…”

Carl fell silent again. Whether it was to allow Rick to continue or out of shock, Rick didn’t know. Nonetheless, while he still had control of his voice, Rick was determined to press on.

He recounted some of the other times, mentioned The Bed, how Simon would take him aside on maintenance days using odd jobs as cover. Carl had begun sobbing at some point, but didn’t try to stop Rick, so Rick went on. He told him about the time in the alley with his teeth, and was mildly surprised that Carl looked enrapt the whole time. So, Negan hadn’t told him about that.

By the time Rick was done, Carl was trembling, looking like an abused animal against the opposite wall, his one eye glowing in the shadows cast from the single candle. As much as Rick ached desperately to give his son just some kind of comfort, he couldn’t bring himself to move. He must have been the last person Carl wanted touching him right now.

So, instead of using his hands to console his son, he wrung them together.

“It was—all for you, and—and Judith. Promise—I promise, Carl,” Rick said at the finish, as if it would count for something. He realized by then that he too was crying, and his words were broken up by harsh hitches in his breath. “I’m—I’m sorry, Carl. I’m s-sorry, I’m sorry…” He couldn’t stop saying it, even when the words all melded together and his voice ran out.
After a while of stillness, Rick heard the sudden, fast-approaching strides then was crashed upon by a warm, solid body.

Rick, who hadn’t expected this reaction, hovered in a kind of shock.

This wasn’t right. If anything, it should be the other way around; Rick should be going to embrace his son. Yet, here was Carl, stronger and more grown than Rick allowed himself to see, and holding Rick.

Carl pulled away enough to look into his father’s eyes with his own wet and bloodshot one. Always growing, Rick’s son was nearly taller than him now. He only needed to crane his neck slightly to press a kiss to Rick’s forehead. Rick was surprised by it and further still when Carl lingered there, holding the contact as Rick often did with him and Judith. Slowly, the young man pulled away again only to press his lips once more to Rick’s temple, and then again to his cheek, and on down until he was at his jaw. Rick could do nothing but angle his head to allow it.

He’d stopped sobbing in his shock and could hear his own shaky breaths in the dense silence.

Next, Carl took Rick’s hand. That too, he pressed to his lips as Rick choked back a deep pained sound.

“Carl, don’t, don’t,” he said as Carl did the same to the other hand. Rick couldn’t understand how something so gentle could hurt him so badly.

But the boy watched him with only the deepest devotion and reverence.

“You,” Carl said, with unfathomable calm as he placed his hand over Rick’s heart. “And me.” He took Rick’s hand and placed it over his own. “We’re in this, together. Always. Always.”

Rick couldn’t speak.

It wasn’t right.

Carl shouldn’t be forgiving Rick like this. He should be furious with him, should hate him for what he’d brought into their home, should want to beat him as much as Simon or near that. Instead, he was more gentle with Rick than he thought anyone had ever been. In this hard and violent world, where had the boy learned such tenderness? Rick couldn’t understand it.

Carl ignored his father’s discouraging babbling and reached out to pull Rick’s head into the crook of his neck.

It took Rick a while to realize the boy was shushing him. Rick was weeping.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed.

I’d like to thank the lovely 1000lux for volunteering to read over this for me beforehand.
I appreciate the help and suggestions, friend!
Chapter Summary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rick could only watch as they loaded the set into the back of a truck in much the opposite way they’d unloaded it many months ago.

He couldn’t get his head around the idea that Negan, who’d once beaten him for not sleeping on the gift mattress, was now forbidding Rick from touching it— or so said one of the Saviors in the moving team; Negan wasn’t there.

They’d come in without a word or warning and started up the stairs as Rick sat stunned on the living room floor, where he’d been playing with Judith.

“Orders from Negan,” the woman had tossed over her shoulder when Rick asked what was going on.

When the set was loaded up, they drove off with no further explanation. A short time later, Rick could see plumes of smoke rising up from beyond the wall.
The gate was still open when Rick arrived.

Stepping outside, he first noticed the burning mattress and boxspring stacked on the side of the road, then the group of Saviors standing around it. They were all staring fixedly—not at the flaming bed, but out into the street. That’s when Rick noticed Negan.

Further ahead down the road and with Lucille grasped in both fists, the lone figure of the Savior leader was beating a Walker into the pavement.

There was no other way of describing it.

Like the soldiers around him, who were as still as statues and whose guns hung limp at their sides, Rick could only watch in a kind of captive horror.

There was such violence in Negan’s swing, such unhinged rage.

From the wide berth the Saviors were giving the brutal scene, Rick guessed that most had never witnessed Negan’s wrath take such raw form. Rick, himself had never seen this kind of intensity from the man, though the scene itself was familiar.

Rick was transfixed, physically unable to pull his eyes away. He soon couldn’t stop his body from flinching as the bat went down hard, over and over again on the downed creature, each wack landing square on the sloshy remains of its head.

His vision began clouding over. At some point, Negan must have noticed him there.

After a while, Rick blinked. At once, the fog drained from his eyes and down his cheeks, and it was all Negan filling up his plane of view. The long, expressive face loomed over him, so close that hot breath tickled Rick’s cheeks with every hushed, hectic sound that spilled from Negan’s mouth.

“Fuck fuck fuck. Oh fuck.”

Large hands hovered up around Rick's face. The bat was gone.

“Oh fuck, Rick. _Fuck!_ Don’t—I’m… Shhhhit!” Negan turned away, barking something at a Savior, who answered defensively. Rick vaguely recognized her voice as one of the movers.

Negan flashed his teeth at her then was back again, heating Rick’s face with more breathy strings of words Rick barely registered.

From behind him, Rick heard someone shouting. There was no small hint of warning in their tone. Dimly, Rick thought it might be Aaron or Tobin, but couldn’t bring himself to look. The fast-approaching foot-falls were quickly forgotten beneath the sounds of Negan’s hushing and Rick’s own shallow breaths. When had he gotten so out of breath?

Finally, Rick shook his head clear. Sniffing, he brushed Negan’s hands away.

God, it was bad. How had it shaken him up so badly? It was just a damn Walker.

“What are you doing?” Rick hissed when he'd gotten enough of a hold of himself to speak. Ignoring the bludgeoned body in the street, he indicated with a jerk of his head toward the burning mattress.
Negan turned to regard the bonfire as if for the first time. When he turned back to Rick, something had changed. The softly furrowed brow and deeply searching eyes from moments ago were gone. Now, his face was clouding over with something like Rick had seen when he’d first approached. Whatever had set Negan off then was triggered again now. But instead of a Walker, that feral rage was now directed at Rick.

Rick braced himself.

“Negan,” came that hard and commanding voice again, this time from right behind Rick. He turned to see that it wasn’t Aaron or Tobin as he’d thought, but Carl. His son. Broad and solid like a wall at his back.

Although the teen was panting and flushed as if he’d sprinted the length of Alexandria, Carl was eyeing Negan steadily. Rick had been right when he’d first caught the warning in the distant voice, and saw it now on clear display across his son’s face.

Instead of charging forward, as Negan looked reared up to do, the Savior took in the father and son for a moment before sucking his teeth and stepping around them.

Rick and Carl stared after the man as he strode heedlessly past the smoking heap of what had been Rick’s mattress and on toward the waiting vehicles.

Over his shoulder, Negan growled something, then hiked a leg up into the largest truck and slammed the door behind him.

Confused, Rick turned to his son, but Carl looked away the same moment.

Only after the Saviors began clearing out again, having taken nothing but Rick’s bed, did Rick piece together what Negan had said: “I’ll get you a new one.”

Carl guided Rick back inside the walls. Rick, who was still a little hazy, was glad for the stabilizing presence at his side. He didn’t know whether Carl had seen the body in the street and worked out what had rattled his father, but the young man seemed to take extra care as he accompanied Rick back to the house.

Rick noticed that since he’d told his son the full story, Carl had been unusually attentive to him, volunteering to help with the most menial tasks, and even speaking to his father in tones no louder than what he used with Judith. It made Rick feel sometimes like he was made of glass in his son’s eyes.

With a hand on Rick’s back, Carl guided his father into the house where two glasses of sweet tea where waiting for them at the dining table.

In the quiet of the kitchen and with Judith sleeping upstairs, Rick learned the source of Negan’s change of heart.

“You—you what? Carl... why would you…” Rick gaped at his son, torn between hurt and outrage.

“I had to, Dad,” Carl said.

As Rick listened with mounting distress, Carl relayed the story of how he went to Sanctuary and flatly told the Savior leader that Rick wasn’t going to use the bed anymore. At this news, Negan became immediately irate and demanded a reason. When Carl gave none, Negan sent someone to prepare a truck.
While Carl spoke, Rick felt a familiar tingling where his body met the chair. Scalding heat began to spread from the area and he shifted uncomfortably to ease a pain that was only in his memory.

“Dad,” Carl said, snapping Rick out of it.

Rick glanced down to see the cup in his hand was shaking slightly. He gave a stiff nod to the boy and set it down.

“Well,” Carl continued, still eyeing his father warily. “He wouldn’t hear anything I said after that. He just got up, grabbed his jacket, and left—I had to chase after him. Finally, we were outside and...”

Rick could see it.

Negan, with his long legs, striding out toward a rumbling truck, still yanking his arms through the sleeves of his leather jacket, heedless of Carl jogging after him. Suddenly, the young man cried out and Negan froze.

“It was the only way to get him to stop, Dad,” Carl said, regret lining his young face. “He acted like he was going to come down here and ... beat you or something.”

Rick’s heart lurched at that. He remembered the pure rage in Negan’s eyes.

“I know he’s the only reason you used the bed, Dad. Maybe you felt like you owed him that after Simon but... If he knew... if he knew what Simon had done, I knew he wouldn’t ask you to sleep in it. I... I had to tell him, Dad. I’m sorry.”

It was done.

And so it was that Rick was now the only one in Alexandria without a mattress. Despite the disquieting development that Negan now knew the whole story (or what Carl had told him), Rick had to appreciate the irony.

“I had to, Dad,” Carl kept saying throughout the day, always low and laden with guilt. Rick would rouse from his thoughts, pat his son distractedly and tell him it was fine. Truly, it was done.

And really, he should’ve expected it when he hadn’t stopped sleeping in the bed after the confession in Judith’s room. He should’ve known that while he’d had time to adapt to the stewing sickness in his belly at the thought of it, the feeling was fresh and visceral for Carl. For the week since the confession, Rick would sometimes find the boy standing in the doorway, eyeing the mattress like it was a cannibal squatting in their home.

Every night since then, Carl had offered his own bed—implored Rick to take it instead, and Rick declined. At the time, he still had Negan’s word to worry about, though he didn’t tell Carl that.

Now that the bed was gone, along with the threat of an impending beating (as far as Rick knew), he could sleep where he liked.

That night, Carl offered his bed once more, now with a shade of guilt. Rick took the couch, assuring the young man again that it was fine.

Rick didn’t blame Carl. He just wished the young man would’ve run the decision by him first.
Admittedly, Rick would’ve forbidden it.

Still, he couldn’t help marveling at the boy’s courage, the way he’d marched into Sanctuary, outright refused one of Negan’s demands. Rick guessed it wasn’t so different from when Carl had gone searching for Simon. Carl seemed to move in and out of Sanctuary with such ease that Rick wondered, with some uneasiness, if Carl wasn’t an infrequent visitor to the Savior base.

The day after the burning mattress and the bludgeoned Walker, Rick had to get out of the house. Tired of stewing over what this new development would mean and watching Carl brood with guilt, Rick was determined to carry on normally until he had reason to do otherwise.

It turned out that in the time since the Saviors' departure, the Alexandrians too had been busy speculating the meaning of the odd visit. Although not everyone had seen the little motley group of movers parked briefly outside of Rick’s house, word had spread from the few who had.

Soon after leaving the house, Rick regretted not letting Carl get the groceries as the boy had so adamantly offered to do.

On his way to the pantry, Rick didn’t meet the pairs of eyes peering out at him from windows and porches but felt them on him. He thought he might find shelter within the walls of the pantry, but it turned out he wasn't safe there either.

Through the gap in the canned legumes shelf, Ms. Margery’s eyes found Rick. In conspiring whispers, she boasted that she’d witnessed the whole thing from across the street.

“Oddest damned thing I ever saw,” she said. “Taking your mattress like that and nothing else. And after the fuss he made when he first brought you the damn thing!” Her wrinkly eyes went narrow and secretive. “You and Negan have a little spat?”

Rick stared at her through the shelf. With a sweep of his arm he knocked four cans of beans into his bag, signed the inventory, and left.

Later, he guessed he only had himself to blame. He’d skipped the meeting at the church and everyone wanted answers.

On his way to set the foundation for the final vegetable beds, he was ambushed again.

“And only that!” Drew, from recruiting, went on. He had to jog to keep up with Rick’s long strides. “They didn’t even touch the tribute!”

Rick had to wonder when Negan had gone from oppressive tyrant to the favorite subject of neighborhood gossip.

“And I heard they burned it too,” young Margaret, a teacher, whispered excitedly. “That’s what that smoke was. Barry said he saw the springs when he walked the perimeter last night. Said they were still hot. Why would they do that, Rick?”

“Did something happen, Rick?”

Rick pursed his lips.
He supposed it was the most excitement any of them had seen in a while. When Simon was around, there was always a raid, or an altercation, or just a general sense of impending violence in the air. In the month or so since his death, things had gotten almost dull by comparison. So much so that news of a single mattress dropped outside the wall and catching fire had become an overnight sensation.

Still, not everyone was thrilled with the rumors about yesterday’s events. Some, who’d grown comfortable with the new calm that had settled over the community, took this recent break from routine as a dangerous sign of turbulence in the Savior arrangement.

“Better not piss him off,” Jeffrey grumbled, cutting through the gaggle and brushing Rick’s shoulder in a way that wasn’t accidental. “Get us all killed.”

The older man had come a long way from ridiculing Rick’s inaction at the town meeting and rallying the community against the Saviors. It seemed that witnessing Simon’s gruesome death had quelled his thirst for retribution. It hadn’t warmed him to Rick though. Now, the mourning father seemed to find something lacking in Rick’s compliance.

In fact, everyone seemed to attribute the event to some rockiness in the relationship, for which Rick was somehow responsible. Like some lovers’ quarrel that could best be settled through civil conversation, they seemed to credit the disruption to some male bull-headedness on Rick’s part. While no one could know the cause of the disruption, they all seemed certain that Rick was the one to set it right. And he needed to set it right, for the sake of the town. Rick guessed it wasn’t so far from the truth.

“Now, we all know you have your pride, Rick,” Mrs. Muller said the next day, while Rick applied a second coat of paint to her fence. “But whatever it is, you best just apologize. I know Negan’s got a temper on him and it doesn’t take much to set the man right off but you gotta be the bigger man about this.”

Setting his jaw, he didn’t respond. And when he finished the fence, he let the old woman send him home with one of her casseroles and a look that said, “you know what to do.”

In all, Rick supposed it was better than all the speculation about Simon. He’d thought that would never settle. He wondered now how long this would last.

Rick was glad when he got back to the house with the casserole plate filling his arms, and Carl swooped out to politely, if assertively, disseminated the new gaggle Rick had collected on the walk there.

When the door was finally closed, Rick fell against it, basking in the silence of the house. With a huff, he shook his head at his son, who, for the first time in a long time, was laughing.

The next day, Negan returned.
Hey guys. Yeah. Dick move. Sorry about that. I had to cut this chapter in two because there was too much going on and I didn't want to exhaust you.

Fortunately, the next part is pretty much done so it will be up much quicker!

Thank you guys for reading and I love hearing what you think!
The Exam

Chapter Notes

I saw a great tag on a recent fic from Magnolia_9 that read something like: "connonverse is not a happy place for these two," and that is such a great thing to point out, because it's so true. I would've snagged it if I didn't already have way too many tags going on. Anyway, I know most of you guys understand, but just try to keep in mind that realistically, it can't ever be flowers and rainbows for these guys, it's just not in the cards. Anyway! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Since burning Rick’s bed, Negan had gone back to Sanctuary, cooled down, come back, got riled up again, nearly put a dent in their door from the force of his pounding, and shouted—a lot.

Rick felt like a child in the room while his parents argued over him. He tried to assert himself but every time he spoke up, his voice got swallowed by the louder roars of the other men.

Rick hated how they kept talking about his body. If it were Walkers or scavenging routes or—dammit, anything, Rick could take the lead. Yet here he was on shaky ground in his own house. He couldn’t even look at them.

Negan was saying that he was going to take Rick back to Sanctuary to get him checked.

“Checked,” like an animal got checked for rabies.

All the Saviors, certainly the upper echelon, had STD tests available to them whenever they needed; Simon was clean. But the idea that Rick had contracted something from the late lieutenant wasn’t the concern. It was another kind of “check” to which Negan was referring.

Evidently, the last time Carl had stormed Sanctuary, he’d also told Negan about the bruises. As a result, Negan now wanted Rick checked for other, more permanent imprints left from Simon. More specifically, he wanted Rick checked for “internal damage.”

Rick opened his mouth to object but t Carl was already shouting back that Rick wasn't going anywhere near Sanctuary and that if he was going to get examined, Negan would have to send his doctor to Alexandria.

Without a glance in Rick’s direction, Negan finally agreed and stormed out, tossing a date over his shoulder.

“ Fucking be ready.” And the door slammed.
The community had gone through a few doctors since Rick had been there. For a while, Tara tried to replace Denise but had left for Hilltop some time ago to be with the other women who’d lost someone they loved to the Saviors. Now, people came and went when the need arose, but Alexandria had no steady physician.

When the Sanctuary doctor arrived, Negan was there too. He didn’t meet Rick’s eyes and when he addressed him, he faced Carl. He mumbled something toward the teen about waiting outside. Carl on the other hand, insisted on going in.

Rick flat-out refused. The whole thing would be uncomfortable enough as it was without his son in the room for it.

But Carl met his mortified refusal with unmoving resolve and Rick found he couldn’t stop the stubborn young man from following him into the infirmary.

Rick had to remind himself that all of this was still very fresh for Carl. While Rick had been living with it for several months, it had all been heaped onto Carl in a single night. It was almost as if the boy needed this more than Rick did.

Eventually, Rick accepted that his son was there to stay. Still, he wished he would just sit down.

All the while the doctor was explaining the process and what he was going to do, Carl stood by Rick’s side, the agitation leaping off of him like sparks from a live wire.

They were both surprised that it was Harlan from Hilltop, the same doctor who’d helped Maggie when they first met up with the other community. Although Carl had surely seen the man since then in his occasional visits to Hilltop, he seemed only slightly assuaged that it was him doing the exam.

Rick didn’t know what he’d expected but found he was put at ease by the older man’s soothing tone. Because of Negan’s rigid policy on sexual assault, this wasn’t a check-up Harlan had done since he’d started working for the Saviors. Still, it wasn’t his first time and Rick felt comforted by his calm professionalism.

So, they began.

Harlan told Rick to take his clothes off and moments later Negan was bolting into the infirmary to help Rick pull Carl off of him.

When they managed to extricate the teen from the doctor, Carl was snarling and glowering down at the man hardly noticing them both there.

“Would another time be better?” The flattened man asked, breathing hard and holding his hand over his nose.

Rick apologized to the doctor while Negan held Carl back by a wad of his collar and a hard stare.

“No,” the Savior leader said, and it seemed to be as much to Carl as to the doctor. “No, Doc. We’re doing this now.” He only lifted his weighty gaze from the young man when it looked like Carl wouldn’t lunge again.

After pulling the doctor to his feet, none-too-gently Rick noticed, Negan dragged him to a corner of the infirmary for “a word in private.”

“Maybe you oughta just wait outside,” Rick tried again, while Negan was busy speaking in low aggressive tones to the doctor. Rick knew Harlan’s neutered stance well. When faced with Negan
like that, all you could do was wait out the storm.

“I said no, Dad,” Carl shot back, straightening himself with a snap of his shoulders and a sharp breath through his nose.

Rick watched the violence in him slowly settle beneath a controlled mask. Where had the boy gotten such a temper?

To avoid an all-out battle in front of Negan and the poor doctor, who hadn’t asked for any of this, Rick didn’t push it further.

When he finished with the doctor, Negan reluctantly stepped out again, only closing the door after casting them all a final severe look.

Rick couldn’t help feeling that they would all be in trouble if they didn’t just get through his examination.

Harlan asked Rick, delicately now, to change into a gown, but added that once they were through with the lower examination, Rick could put his boxers back on. He left it to Rick to decide which part of the check-up he wanted to do first.

Rick changed behind a screen and when he emerged, was ready with his decision.

He would get the worst of it over with.

Harlan directed him to bend over the examination table.

Rick had already been dreading the position, but that paired with what Harlan was going to do made for an all too familiar experience.

It didn’t hurt, not really. Rick had dealt with much worse. It was just uncomfortable, worse with Carl there.

All the while the doctor’s hands were on him, his son sat beside him like a ball of nerves, his brow knitted and teeth tearing at his own lip.

Although Carl stared into the ground throughout the examination, Rick still knew he was listening intently.

On his elbows, Rick winced occasionally but did his best not to make a sound. He didn’t want to express any discomfort, knowing that it would hurt Carl more. It was hard though, with the young man sitting so close.

At a prodding touch that was more surprising than anything, a sound escaped Rick’s lips.

With icy panic, Rick froze, then quickly turned to Carl, but the boy was already up and gone. Behind Rick, there was a clatter of instruments and Rick hurriedly covered himself as Negan once more came barreling into the infirmary.

After that, Carl grudgingly agreed to stand outside with Negan but only on the condition that Father Gabriel be sent in his place.
Before Carl left, he pulled the poor doctor aside to have a word of his own.

“I think I got it fucking covered,” Rick heard Negan growl to Carl as the young man was speaking in grave, forceful tones to the doctor in the same corner where Negan had done something similar earlier.

Gabriel agreed to chaperone Rick throughout the check-up and sat in Carl’s place. The scene was a near full reversal of ones from weeks earlier, when it was Rick who’d sat with Gabriel through his recovery. The context was very different.

When Carl and Negan were finally out of the building, Rick spoke low to the priest. “You don’t really have to stay, Gabriel… I know this is…” Rick winced, indicating to the entire situation. “I can just tell them you—”

“No, no,” Harlan, who’d overheard, quickly interjected from the end of the table. He had red-stained tissue hanging down from both nostrils. “I think he should stay. They said—well… I just think it’s best that he stays. Please,” he finished hastily. Rick thought the doctor looked worn beyond his years, which couldn’t have been much more than Rick’s. He wondered exactly what Negan and Carl had said to him when they’d each pulled him aside.

“It’s alright, Rick,” Gabriel said beside him. He wore a kind smile. “I’m glad to be here. You don’t need to worry about me. I’m quite comfortable.”

Reluctantly, Rick nodded but still felt queasy.

He’d first strongly resisted the idea of bringing another person into this, but as Gabriel sat tacit and calm beside him, Rick found he didn’t mind that it was the priest. He didn’t know how much of an explanation Carl had given him, but if any of this was alarming for Gabriel, he didn’t show it.

Much to Rick’s relief, Harlan had seen all he needed before Carl had attacked him the second time, and so had allowed Rick to put his boxers back on before continuing with the remainder of the exam.

He did ask, however, that Rick remove the gown so he could check for fractures on his upper body. Rick did so and sat straight up at the edge of the table as instructed.

Of course, there wouldn’t be any fractured bones, Rick knew. If he’d sustained any from Simon, they would either be obvious or long healed by now. Harlan had to know that too, but Rick understood the doctor had obligations.

Gloved hands navigated Rick’s torso with precision. Palms pressed gently on either side of his rib cage, fingers prodded along his collarbone and up his spine.

Although Rick didn’t have to police his responses with Gabriel like he did with Carl, he found it wasn’t necessary anyway; It wasn’t so bad. He had very little part in the process, really, and only had to do what Harlan prompted him to. The commands were all simple: breath deep, relax, slide forward. At one point, Harlan asked him to spread his thighs wider so he could feel along each knee and femur, Rick had done so without pause. Only afterward did it strike him how thoughtlessly the obedience had come to him.

Harlan told him to climb up the table and lie face-down so he could feel his tailbone, and Rick did so.

In all, Rick thought the exam was not as awful as he’d expected and was surprised that they were already almost done. Then he felt Gabriel’s hand squeeze around his forearm and looked over to see the priest holding out a tissue to him. Harlan, who’d been feeling around the base of his spine,
became immediately concerned that he was hurting Rick, and asked where the pain was. But Rick gently assured the doctor he was fine. Sitting up again, he wiped his eyes while the other two men looked away.

After a while, Rick cleared his throat and huffed a laugh. “I won’t tell them about this if you won’t,” he said.

They all three agreed.

In the end, Harlan found no fractures or broken bones, but did find scar tissue build-up from old tears along Rick’s rectal lining, but nothing severe or lasting to worry about. The doctor offered Rick something for discomfort, which Rick didn’t need but took when he caught the knotted look on Carl’s face.

He thanked Gabriel, who nodded and smiled. With only a glance toward Carl, Negan was already climbing into a truck and leaving with Harlan.

It was a while before Rick saw the Savior again.

He thought he’d be there when they dropped off the new bed, but he wasn’t.

Rick thought he’d be at the following pickup, but he wasn’t.

He wasn’t at the next one either.

After a while, Rick stopped expecting Negan, and even settled back into something like a normal routine. It was perhaps because of this that Rick was surprised one day when he came home to a visitor.

Smudged in dirt and drenched in sweat from working all morning in the new garden with Gabriel and Aaron, Rick arrived back home to find an intruder standing in his living room.

Negan had his hands in his pockets and was staring at something on the bookshelf.

“Hey,” he said when Rick came in, then turned back to the bookshelf.

Rick, whose heart had leapt in his throat the moment he’d noticed the man, slowly recovered and made his way into the room.

There was an obvious question, Rick knew. As he came up beside the tall man, it sat ready on his tongue; It was painted across the walls; It hovered in the air around Negan’s head in neon colors. Rick regarded it.

Negan, whom Rick hadn’t seen in over a month, was so cavalier about just suddenly appearing in Rick’s living room like not a day had gone by, that it was making Rick feel like he was the one behaving strangely.

So instead of asking the obvious question, Rick turned to see what the Savior was looking at.

It was a framed black and white photo of a family sitting on steps. A man, a woman— presumably husband and wife— and their two children, a boy and a girl. They were all smiling.
“Who are they?” Negan asked after they’d both been staring for a while.

“I…I don’t know,” Rick admitted. “It was just… here when we came. I think it came with the frame. One of those… model photos. Never thought of takin’ it out. Got nothin’ else to put in.”

“Huh,” Negan said, and for a while longer they continued to look at the strangers in the photo.

Finally, the Savior turned, went to the couch and sat.

It was where he’d sat that night after Simon, and Rick swallowed reflexively.

“The assassin around?” Negan asked, slinging his arm over the back of the couch.

“Carl’s at Hilltop.” Rick said, without even thinking. In the oddness of the moment, it had slipped his mind that his people were still hiding out in Hilltop and that this was the very man they were hiding from.

Rick felt his heartbeat in his ears.

Negan cocked a brow and made another “Huh” sound. If the news concerned him, he didn’t show it. Or something else was more pressing.

With a subtle gesture that spoke volumes, Negan indicated to the empty seat beside him.

Rick moved and for a while the two men sat silently at opposite ends of the couch.

“I beat you,” Negan said at last.

Rick blinked at the table in front of him.

“I wanted you to know that I don’t just throw my word around lightly, that I mean what I say.”

For the first time since sitting down, Rick turned to look at the other man.

“But you had a reason for not sleeping in that bed, Rick. A damn good one. And I fucking punished you for it.”

“My reason,” Rick cut in and licked his dry lips. “Was I didn’t want to be the only one sleeping in a bed when my people were all sprawled out on nothin’ but bed sheets and papers. Had nothin’ to do with—“

“Oh, come on, Rick!” Negan groaned. “Don’t act like it isn’t fucked up that I made you sleep every night on the same bed Simon ra—”

Rick turned away.

Negan gave him a moment.

Measured and careful, Rick began again. “It wasn’t like that. I told you why I didn’t want the damn bed that first day. You wouldn’t listen. You’re right to be sorry and I’m pissed off about it, but don’t go takin’ more credit than you earned. You didn’t know when you…when you did that, that Simon was…” he took another moment. “You didn’t know. And I didn’t say anything, so it’s my own damn fault I guess.”

“No, Rick. No, fuck that. It’s Simon’s fault. Don’t be such a goddamn martyr. That fucker’s to blame
for all this shit. He’s to blame for putting you in this fucked up situation, for me having to beat your ass—“

“No, no.” Rick cut in again, turning incredulously to Negan. “No. You’re to blame for that. That was you!”

“Hey, hey,” Negan held up his hands defensively. “I was just keeping my word. I take pride in being a man of my word, Rick. A man is nothing without that. I thought you of all people would appreciate it. You’re a leader. You had to lay down the law your share of times.”

“You didn’t have to spank me,” Rick growled, heat rising in him.

“Oh, yes I fucking did have to spank you, Rick. If that’s the punishment I lay out— in front of all my people— that’s the punishment that gets dealt! And truth be told, as much as I regret the reason behind it, I think you fucking deserved that spanking. At least a fuckin’ portion. That shit was a long time coming, Rick.”

Rick huffed, growing restless.

“Yeah, that’s right, keeping all that shit bottled up all this time— from me, from your son.”

“Don’t talk about Carl.”

“Hey, I got nothing but the utmost respect for Carl. And once again he’s proved himself a stand-up, honest dude, which is a hell of a lot more than I can say for his father. I can’t trust a damn word out of your mouth, Rick Grimes. I swear, I oughta beat your ass again for that damn pride of yours…”

“I—“ Rick stumbled, stared down at his fists on his thighs. “I didn’t lie.”

From Negan’s chest came a deep rumbling sound, but he didn’t press further.

“Anyway,” he said, moving on. “I came here because I have a debt. The way I see it, I owe you two big asks for what I put you through. One for sending that sick fuck over here every week and another for making you sleep on that disgusting fucking mattress. Now, this isn’t one of them and I know it probably doesn’t count for shit right now, but take it as a start. I’m sorry, Rick.”

Reluctantly, Rick turned to the other man.

With a sigh, Negan leaned back into the cushion and stared off. The sight reminded Rick of that night when they sat on this very couch after Simon’s death, when, for an instant, Negan nearly knew the truth. In that brief moment, the cold and violent Savior leader had dropped his businessman’s mask and was Negan the man. Here was that same man.

“Should’ve fuckin’ seen it,” Negan said softly. “So many times I looked at you and I swear it was so goddamn obvious— the way you’d fuckin’ seize up every time I said his name. That first day... That first goddamn day. Knew that shit would come back. Never sat right.” He shook his head and brought his thumb to his lips. “That night. With Simon. The way you were sittin’ there, lookin’ at me. Part of me knew it right then. I just didn’t want to see. Didn’t want to think…”

He seemed to sit with this. Then, after a while, the Savior straightened up again, salvaged his mask, and turned to Rick.

“Rick Grimes, I’m a blind fool and I should’ve fuckin’ seen. I beat you for no damn reason. You didn’t deserve it. Made you sleep in the same goddamn—“ Negan sucked his lip in his mouth and breathed deeply through his nose. “I was fuckin’ wrong, Rick. You don’t need to forgive me. Sure
as hell don’t deserve it. But there it is. I’m sorry.”

They stared at each other. Rick was aware of an odd calm falling over the room. Negan’s eyes were on him, but they didn’t push, didn’t pry. He was waiting.

“What can I do?” Negan asked.

“Daryl.” It was out with barely a thought.

Negan looked at him sideways. “Daryl?”

“Daryl.” Rick gave a nod and clung to the sudden strength that took him. “You don’t…you don’t need him. Leave him. Call your men off. Stop the search and let him be.”

For a long time Negan continued to stare at him, a disquieting twist in his lips like he was fighting down something bitter.

“What else?” He gritted out, and it seemed to take some discipline.

Rick couldn’t believe it. “The pick-ups,” he said then, emboldened.

“What about ‘em?”

“Stop.”

“No can do.”

Rick huffed and looked down at his dirty hands. His hair fell over his face. He felt the other man still watching him.

“Tell you what,” Negan said. “I can come less. we’ll make it every two weeks. Fair?”

Rick looked up at him.

“Fair,” he breathed out, feeling like he was in a dream.

Rick followed Negan to the door where the Savior stopped at the threshold. Rick hadn’t realized how closely he’d been following behind him until Negan turned around to face him and was suddenly inches away.

Negan too looked briefly surprised by the sudden proximity, but it quickly passed.

Neither man backed away. The silence made the distance between them feel somehow smaller the longer it held.

Rick felt the heat rise in his face as Negan watched him.

“What do you say?” The Savior asked at last, so close that his breath was hot on Rick’s lips.

Rick felt bound to the spot, though Negan hadn’t touched him. His own breath was shallow and he found he couldn’t break from Negan’s gaze if he wanted to.

He wouldn’t though. This was Negan. Negan, who hazed Rick, made him hold his bat, brought gifts for his kids, beat him, and killed Simon. Negan, who apologized. Rick held the gaze.

“Thank you,” he breathed at last, feeling the tingling nearness of Negan’s body.
Negan lingered a moment more, his eyes steady. Finally and without another word, he turned and left.

For a while after the door closed, Rick only stood there.

He didn’t realize until then that he had his hand on the back of the couch, nor how much of his weight it had been supporting.

He stole another moment for himself before going upstairs to check on Judith.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to 1000lux for reading over this and giving some great suggestions! I appreciate the help!
Chapter Summary

Alexandria settles into the new arrangement.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
It was a kind of victory, wasn’t it?

Rick lay in bed, restless. His thoughts, which had been ricocheting around his head all day, distracting him in every task and interaction, didn’t slow now, as he’d hoped they would, but soared.

Just as Negan had promised, the Saviors hadn’t come. The sun had risen and set over a regularly scheduled pick-up day without a Savior in sight. Rick had been feeling so uneasy leading up to it that he hadn’t told anyone about what Negan promised. Instead, he’d sweated his way through the day, distracting himself any way he could, refusing to behave any differently than if it was any other pick-up day.

A tense huddle of Alexandrians had gathered and steadily grown by the gate, and were watching Rick’s back with an agitation he could feel in his bones. When it was finally clear that no one was coming, Rick called his first meeting since Simon.

Negan had kept his word.

Rick had been riding a kind of high ever since.

It had been so long since he’d felt anything like a win that he hardly recognized it.

Now, as he lay on the new mattress, the electric energy, still fizzing through him, all seemed to flow downward. He’d ignored it the night after Negan left but now that the victory had been confirmed, the feeling was back again and stronger.

He didn’t know why it was so powerful. He hadn’t been engaged in that way since that last time with Michonne, and even then it was a surprise. The way she found his buttons and knew how to press them made him wonder if she knew his body better than he did.

He couldn’t say he missed Michonne since she’d left— hadn’t had the time. And anyway, Carl always told him how she was doing when he came back from Hilltop. It gave Rick a deep sense of contentment knowing she was safe and not too far away.

But now Rick thought it wasn’t enough knowing where she was. He missed her warm presence beside him, missed the things she could do to him, the way she knew just how to take him in hand.

With a shaky breath, he slid his hand down the front of his boxers. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done this to himself. Too busy and too stressed out of his damn mind to even work up the want for it, he’d gone without such self-indulgence since even before the Saviors found them.

Now, when he was sure he’d all but dried up, he found this old desire budding in himself again.

It was the rush from the fresh victory (and it was a victory, wasn’t it?) and the lull of peace, he knew. The idle times. He didn’t need to look over his shoulder every five seconds and his body sensed it. It was reawakening, telling him in urgent whispers that he could afford this, he could take this small moment for himself and not worry that he should be busy with something else, not worry that someone, somewhere needed his attention more.

Although rusty at first, his hips were building up a steady rocking pace, slowly but steadily falling back into that familiar rhythm. His mouth fell open and he covered it quickly with a hand. Although Carl wasn’t there tonight, Judith was, and Rick still needed to be quiet.
He stopped occasionally to lick his other palm before sliding it back down to ease the friction. Anything that felt good, that could build on his pleasure in this moment, he wanted it. For more leverage, he spread his legs on the bed, digging his heels down. He reached in his imagination for what more he could do.

Sometimes, when Michonne used her mouth, she would put her finger in him and she did it in a way that felt good. She was bold that way and it had excited Rick then. But when it was Simon, it was very different, and now Rick only wanted to stay away from the area.

He realigned his thoughts.

Pleasure, only pleasure. Only the good things.

He couldn’t stop moaning into his hand. He had to keep reminding himself to be quiet.

His thoughts were a collage of images and scenes, usually Michonne, but with flashes of Lori and other women he’d known, and even some fully fabricated characters that were an amalgamation of physical features Rick thought he liked. He tried to cling to one of the fantasies but they all kept racing by. It had been too long since he’d given himself time to indulge this way and he was out of practice. What did he want? What did he like? His imagination was a vast banquet laid out before him, but he just couldn’t decide.

He bit his lip beneath his palm in frustration as his hand kept moving, growing rougher with himself.

He concentrated on curves, all curves, anything soft... while dodging anything too course, or lanky with large clinging hands.

He kept going back to soft and warm, like a mantra. It was easy and tangible and kept him focused.

Michonne had a soft smile and cozy brown eyes. He tried to lock onto them, hissing, when they turned into another pair of brown eyes, large and sunken in bruised sockets.

Rick bit his lip harder.

Soft, he urged. Soft, warm...fuckin’ soft.

He got the eyes right for an instant, but then they turned again and Rick was hurting himself.

With shuddering gasp, he pulled his hand away from his sore and softening member. His heart was pounding so hard that his chest ached.

After a while, when his breathing leveled, he took himself once more in hand, carefully now.

Warm, he gently asserted, guiding his thoughts back. Easy, soft.

Determined now, Rick used both hands between his thighs, working himself stiff again while tentatively cupping himself beneath. He sucked in his lip and shut his eyes tight in concentration.

Soft... like down. Warm. Warm like autumn.

Autumn eyes slowly emerged now. They were brown but with other colors, colors Rick couldn’t even identify. These were lighter than before and not as cozy as Michonne’s, but they didn’t turn dark and sunken so Rick held onto them like an anchor.

Then a warm touch was on his face, and that too was soft. It slid downward, down his neck, his chest, his belly. Rick lifted his hips to meet the trailing fingers and worked himself in long steady
strokes.

When he finally came, it was harsh and almost painful, as if he’d had to break through a congealed seal that had built up over his year of celibacy. He couldn’t stop the broken cry that tore from him.

Afterward, Rick just lay there, body paralyzed, mind blank. In all, it had only taken about five minutes but he felt completely depleted in body and mind.

With the exhaustion, came a wave of something else, something similar to what Rick had felt after Negan had left, and today when he realized the Saviors weren’t coming. It was pride, victory. Just as he’d reclaimed Daryl’s freedom and some precious leeway on supply pick-ups, Rick had reclaimed this, a small part of himself that had been lost.

In the next room, Judith, who’d been woken up by Rick’s finishing cry, began bawling for him.

As he lifted his drained body up onto quaking legs to go to his daughter, Rick thought he would need more practice to get the hang of this again.

The Alexandrians took to the news better than Rick had hoped. He’d half-expected cries of betrayal, moans of “that’s the best you could do?” Instead, people were supportive of the new arrangement— encouraging even.

Rick lead another meeting and was pleased at how smoothly it went. With surprising ease, he was coming back into the role of leader like slipping into a well-worn glove. It felt right.

There were questions but everyone was civil. Even Jeffrey only frowned at him.

At the close, Ms. Margery brushed past him.

“You two get it all sorted out then?” came the low hum.

Rick turned around to catch the woman’s squinty eyes as she filed out of the church with the rest.

Sometimes it unsettled Rick just how encouraging people were.

Admittedly, since the Savior leader had started sending patrol teams, the community had more protection than even before their guns were taken away. And since Negan had made it very clear how he would punish any Savior who over-stepped their boundaries within the communities, the pick-up teams were uncharacteristically restrained— almost respectful. Furthermore, following Rick’s checkup, Negan had been sending Harlan back for weekly training sessions in the infirmary, so Alexandria was on its way to having its own permanent physician again.

Even so, Rick asserted, all of that didn’t alleviate the brutality and oppression that the Saviors represented, nor the violence and chaos they’d brought into the walls of the Safe-Zone over the past year. Rick only wished that the Alexandrians shared his reservations.

Sometimes Rick overheard his people talking about the Savior leader in tones light and almost reverent. It gave Rick a bitter taste in his mouth.

Negan had barbaric ideas about what society should be. He was cruel and prone to sudden bursts of
violence. He’d brutally murdered two men in their streets and was still stealing from them. A few good deeds around Alexandria didn’t suddenly make all of that go away. Of course, Negan had done much more than even that, but the Alexandrians didn’t know that and Rick would go to great pains to keep it that way. But even with the Alexandrian’s limited understanding of the volatile Savior leader, Rick didn’t think Negan earned this favorable standing in their eyes.

Gabriel turned from where he was pruning the tomato plants. “Didn’t you almost beat a man to death in the street?” he asked Rick, who blinked. “Didn’t you shoot him?”

Rick went back to digging. “Pete was… Pete was different,” he said, driving his shovel deep into the compost heap.

Pete Anderson had been an abusive drunk and would beat his wife, Jessie—probably would’ve killed her if Rick hadn’t stepped in.

“You had reason for it,” Gabriel said. “We all understand that. I’m only saying, maybe Negan also had a reason.”

Rick stopped digging again. “Are you defending the Alexandrians or Negan?”

“You’re an Alexandrian. And I’m not defending Negan.” The priest clipped an errant branch with his trimmers. “I’m just explaining why people might be willing to look past what he did. He saw dangerous men and he stopped them. Like you stopped Pete.”

Rick stared at the priest. “He gutted Spencer in the street.”

“Not saying I condone it,” Gabriel said. “I’m only saying that his reasons weren’t terrible.”

With a huff, Rick took hold of his shovel again.

“You told me once that you tore a man’s neck out with your teeth,” Gabriel said, and Rick paused again. “You said you did it to save Carl. You said you had to. It wasn’t even a thought. Well, what Negan did to Spencer, to Simon…”

Rick stared at the ground.

"He did for you. They see that, we all see it. And if Negan would go to such lengths to keep you safe, then well," he took a deep breath, mulling it over. "Maybe Alexandria is safe too.”

That night, as Rick lay in bed, skin still damp and chest still rising and falling rapidly, he thought more on it.

He was coming down and the razor sharp sensation along with that feeling of triumph he’d come to enjoy near as much, were wearing off. He was getting better at it and had only needed to stop briefly this time when he learned that he didn’t like to have his nipples tugged. He’d taken a moment, then rallied himself, found those steady autumn eyes and finished strong, this time with his hand securely over his mouth.

Now, with his heart still pounding away and his limbs like noodles, Rick replayed Gabriel’s words in his head.
Was he right? Did Negan’s relationship with him make the Saviors somehow less of a threat? Rick hardly saw it like that. In fact, it seemed that more people had been harmed because of Rick’s proximity to Negan.

But maybe there was something there.

For so long, he’d been so concerned about what Negan’s treatment was making Simon think, that Rick hadn’t stopped to consider what it looked like to the Alexandrians. Over the last year, they’d seen Negan publicly put Rick in his place countless times, seen him openly threaten to bend Rick over his knee and spank him. Now they’d seen him kill two men— both times making it explicitly clear that it had been for Rick. Was it so strange that they would think there was more than business between them? Had it also lessened their fear of the Savior leader?

What’s more, were they right not to fear him now?

Rick wouldn’t go that far.

He would take this small victory though, and see what came of it. It was all he could do.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to the lovely 1000lux for reading over this and giving some super helpful suggestions. You're a wonderful second pair of eyes!
Chapter Summary

At the gate, Carl waited back to say goodbye. When they broke away, the young man straighten his hat. Carl had started wearing the old stetson again some time ago and Rick tried not to show how elated it made him every time he saw the boy in it. By now, he’d grown into it well, probably wore it better than Rick ever did. The dark leather eye-patch probably had something to do with it.

Still, that hair.

Rick reached out and hooked a long wavy lock. “You gotta cut this,” he said. “It’s not safe. Somethin’ could come up and snag it.”

Instead of waving him off and telling him he’d be fine like Rick had expected, Carl gave his father a sly smile.

“Tell you what, I’ll cut mine if you shave yours.” He reached out and tugged teasingly on Rick’s beard.

Rick swatted him away with a playful scowl.
Really, Carl could do with a shave himself. The young man had some formidable facial hair of his own going. But Rick sensed that he liked the layer of ruggedness it added to what was still a boyish face, so he didn’t say anything.

“Alright, deal,” Rick said, rubbing at his beard, which had been allowed to grow unfettered for the past month or so. It really was time. “A trim. That’s all you get.”

“Fine,” Carl said. “Then I’m only cutting a little off mine.” He smiled as he backed away to the car, where Enid was waiting for him.

Rick shook his head and waved them off.

Since Rick had told his son the full story, their relationship had become more affectionate. Carl had taken to seeking out his father before leaving on errands, or supply runs, or even when he was just going to Enid’s, and imparting Rick with some warm gesture. Once, Rick had been doing the dishes and was startled when he felt long arms wrapped around him from behind and a kiss pressed to the back of his head. As Carl had pulled away saying he’d be back in time for dinner, Rick was left shaking his head and smiling to himself.

He’d wondered then as he did now, as he watched the car roll through the gate, how he’d ever thought it was a good idea to keep things from his son.

As Rick dipped the spoon in the saucepan for another taste, he thought that it wouldn’t be so bad keeping this from the boy.

The tomato sauce had thickened up well enough at least, but now tasted bland. It would have to be right by tomorrow night. He added a dash of seasoning.

Rick had never heard grumblings from his kids about his cooking. While Lorie had never commended him on it, she never complained either. As a man well into his forties, Rick thought he’d been doing alright for himself and his family.

It had only taken Enid coming over for dinner one night and asking why they were pouring tomato soup on the pasta for Rick’s confidence in his culinary skills to come crashing down.

He remembered turning to Carl, who was suddenly having trouble swallowing his mouthful.

Rick couldn’t help that since Enid had come to Alexandria, she’d been living with Olivia, who’d been an award-winning head chef at some big city restaurant in her old life.

Still, it suddenly made sense why his son so rarely had his girlfriend over for dinner.

It was at that moment, as his son fought to hold in his spaghetti through fits of laughter and as Enid stared confusedly between them, that Rick decided he would put in an effort. He wouldn’t have his son embarrassed about bringing his girlfriend around.

Now, when the couple left on runs, Rick took the opportunity to brush up on his skills. He studied recipes and learned what best ingredients worked as substitutions. He would’ve borrowed a cook book from Olivia’s impressive collection, but was afraid the woman might rat him out to Enid. So instead, he’d quietly borrowed one from Tobin. It was dusty and yellowed and filled with old grainy photos, but it would work.
For his first attempt at advanced cooking, Rick boldly picked manicotti, because it looked like a fancier cousin of spaghetti.

Unfortunately, they didn’t have any cheese, so Rick was going to use canned mushrooms to fill the shells. There was no substitution for pasta shells, however, and he yelped with excitement when he spotted the single remaining box of large pasta shells in the pantry, startling the other two shoppers.

Now, with everything set, it all came down to the sauce.

Leaning once more over the stovetop, Rick flicked his tongue experimentally over another spoonful of the red concoction.

He winced.

“Never could get that sauce right,” came a voice behind him.

Rick turned— too quickly and flung red paste onto the floor.

“You’re too skimpy on the salt,” Michonne shrugged from the doorway.

Both bounded forward, nearly slipped on the spilled sauce, then crashed into each others arms laughing.

After eating Rick’s bland, trial sauce and putting Judith to bed, they sat in the candlelit living room and talked.

It felt so natural, Rick forgot that Michonne had been away so long. When the silence finally fell over them, Rick had no idea what time it was.

“You don’t come around,” she said after a while.

“Wasn’t sure y’all wanted me there,” Rick said and meant it. He’d had a feeling for some time that they were still planning something, though they never let on, and neither did Carl when he came back from his visits there. He didn’t know if they viewed his improved standing with the Saviors as a betrayal but couldn’t blame them if they did.

Michonne’s head fell to one side and Rick read from her eyes that he was a fool.

“Alright, alright,” he said. “I know. Y’all still want to fight this, and you got every right. But I… I can’t. I can’t lose anybody else. I can’t let anyone…” He bit off what came next. “Look, I don’t know if y’all are really settin’ up to do somethin’— and maybe you won’t tell me if you are, but I … I think you should stop…whatever it is. Negan’s got guns and numbers and… maybe I can’t convince you but if I can stop you, I’m gonna try.”

Michonne seemed to take this in. Whether or not there was any truth to what Rick was saying, Rick couldn’t read it from her expression, which didn’t change.

“Do you feel like you owe him that?”

Rick stared.

“No,” he said and swallowed. “No, I just… I need to do what’s best for everyone. The Alexandrians… they’re my people now. And this deal with the Saviors, it’s…it’s hard— every day it is, but it’ll keep them alive until I can work somethin’ else out with Negan or…”

“Or what?”
“Or… I don’t know what, I’ll… I’ll figure somethin’ out.”

“He won’t just go away.”

“I know that, I just… What he did here, what he’s doin’… I just, I need to think that… that a man can…”

“Change.”

Rick blinked at her, and for a moment thought she knew everything. Everything with Simon and everything Negan did, and maybe she even understood.

“I wasn’t always…” He tried to find the words. “I killed a lot of people, didn’t always have a reason other than fear and hunger and rage. I’m just sayin’… out there I changed into somethin’… some kind of monster. But meeting you all, making this family, having all these people I gotta protect, it somehow changed me again. I have to believe that a man… even a man like him… can do that too.”

At the stairs, Rick stopped when he didn’t feel Michonne following him anymore.

He looked back to see the gentle smile on her face, glowing gold from the candle in her hand.

When he went back, she leaned in and pressed her lips to his head, then pulled away and put their heads together.

This close he could bask in those cozy dark eyes.

“Yours. Always.” she said and Rick thought there was something strange in her smile.

“Yours,” he chuckled softly and kissed the smooth underside of her slender wrist.

Slowly, she began pulling away. “No,” she said, with that same gentle smile. "You're not."

She squeezed his hand one last time, before moving back to the couch.

Michonne stayed the next day as well, catching up with the Alexandrians and helping around with the new projects. It was good having her around again.

That evening, Rick let her help him prepare dinner for Carl and Enid’s return. Really, it was better than feeling her amused gaze following him around the kitchen from where she sat perched on the counter top.

With her help, the manicotti turned out well.

Michonne was demurely silent as both Carl and Enid complemented Rick on the sauce. Rick accepted the credit graciously but thought he caught Carl send a glance to the woman sifting innocuously through her noodles to Rick’s right.

With the five of them there, they had a full table for the first time in a long time. It felt good.
They laughed and chided each other like nothing had changed. Enid told the story of their supply run, Michonne and Carl joked back and forth, and Judith balked in partial-English, excited for the guests. Rick commented occasionally and laughed, but mostly sat back and watched the natural rapport between Michonne and his son. He’d forgotten just how much he used to love watching them together. They were truly two sides of a single coin.

After dinner, Michonne said her goodbyes, embraced them all, placed another lingering kiss on Rick’s head, whispered three things in his ear, then left for Hilltop.

If there was a war brewing, it was slowed by Rick’s reciprocal relationship with Negan, which everyone was soon attuned to.

It had calmed things in Alexandria, but it wasn’t the Alexandrians who worried Rick.

He expressed his uneasiness to Gabriel, but the priest told him he was only being antsy due to the rare peace they’d been enjoying over the last couple of months, which Rick was unused to. He couldn’t deny that. Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was about to fall on him.

Sasha and Maggie visited occasionally but for the most part stayed away from Alexandria. Although there may have been no more need for them to hide, Rick got the sense that there was nothing more for them here. Hilltop had become a new start for them both. Of course, they would never stop wanting Negan dead for what he’d done, and Rick would never expect them to forgive him.

It was only a matter of time before Carol was pulled out of reclusion. Having finally got word of what happened with Abraham and Glenn, she came seeking blood. Even Morgan’s fury, that had been long dormant, had been reawakened by something.

It all came to a head when they all heard about what Negan’s second-in-command had done, and how Negan handled it. Rick didn’t know if it was Aaron, or Gabriel, or Tobin who told them about that night, or how much they knew. But like Michonne, they all came to him— not all at once but each on their own. He didn’t know if they’d planned it that way, to give him breathing room, but that’s how it happened.

Sasha stared with her glistening almond eyes, searching, shaking her head; Morgan nodded stiffly, lips tight and twitching, and hand restless on his staff; Carol held Rick’s face and shed a single, silent tear; Maggie didn’t cry but held him long and firm against her.

Only Daryl stayed away.

On one of her visits with Hershel, Maggie finally told him.

“‘When he heard about…’” she trailed off, blue eyes glistening. “‘he thought you might’ve done something to get him out. Says he’ll give himself up again if it’s the case. I tried to tell him there was no trade, but he wouldn’t hear it. He won’t even come back inside the walls anymore since he heard. Doesn’t want to be around anyone, get too used to it again.”

Rick sighed, watching the two small children playing on the floor.

Herschel had his father’s jet-black hair and kind eyes, and Maggie’s smile.

“‘You know what he’s like,’” Maggie went on, raking a hand through her shoulder-length hair and
folding her legs beneath her. “Took him a week to even look at me, he felt so responsible for Glenn.”

This came as a surprise to Rick. Although he would always remember every detail of his friend’s slow and gruesome death, he’d almost forgotten how, only moments before the horrific scene, Daryl had leapt out of the line and struck Negan. Of course the hunter had taken that on himself. And now he was taking on this.

Maggie looked exhausted. “I didn’t want to make you worry. I thought I’d find him or he’d come back. But it’s been a week and I’m starting to get scared.”

When Rick finally found him out in the woods, Daryl had set up a small camp between Hilltop and Sanctuary, as if he’d been on his way to turn himself in but couldn’t bring himself far from Maggie and the baby.

Rick grew more anxious the further away from Alexandria he got, but he knew that if anyone could bring Daryl Dixon back, it was him.

It took a while of convincing, during which the soft-spoken hunter murmured low and snuck furtive glances from beneath filthy drapes of hair, but eventually Daryl seemed to accept that Rick hadn’t traded anything for his release and finally agreed to come back with him to Hilltop.

From then on, everyone seemed to view Rick differently. More importantly, they seemed to view Negan differently. The Savior leader had not only killed his own Right Hand for tormenting one of their own, but he’d given up Daryl for no reason other than because Rick had asked him to. Like with the Alexandrians, this odd turn seemed to curb their bloodlust for the Saviors, at least for the moment. And that was all Rick could hope for until he found a more permanent way to sort all this.

If the budding alliance between Rick and Negan wasn’t enough to smooth the rising furor between the communities, Carl too was a help, though Rick didn’t realize for a while.

The young man still came and went regularly, sometimes giving little detail and seeming unconcerned with it. So, trusting his growing son, Rick too was unconcerned.

It had been creeping around his periphery for some time, but it wasn’t until Rick was staring at the holster and the pistol seated within it, that it fully dawned on him. Carl wore the weapon comfortably around his waist, with his thumbs hooked in the band and didn’t hide it when the Saviors came around.

It didn’t so much hit Rick, as it did wash cooly over him, like an ocean swell.

He was sitting on the porch bench and Carl was up leaning against one of the beams and looking out over the street, as he often did.

“Carl,” Rick said. “Are you…” How had he missed it?

His son turned to eye him over his shoulder.

Rick tried again. “Carl, are… Are you a Savior?”

The young man gave him a strange look that struck Rick as neither defensive nor ridiculing. Then he glanced down and seemed to take in the sight of the gun strapped to his waist, studying it like it was
neither an asset nor a hinderance, but only another part of himself that he’d grown used to like the large scar that replaced his right eye. Then he looked back out over the streets, which were peopled with both Alexandrians and Saviors.

He never gave Rick an answer, but Rick guessed he didn’t need it.

It turned out, Rick would learn later, that Carl was a little different from a regular Savior soldier.

Chapter End Notes

I know it’s been a kind of slow couple of chapters. Thanks for sticking around, guys :) let’s get back into it!
Rick is trying to get through this pick-up day but something has Negan distracted.

“Who’s that?”

Rick looked up to where Negan was staring out onto the street. Teams of Saviors were moving crates in and out of trucks. One Alexandrian was weaving between them.

“It’s Eric,” Rick dismissed, turning back to the order on his lap. “What’s this in blue? Is that…staples?” He could never read Negan’s handwriting.

The Savior ignored him. “The fuck’s he doing?”

Again, Rick looked up. “He’s handin’ out…” he squinted. “Cookies. He’s handin’ out cookies. Why do y’all need so many staples?”

“Jesus Christ! Just fucking—mark it off. I don’t give a shit.”

Negan had been quick to anger all day. Something had happened with another community or someone messed up at Sanctuary, Rick guessed. He didn’t mind it as long as it didn’t slow things down. Right now, Negan was moving at a crawl.

“Something wrong?” Rick finally asked, despite himself.

“No, Rick. Nothing’s fucking wrong. Just can’t fucking trust anybody, that’s all.”

Rick went back to his list.

“Sure as fuck can’t trust your people. Speaking of which.” Negan eyed Rick over his shoulder. “You put anybody else in charge here?”

Rick looked up, blinked at him.

“Like that Spencer guy. You assign anyone else a position like that?”

Rick thought a moment. “No,” he said.

Really, he’d been leaving Gabriel in charge of things when he left but it was never official. Without Daryl there, it hadn’t occurred to him to assign a second-in-command, but he supposed Gabriel had been operating as just that for some time now. It was sort of natural the way it happened.

“Good.” The Savior turned ahead again, surveying the street. “Your judgment is shit. Next time you think of delegating a big fucking position like that, you run it by me.”
Rick snorted. “I don’t have to do that.”

Negan’s large eyes turned on him. “Oh, yes you do have to do that. You are like 10 and 0 on bad fucking judgment calls. You lost your fucking promoting privileges.”

“And what about you?” Rick shot back.

“What about me?”

“S’pose you just get to assign whoever you want? Not like you got a spotless record, last I checked.”

Simon had been notoriously abusive of his position, but the man Negan had since promoted as his new Second made Rick uneasy in a different way.

Something shifted then and Rick watched the hard lines melt from Negan’s face.

“Yeah,” Negan said and turned away. “Well I stomped that shit out the second I caught it, didn’t I?”

In the dense silence that followed, Rick felt he’d made a mistake. The sullen turn certainly wasn’t helping to move things along, but really, Rick didn’t blame Negan for Simon. It wasn’t fair to use that against him, even to prove a point.

“Negan, I didn’t…”

“Look, fair enough,” Negan said. “You earned the right to have a say. Next time I put a guy in charge here, I’ll fucking run it by you, happy?”

Slowly, Rick nodded.

When Negan turned back to the street, Rick continued staring at the man leaning against the post. He was reminded of someone else who often occupied the same position.

“And Carl?” Rick said after a while.

“What about him?” Negan cocked a brow back at him.

“You never ran him by me. You gave him a pretty big job. Didn’t think I oughtta know about that?”

“What, you want me to ask his daddy for permission? He’s a grown man, Rick.”

Reflexively, Rick looked down. It always stung when Negan felt the need to remind him of Carl’s age, as if he didn’t know his son wasn’t a boy anymore.

“What, you don’t approve?” Negan huffed. “Seriously? You got a problem with me making Carl my Alexandrian liaison, Rick, that it?”

“No, that’s not what—“

“I can’t be every damn place at once, Rick.”

“I know. I know that.”

“And I thought you of all people would appreciate the choice. Or is there some character deficiency I should fucking know about? Way I see it, he’s a stand-up dude. One of the best I got. You gonna tell me otherwise?”
“No, it’s just…”

Carl had been quietly working for the Saviors for some time before Rick ever learned about it, and suddenly he was being promoted. It just seemed fast, was all. Rick had still been wrapping his head around the idea of Carl, the Savior, and suddenly he was occupying one of the highest ranking positions. Rick didn’t even know there was such a thing as an “Alexandrian Liaison.”

As Rick opened his mouth and shut it, Negan watched him, unblinking.

“It’s… it’s good,” Rick finally said softly. “It’s good.” And he was struck because really, it was. Somehow, he felt safe knowing that his son was with Negan when he wasn't home. Despite Rick's own feelings about the Savior leader, he knew Carl would never come to harm under his watch.

“Good,” Negan said, and turned back to the street.

After a while, Dwight approached the porch and said something about one of the shipments being short, said it was short when they arrived so someone must’ve swiped the missing crates before they left Sanctuary.

“Raoul run that shift?” Negan asked.

The blonde nodded significantly. Apparently, it wasn’t the first time this had happened under Raoul’s watch.

Negan said something low and grim, to which Dwight gave a soldierly nod, cast a quick glance toward Rick, then turned to leave.

As he walked off, Negan stared after him, rolling his jaw in thought.

“Can’t trust fucking anybody, Rick. Not a damn one.”

Rick caged his tongue as he too watched Dwight go.

Dwight had been promoted to second-in-command shortly after that night with Simon. Although he’d long stopped leering at Rosita and even dropped his personal vendetta against Daryl, Rick felt no less distrustful of him. In fact, Rick had been feeling more wary of the scarred man lately. Sometimes, he would look past Negan and catch steely blue eyes watching him from beneath sickly blonde hair before they darted away. And on pick-up days, their dealings were always marked with an elusive tension Rick couldn’t place. When Rick would speak, he could see the tightness in the blonde’s jaw and the odd twist of his lips. And when Dwight responded, there was always a harsh crispness to his tone, as if he wanted to say more than what the new civility of their arrangement would allow.

Rick wondered if he and Simon had been friends.

Rick hadn’t said anything about it to Negan. It was only a feeling anyway, and the Savior leader had a lot on his mind.

“How the fuck did he slip that shit past me?”

Rick blinked, taking his eyes off of the receding blonde as Negan kicked off the beam and lumbered back toward him. The large man all but threw himself down on the bench beside him.

“That’s the shit that eats me up. He was so fucking… cool about it. Not a damn thing changed. Looked me straight in the eye and fucking smiled. All while he was pulling that shit behind my back.
The fucking audacity. The goddamn entitlement.”

Rick watched Negan chew the inside of his lip as he stared off. “Maybe he thought you wouldn’t mind it,” he offered.

Negan looked wildly around at him. “Now, why the fuck wouldn’t I mind it? We got serious fucking rules. He knew. Hell, everyone knew! Wasn’t a goddamn secret!”

Sometimes Negan could seem so oblivious. When he raised a group of people to live by his own personal code, even made them all take his name, could he really be surprised when they started acting like him?

From the genuine alarm across the other man’s face, Rick guessed yes, he could.

“Negan,” he began carefully. “When they see you… doin’ stuff like that, they think they can do it too.”

“I wasn’t doing that shit!” Negan protested. “Never that. I don’t just come up and fucking—take shit.”

“No?”

“No. No, I fucking don’t, Rick. I work for it. Every damn day. I don’t know where the fuck he got the idea, but it sure as fuck wasn’t from me. I don’t hold with that sick shit.”

Rick felt somehow that they weren’t talking about Raoul and the missing shipment anymore. He wondered if they ever were.

Rick turned to the forms on his lap. “Maybe, he thought…maybe it looked like you were…so he thought…” he sifted through a few papers.

“You’re saying,” Negan began, slow and measured. “That somehow he got it in his head that I was doing that shit, so he thought it was okay?”

Rick’s eyes stayed down. He felt the intensity boring into his left side.

“Simon thought we were fucking,” Negan said, and it wasn’t a question.

Rick swallowed, idly tapping the binder.

“Why’d he think that, Rick?”

When Rick remained silent, Negan spoke again, steady, firm.

“Rick. Why did Simon think—”

“Wasn’t just him, Negan,” Rick relented at last.

After a pause, Negan leaned back on the bench, inviting Rick to explain.

Rick wasn’t sure how honest he should be. Negan could be so naive.

After a deep breath, he cleared his throat and began. “You got this way of…talkin’ to people.”

“Talking to people,” Negan echoed.
“Yeah,” Rick licked his lips. “Sometimes when you take... people aside, or get up close on ‘em, it... it’s like...”

“Like what?”

Rick blinked, grasped for the words. He felt sometimes like he was talking to a child. He swore Carl had more sense about things.

“Negan... you gotta know how it... you gotta see how it...”

But Rick gauged the sharp eyes and angled head and saw that maybe Negan really didn’t know. Maybe Negan had always teased people that way and didn’t think of how it came across. Maybe Negan spanked grown men as punishment and didn’t see anything odd in it.

He searched Negan’s eyes but only found impatience and genuine confusion staring back at him.

“Forget it,” Rick said and thumbed through the remaining pages in the binder. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s just get through the rest of this and—“

“No, Rick,” Negan swatted the binder shut. “I want to know how I talk to people. If people are watching me, picking up messages. I need to know what I’m putting out there. It’s kinda fucking important.”

“It’s nothin’. Can we just—”

“So, you’re saying the way I talk makes people think that I wanna fuck them. That right? I wanna know exactly what I’m doing, Rick, and why I— the man who’s gotta run not one but a dozen fucking communities, where every other day it seems like some asshole wants to play the fucking hero, not to mention keep tabs on my own people sneaking around behind my back— why I now have to worry about how the way I’m talking is making you uncomfortable. Explain that to me, Rick.”

Rick stared into the closed binder, unable to pull his eyes up.

“Alright, answer me this then— Is it the way I am with you that gets your panties all twisted or is it what other people think about it?”

“Negan it’s... I don’t...I don’t care. It’s fine.”

“Oh you don’t care, huh?” Negan said. “So it’s them you’re worried about then? What they think?”

“No, Negan—“

“Well let’s fix this, Rick. What can I do to make you more comfortable? I don’t want people talking— God forbid, getting ideas. What is it I’m doing exactly that’s got people’s minds in the gutter?”

“Negan, I...” Rick shook his head at his lap, tongue gone thick and clumsy.

“Help me out here, Rick. How can I fix it if you don’t tell me what I’m doing?”

Negan’s long arm had been draped over the back of the bench all the while they’d been sitting there, but Rick only now felt aware of it. The distance between them too seemed to be slowly closing.

“Negan...”

He wanted to get under Rick’s skin, that’s all this was. For whatever reason, the Savior had been
wound up all day and now sought to take it out on Rick, reveling in his discomfort, devouring every
flinch and evasion.

Keeping his eyes down, Rick was determined not to recoil as he felt the heat from the other man’s
body envelope his left side.

“Am I making you uncomfortable, Rick?” Came the deep rumble in his ear.

Rick shot to his feet, snatching up the binder when it nearly fell.

“What, Rick?” Negan hollered, all eyes and teeth as he beamed up at him. “It’s how I talk to
people!”

“Ne-Negan… we need to get through the rest—“ But Negan too rose from the bench.

“No, Rick. We’re onto something here.” The Savior prowled forward. “I gotta know what kind of
messages I’m putting out there. I don’t want people saying shit—oh, shit!” He slid up close and
Rick’s breath caught in his throat, his back against the railing.

“Don’t look now,” Negan said low. “But we’re being watched—I said don’t look. Christ. Got the
gossiping geese brigade at seven o’clock. Little Miss Marge and the gang. What do you think they
see, huh? What could I be whispering to you over here?”

Rick shifted his weight, feeling a prickling on his neck, both from their audience and from the way
the waning sun kept hitting Negan’s eyes. His feral stare was already imposing, but now the light
made the irises iridescent and they seemed to blaze gold—no, green. They were too many colors,
Rick couldn't place them.

“They think I’m talking you up right now, Rick? Working my way into them tight little Levi’s?”

Rick’s fingers twitched around the binder between them. “Negan.”

“Telling you how worked up you got me, strutting around in them goddamn cowboy boots all day.”
The tall man craned down by Rick’s ear. “Maybe telling you how they might look a little better
hanging up on my shoul-”

Rick sidled off the porch, mumbled something about finishing the rest himself, and strode off toward
the trucks.

He couldn't shake him.

At each truck, Rick promptly matched his lists with the cargo and tried rigidly to ignore the presence
at his back. If he stopped too long, the relentless Savior would speak to him. So, Rick kept moving,
stopping only briefly to confer with the drivers, checking his lists with theirs.

Like a devil, Negan hovered over his shoulder, grinning wildly at each driver and standing so close
that Rick’s questions were coming out halting and dry-mouthed.

As Rick read over the items on each delivery sheet, Negan read over him, breathing on his neck and
engulfing Rick’s back in the furnace of his body heat. Rick couldn’t read a single word on the paper.

Arguably, Negan wasn’t behaving so unlike the way he normally did, hanging over Rick as the
Alexandrian fought the constant battle to get some amount of work done while Negan seemed determined to prevent it. Still, this was different. Now, there was malicious intent in it.

With a jerky nod, Rick approved another list he hadn’t checked and dismissed the driver, realizing too late that he’d reached the final truck.

No sooner was the young Savior out of earshot than Negan was in Rick’s ear again.

“That was getting awkward as shit,” he said. “I get what you mean now, Rick. You see how he was looking at us? Like I’m about two seconds from throwing you up against the side of this truck and wearing your thighs as earmuffs. That what he’s thinking? That I’d make you shoot so hard I’ll be burping up jizz bubbles for days? That it, Rick? That is fucking filthy.”

Rick snapped his binder shut and fled up a ramp of one of the larger trucks where two more Saviors were organizing crates. Rick hastily asked them about the contents of each crate and, before they could answer, was off inspecting them himself. A fourth shadow crept up the truck’s back wall and Rick spun around to see Negan too ascending the ramp.

Staring voicelessly, Rick watched as the Savior, in a few words, sent his men away to sort the loads on a different truck.

Then it was only the two of them there, surrounded by stacks of boxes. Negan saunter nearer, all but blocking the only exit with his mass.

“What about when we’re alone, Rick? Bet people get real imaginative then, huh? What do they think we get up to?”

Rick shook his head and opened his mouth, but before he could get anything out, Negan heaved a loud groan.

Startled, Rick jumped back.

“Oh fuck!” Negan hollered, throwing back his head.

As the Savior heaved a few more emphatic groans and curses, Rick’s confusion slowly faded, and his face grew hotter. When Negan punctuated one rapturous howl with his hips, Rick looked away.

“Careful, Rick,” Negan intoned with bedroom eyes. “If you’re not makin’ noises, they might think you’re doing something else with your mouth.”

Rick shot him a look.

“Easy, easy. It’s those gutter-minded fucks out there, not me, Rick!” Negan held up his hands defensively. “Fuck, they probably think I’m choking you right now, Rick. Quick! make a sound before they send a medic or something!” He bit his lip to keep from laughing.

Of course it was a game. Everything was a game to Negan. Rick was foolish for thinking he could teach the crass man anything. He liked it better when he was pissed off.

Rick bristled, tension giving way to an old, familiar irritation. “You done?”

Now that he’d provided sufficient distraction from the Savior’s sore mood, it was time to wrap this up before Negan could think up more ways to waste his time.

“Hey, hold up, Rick” Negan side-stepped in front of him just as Rick moved to leave. “You can’t just
walk out after all that—me, having all the fun in here. You got them all out there thinking I’m some kind of selfish lover, Rick. That ain’t right. Fuck, think of something.” He leaned on the truck wall, his fingers tapping idly near Rick’s head.

“Negan,” Rick protested, feeling ridiculous, but Negan shushed him.

“Alright, I got it,” Negan said at last, and the tapping by Rick’s head stopped. “Maybe you’re touching yourself as you do it, how’s that?”

Rick set his jaw, moved for the opening again, but Negan’s hand came up to hover at his chest.

“What, that’s fair, right? I had my fun, now it’s your turn. Let’s give you a minute.”

“Enough, Negan.” Rick was through being the man’s entertainment. Anyway, he doubted seriously that even the more imaginative of the Alexandrians thought anything like that was happening in the back of the truck. And all it would take was someone walking by the open compartment and seeing the two men only standing there to dispel any suspicion.

Still, for some reason, heat had been rising steadily in Rick’s body since they’d been left alone. Despite the stacks of crates around them, Rick felt oddly exposed.

“Maybe you’re rubbing yourself off through your jeans, huh?” Negan ventured, a boyish curve to his lips.

In the dimness of the truck, his eyes had gone brown again. Rick only felt brief relief.

“Bet you’re just going at it, getting those boxers all wet. Your people got pretty good imaginations, maybe you slide a hand down the front…” His devious eyes dipped down and Rick held the binder more firmly in front of himself. “You go rough on yourself, Rick? Beat yourself off pretty hard?”

If this was still just a game to Negan, why was Rick sweating so bad? He was glad again for the dimness of the truck.

“No,” Negan said, and ran his tongue over his lips slow in thought. “No… maybe you’re going easy… gentle. Sliding your fingers up and down real slow, working yourself steady… maybe you’re looking up at me as you do it, moving your hips, fucking slow into those… pretty hands—”

A sound escaped Rick’s lips, and at once Negan’s eyes shot up. Twin orbs darted with precision over Rick’s face, gathering, calculating.

“You like it gentle, Rick? Slow?”

Rick felt icy cold now shooting through him, overtaking the heat. He clamped his jaw tight against any other sound that might escape without his consent.

“I bet you get loud when you come, don’t you, Rick?” his words ran faster now, he touched on something and was now seeing where the momentum would take him. “Bet when you get close, you get real fuckin’ loud, huh?” He took a half-step closer. The boyish curve of his lips didn’t reach his eyes now. The game had changed.

“You scream, Rick? Huh? Or you bite down, try to keep it in? Maybe you’d need help, huh? Maybe I’d pull you up to your feet…”

“Stop,” Rick swallowed, feeling too much saliva gathering in his mouth. “Stop.”
Negan’s voice, like his eyes, had undergone a shift somewhere. The tone that had started out bating and almost cruel had at some point lowered to a deeper, smoother rumble.

“Spit in my hand, get it nice and slick…take you in my fist…”

Like the words had taken physical form, Rick felt it, that large grip, wrapped around him.

The hard wall at his back and the heat rolling off of the body over him recalled the early days when the Saviors toured the town, and when Negan, even then, was always too close, too familiar. Rick’s eyes flashed briefly to the truck opening with an old antsiness. In those days, Rick had always been worried for what others might see, what they would think and twist— Simon in particular. Rick had wanted Negan to stop then, to preserve others’ perceptions of him. Now it was only himself Rick was trying to preserve.

“Negan,” he breathed, feeling like the air in the truck had gone too thick. “Please.”

“Please what, Rick?”

As Rick’s hips rose off the wall, pulled forward as if by some gravitational force, Rick wasn’t sure himself what he was pleading for. He looked up at the other man, his dry lips parting to speak but words escaping him.

Why wouldn’t he just do it? Nothing ever stopped Negan before. The constant teasing, the encroaching on Rick’s personal space, the tugging, the shoving, the whispering. Hadn’t all that come so easily for Negan? What was stopping him now?

“God damn,” Negan hissed, hooded eyes darting once more over his face. “You need it. Need it bad, don’t you?”

Rick’s face burned and he looked away. The wolfish bite had returned to Negan’s voice.

“It’s okay… You need it, need Daddy to fix it.”

Rick breathed a mirthless laugh as he looked down, noticing for the first time the obvious swell in the front of his jeans. The heat that had claimed his body now scathed him and his skin pricked all over. He was a fool. He was Negan’s fool.

“Let me fix it. Let me make it good.” The other man swayed forward, threatening to connect.

Rick felt closed-in, hadn’t noticed when Negan had brought both arms up on either side of him.

“Let me,” Negan said, his thick, luxuriant voice rolling over Rick’s body like big, warm hands. Rick tried to shake them off.

Negan shifted his leg closer so it was like a column between Rick's thighs, inviting Rick to rock against it, like he somehow knew that Rick had been rocking against nothing but his own hand and that mattress for weeks; like he knew whose eyes and whose touch filled his thoughts when the sensation peaked. The thought of having a thick, warm mass to grind into had Rick's hips inching forward on their own. Even just a graze...

“No,” he said, flattening himself against the wall and turning away from those ever-changing eyes. Instead, he looked down at the scattered documents spilling out from the forgotten binder on the floor.

“Let me,” Negan said.
“No.”

There was so much power in a word, Rick didn’t realize.

“Let me do it, sweetie.”

“No. no.”

With Simon, Rick never bothered. Wouldn’t’ve done much good anyway.

“Let me make it good.”

Rick shook his head.

“Please,” Negan said.

*Please.*

Rick looked up.

Negan’s face was damp and feverish, eyelids heavy, mouth slack. There was no mockery or victory, no malice. He was bare as he stared down at Rick.

He said it again.

A short time later, as Negan descended the ramp and went to gather his men, Rick’s lips were still tingling.

There was so much power in a word.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter Summary

Rick is sick and can't come out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rick was sick.

Everyone knew it. When they asked where he was, that’s what he told them— or rather, that’s what Carl told them.

Through an upstairs window, Rick watched his son head off the Savior leader at the end of the sidewalk as he’d done a few days ago, and a few days before that.
The young man was shaking his head in familiar discouragement to Negan’s slanted look.

Suddenly the leery eyes shot up and Rick lurched back from the window.

By the time the door had closed and the footsteps were climbing the stairs, Rick had scooped Judith up in his arms and put an inconspicuous distance between himself and the window.

“Says to get better soon,” Carl said from the doorway. “Told me to give you this. I think it’s soup.”

Rick regarded the small container and rocked Judith on his hip.

“He’s not just going to stop coming,” Carl said after a while, and looked his father over. “What did he do?”

“Nothin’,” Rick said. Judith tapped her fingers to each of his own in a kind of rhythm.

“Did he try something?” Carl asked, and then when Rick didn’t answer—“Dad?”

Rick blinked and looked up, noticing the change in his son.

“No— No,” he rushed out. “Nothin’ like—it’s nothin’ like that, Carl. Promise. It’s nothin’ like that.”

Really, it was more “like that” than Rick cared to admit, but didn’t know how to explain that Negan wasn’t Simon. Still, Carl seemed to know his employer well enough not to seriously think he’d hurt his father.

“Then what is it?” The single blue eye was fixed on him.

Rick opened his mouth.

They didn’t lie to each other anymore. When Carl asked him something, Rick had to answer, honestly.

“It’s nothin’,” he said, and turned back to Judith. “Just can’t… can’t see him right now.”

The tall figure shifted in the doorway.

“You think if you hide out here long enough, he’ll just forget about you?”

“What? No, Carl. No—”

“You think it’s a good idea, playing with the man who has so much power over us? Over everyone?”

Rick blinked at his son. He didn’t know where this sudden anger was coming from.

“Carl—“

“I can’t just keep lying for you, Dad. Either tell Negan to fuck off, or I will.”

“Carl!” Rick hissed, bringing a hand up to Judith’s head.

The young man’s heated gaze drifted down to the girl then seemed to fizzle out. “Sorry,” he mumbled to the ground.

“Carl, you don’t need… You don’t need to do that. I just…” He gathered himself, looking to Judith. She was a source of calm, but he also hoped a source of fatherly resolve. “Look, I shouldn’t ask you
to do that. It’s not fair, I know. I just…I just need a little time, is all. I just need some time.”

It seemed to take some discipline for Carl not to press him further, but at last he nodded and left them.

Carl had been right, it turned out, though Rick ignored his warning for about a week more: Negan wouldn’t just stop coming.

Tell Negan to fuck off.

Rick had never heard words arranged in that way, didn’t think such a thing was possible. Still, his son always had more gall with the Savior leader than most. If anyone could tell Negan to “fuck off,” it would be him.

Still, it was Rick who would have to face Negan again. Of course he would. He knew that.
He’d hoped, however, that it would be on his own terms.

The door opened downstairs. Rick was relieved.

He needed to go to Tobin’s and now that Carl was there, the young man could watch Judith.

“Carl,” he hissed as he carefully closed the door to Judith’s room. He’d had to agree to two songs before the girl would lie down, and it had taken four before she finally dozed off.

His ears perked up to the sound of footsteps climbing the stairs, then a moment later he was bounding back to his room.

“I got an idea about how we can stop the kale from gettin’ infested so bad,” he called out to the approaching teen. “We don’t have all the equipment now but I was thinkin’ I’d put a list together and send it out with the next group, or maybe you could take it back to Sanctuary with you and see if they have anything they’re not usin’. Don’t know why I didn’t”—with a grunt, Rick shoved into the second boot—“didn’t think of it sooner. Never got this bad at the prison. Hershel set it up in the yard perfect and I didn’t give it much thought. I think I figured it out though. If you could just…”

“Well, I bet you were just the sweetest little thing in the cell block.”

Negan was standing in the doorway, holding a large thermos.

Rick blinked, lunged forward, shut the door and locked it.

After a moment, there were three knocks.

“Little pig, little pig…”

Rick scrambled away until his back hit the bed.
The doorknob jiggled.

“Hey, Rick, why don’t you let me in?”

Rick’s heart was pounding in his ears.

“Come on, I already saw you. Gonna have to be quicker than that, Rick.”

The Alexandrian grasped for a defense and realized with a wave of triumph that he had one.

“I’m- I’m sick. I’m sick!” Rick blurted out.

“Yes, I heard. Looks real serious, Rick. Real serious. Well, I brought you some soup or… something. It’s in a thermos. We’ve been driving a while though, so I don’t know how much longer it’s gonna stay warm.” The knob jiggled again. “Why don’t you come on out?”

Slowly, Rick lifted himself to his feet, eyes glued to the door. Was it only Negan? Where was Carl?

“Or we can just keep talking like this, if you want” Negan went on. “I don’t mind.” There was some rustling and it sounded like the man was making himself comfortable against the door frame.

“What do you want to talk about, Rick? Let’s see… Got a couple new communities. Had to swing my dick around a little bit to get the message across, but I think they got it. Actually snagged an old ice-cream maker from one of ’em. You like ice-cream, Rick? We could talk about that if you want,” he offered. “Or maybe we could talk about that kiss…”

Rick swallowed his tongue.

“Or we could talk about ice-cream,” Negan went on. “You probably like some ass-backwards southern flavors, don’t you? Probably like that artificial orange shit that tastes like a fucking skittle. Or that shit with the peach chunks? You fucking Georgians.”

Rick’s eyes drifted toward the window.

“Pretty hot though. That Virginia heat. Probably get all melty if you don’t eat it quick. Probably make a real mess. I could help you clean that up if you wanted, Rick. I’ll be honest, that nasty orange shit makes me queasy as fuck just thinking about it, but shit hits the fan, I’ll do what I gotta do, Rick. It’s the end of the world, we gotta conserve paper towels. I’ll do that for you, Rick. I will. If that’s what you want.”

Sweat was beginning to pool into Rick’s eyes making them sting badly, but he didn’t wipe it away, didn’t dare move.

“You ever had your belly button licked, Rick? Nah, I suppose you’d have to be real messy for it to get down there, huh? You there, Rick? Let’s see, what else…” There was a dull thrumming against the door. “I was thinking about that game we were playing a while back. You know, before that kiss…”

Rick blinked, but it only made his eyes sting worse.

“You remember that game, Rick? With the people out there? A few of them saw me come in here, you know. Ol’ Barry and Miss Marge. You know she was doing that fucking squinty thing? I tell that woman every damn week to get her short-sighted ass some goddamn bifocals or something.”

Rick might’ve quipped that the nosy woman would prefer binoculars if his tongue wasn’t sand.
“I almost brought flowers,” Negan said. “Just to set ‘em all off in a tizzy. You think they’re all out there wondering about us right now? What do you think they’re saying, Rick?”

No. Not this.

“I been in here a while, Rick. I bet by now we’d at least be down to our skivvies. They gotta give me a little credit. Maybe you got those bowlegs up around my head…”

“Negan,” Rick said, but it was an inaudible rasp, his throat a desert.

“I bet you’re turning all pink around the ears. Got those hands in my hair. You there, Rick? You gotta play too or it’s not a game.”

There was nowhere to run. He was already locked in his room. He could only listen to the low rumble of Negan’s voice through the door and pray the man would get bored and leave soon.

“You’re right,” Negan said. “Maybe we’re not that far yet. Maybe we’re just huddled up on the couch. Sucking face, what do you think? Are you in here giving me the full version of that little sneak peek from the truck? That was real sly, Rick. Real fucking quick. That how it is when you get into it? All timid and tight-lipped like that? You a shy kisser Rick?” Negan’s voice dropped lower, and the silky drawl took on a husky edge. Rick felt himself pulled closer to the door to better hear.

“It’s alright if you are, Rick. You don’t want to open your mouth up, I could just feed you my tongue, little by little, let you suck on it? Would that be better? Bet you could fellate the fuck out of my tongue, Rick.”

Rick brought his hand to his mouth.

“What was that? You say something, Rick? Anyway, I’d let you suck off my tongue for a while. Then we’d worke our way up here. You’d probably take me around that new bed. Maybe show me what ‘Daddy’ sounds like in that Georgian drawl—”

Rick hissed into his palm.

“Just saying, Rick,” Negan said through a breathy chuckle. “We’re gonna work our way in there at some point. Not that I’m forward like that, but your people seem to think so. That’s what you said, right? Shit, they probably got the scene all mapped out down to the last freckle on your neck. Down to the last curl. Christ.” He huffed what must’ve been another laugh but sounded thin. “So fucking curly…How’s that work, Rick? Carl’s hair is bone-straight. Doesn’t make any damn sense. He’s got your eyes though, I’ll give him that—eye. Sorry. But the way he scowls is all wrong. It’s too…hard. Cold. Always so goddamn angry. Yours is…yours is…”

If Rick could lean in any closer he would but his head was already against the door.

“Soften,” Negan sighed at last and Rick let out the breath he’d been holding. “So fucking soft. Not to downplay your stare or anything, Rick. It’s a good stare. But sometimes when you look at me like that…fuck, it’s all a man can do not to put his hands on you, make you purr…”

Rick fought to master his breathing as it grew shallow again. Through the door, he could hear Negan’s own harsher breath’s on the other side, like a beast’s. He felt like he was leaning against a tiger’s cage.

“Is that what we’re up to in here, Rick? Am I making you purr?” A dull dragging sound accompanied his voice, like fingers tracing wood. “Bet if you gave me some time, Rick, I could make you purr.”
Rick tasted blood on his lip.

“Shit, Rick, if you just give me a little time, I could—I could have you making all kinds of sounds.”

Before Rick could stop it, he was opening his mouth.

“What would… what would you do?”

It was a strange voice, arid and quiet, and the moment it was out, Rick was biting his lip again.

In the dense silence that followed, even the beastly breathing on the other side of the door had stopped. When Negan spoke again, the velvety rumble was gone, replaced by something coarse and strained.

“I’d… I’d make you feel so— good, Rick. I’d be so fucking… gentle. I’d take— such good care of you, Rick, would you— like that? Would you like…” He kept breaking off abruptly as he spoke, as if every word was a battle to get out.

If possible, Rick felt himself leaning further into the door, his shaky breaths hitting the wood and coming back in his own face.

“Gentle,” Negan kept saying, “gentle, so fuckin gentle.” But the way it came out, through teeth and painstaking restraint, it sounded anything but that.

Still, Rick clung to his wracked voice and the violence beneath the soft promises. He had one fist braced against the wall by his head, while the other was down below, its heel pressed hard into the front of his pants to subdue the worsening ache there.

“Would you like that, Rick, if I touched you soft… You like soft things, right?” The dull dragging sound returned, but now Rick could feel it. “Could just use the tips of my fingers, trace them real soft over you. Or… or my mouth, Rick. Just my lips— no teeth, Rick. No teeth. Would you like that? Or even… or even… I could…”

Through his foggy mind, Rick realized that Negan was trying to think of more soft things.

“Tongue,” he supplied. It was easy; Negan was always sticking it out at him.

“Yeah, yeah!” Negan said. “Fuck yeah, that’s real soft. You’d like it. You want that on you? Where you want my tongue, Rick?”

But Rick’s voice had shriveled away again.

“Could start at your— at your hands… clean your fingers, one at a time. Go slow. Could slide my tongue up in between’em, right up to the knuckle…”

Rick felt the warm, slippery appendage lapping at the sensitive webbing.

“Where else, Rick? Where else you want it? Bet you taste so fucking good, Rick. Eat you up.”

Rick shut his eyes.

“You ever had a tongue up inside you?”

Then it slipped out. A sound— broken and guttural and not his own.

Both men went utterly still.
“Open the door,” came a voice from the other side, chilled and hollowed-out.

Rick didn’t move and didn’t breath.

“Open the door, Rick,” Negan said again.

Through the cracks of the doorframe, the other man’s will was creeping in like a noxious gas. Of its own volition, Rick’s hand drifted toward the brass knob. Rick caught it and pulled it away.

No. He shook his head as if the other man could see him.

“Please.”

Rick froze.

“Please, Rick.”

It was like in the truck, small and bare, and Rick felt his hand moving once more for the knob. At the last moment, he snatched it away again. No, no.

He was losing, buckling beneath Negan again. He had to shake this, had to get a hold of himself.

Suddenly, there was a thunderous crack by Rick’s head and he flew back like he’d been struck.

“Open the goddamn door, Rick!”

For an instant, Rick thought Negan had broken the joints of the doorframe with the force of the blow and would now come barreling through, but the handle only rattled violently.

“Rick!”

He backed into the bed.

Silence, then a moment of deja vu as the distant sound of the front door reverberated through the house.

Through icy panic, Rick heard Carl’s voice.

“Dad!” And then, “Negan?”

There was a last low growl that struck something deep in Rick’s belly. Then, like a switch had been flipped, Negan called out to announce himself in a voice that sounded suddenly boyant and composed.

Footsteps bound up the stairs. “What the fuck are you doing here?” Carl asked, from the end of the hallway.

“Easy, son. Fucking chill. I was just checking on your pops.” Negan’s voice drifted away from the door. “Brought him some more… soup shit. Anyway, the little diva won’t come out.”

“He’s sick. I’ll take… What the fuck?”

Some rustling then a sigh. “Look. I’m a grown-ass man. He’s a grown-ass man. I don’t need to—“ And then there was a hard, thick sound and silence.

“Well shit, son.”
The sudden rush of activity that followed roused Rick from his daze. From the hallway, came the sounds of heavy, dense entities colliding with walls, and hangings clattering to the ground.

Lunging forward, Rick unlocked and opened the door in one movement, then bolted out to extricate the two men.

Carl was hurling fists and curses, while Negan was using one long limb to hold the boy back by the hair and the other to gouge at his face.

“Enough, Enough!” Rick said, finally driving himself between the two. He shoved them back to arm’s length by wads of their shirts. “I said stop. That’s enough.”

“Tell that to this asshole. Fucker swiped me. I didn’t do shit.”

“Bullshit,” Carl snarled and looked ready to spit across Rick at the man. “You know what the fuck you did. You can’t just come in here—“

“I said enough!”

“Bullshit? Bullshit I can’t! I own this whole fucking—”

“Drop it! Both of you.” Rick shoved them back again as he was pressed from both sides. “Y’all wanna do this here? Here?”

“He started—“

“I don’t give a shit,” Rick snapped. “If y’all are gonna do this, you go outside. I won’t have it in here.” He cut severe looks from his left to his right.

The heat that had been rolling in his belly earlier had not lessened but rose now to his chest.

From the silence that followed, there rose only heavy breathing and finally a small voice.

“Daddy?”

Rick looked over and saw Judith peaking out from her creaked door, wiping one sleepy eye and watching them with the other.

“Baby,” Rick said.

“Jude,” Carl said.

“Oh, sweetie,” Negan said.

All three men moved at once, but Rick shoved the other two back— “No.”

Carl’s wilted voice followed him. “Dad?”

“I said out,” Rick growled over his shoulder, before turning soft eyes on the girl and scooping her up in his arms. “Shh, baby. I’m sorry. You been there a while?” His stomach dropped at the thought. “Everything’s fine, baby. Everything’s fine.”

“Did Negan get hurt?” She was staring past Rick with heavy-hearted concern.

“Oh, you messed up now, son.”
Rick shot the man a look that made the rueful grin fall from his bloody lips.

“No, he’s fine, baby. You hungry? Let’s get you dressed and we’ll find somethin’ to eat.” Before closing the door, he leaned out into the hallway. “I don’t want to see either of you when I come out of here. I mean it.” And impressing a final simmering look on them both, Rick closed the door.

As Rick helped Judith pick out her clothes, he could hear the two sets of footsteps grow fainter as they drifted down the hall at a slow, neutered pace.

As Rick had ordered, neither Carl nor Negan was in the house when he and Judith emerged from her room. Still, he heard the muffled voices coming from the backyard.

Judith was playing in the living room, and Rick, preparing her lunch in the kitchen, listened idly to the argument but followed little. What he did catch was mostly Negan’s end; the man had a thunderous voice, and Rick understood now how Carl had been able to overhear so much of the man’s rant the day Spencer died. Here was mostly defensive statements and tactless attempts at calming Carl down.

Rick did catch a little from Carl, whose voice was strong in its own right. He caught something about Negan having a “good thing,” whatever that meant, and was momentarily stunned when he caught the back end of a biting comment, that went something like “thinking with your dick!”

Over the next few days, Rick grew to dread the night.

Chapter End Notes

What has happened to this fic? XD

Sorry for the delay. If you guys haven’t already, check out Laundy's awesome illustration for Chapter 22 in the link to Part Two of this series, or go to Laundy's Tumblr to see some more beautiful Regan works.

Thank you again for the support. I love hearing your thoughts!
Rick lay face-down with his head shoved beneath the pillow. He was concentrating. He’d never been able to sleep on his belly before, but now it was a defense.

Since Negan’s last visit, Rick had been confused, disgusted, furious.

Painfully aroused.

Every night since then, he’d shoved his hands down his boxers and made himself go blind. It wasn’t invigorating, wasn’t empowering. There was no victory in it. It was a means to an end. Each time, he came down hard, and found himself in a deep hollow, chilled from the inside out.

It wouldn’t happen like that tonight. He mashed his face into the mattress, smothering his groans and
fighting the rolling need between his thighs as his imagination clung stubbornly to its target.

As a deterrent, Rick ran through the list of offenses:

The man had come into his house— where his daughter slept— violated the space with his filthy mouth and filthier ideas. He’d placated him, lied, tried to wheedle his way past his defenses, talked to him…

Groaning, Rick rocked into the mattress.

He tried again:

Negan humiliated him. At every opportunity, he dragged Rick through the mud, cut him down publicly. He’d spanked him in his own house, treated him like a child— worse, a pet. He tugged Rick around, punished him when he didn’t fall in line, rewarded him when he did, called him “sweetie,” said “please.”

Furiously now, Rick’s hips ground down.

It was getting away from him. He grasped desperately.

The man had stolen his son away— stolen Carl. Used him in his army. Made him carry a gun.

And yet Carl was around more now than before. And now that he was allowed to carry a weapon, he could protect himself beyond the wall. He was safe.

Rick clawed at the pillow, not caring if he tore it, but then eased his grip at once because yes he did care; It was one of the pillows the Saviors had brought back with the new mattress. It was stuffed full of pure down and Rick thought he’d never felt anything so soft.

What was wrong with him? He felt like a teenager, mindlessly rubbing against anything and everything. He should be ashamed of himself, with his little girl in the next room. What kind of father was he, getting off on the man who’d ruined their lives, who’d come into his home, stole the food right out from his daughter’s plate every month— and yes, it was now only monthly pick-ups. And really, now that the garden was up and running, it was more of a trade.

Still.

As if Negan thought he was doing them a favor.

“Do you like that?” Negan had asked after Rick took a bite out of a Sanctuary apple. It was impossibly sweet and juicier than anything they’d been able to grow there. He could only nod, and Negan left them six crates.

“Do you like that?” Negan had asked as his team showed Rick the toddler-sized bed they’d scavenged. Rick blinked, nodded, and they carried it inside.

“Do you like that?” Negan had growled through the door as Rick rutted against his own wrist.

Cursing through his teeth, Rick gave up then and slid one hand down between the mattress and his hips.

He told himself it was just to end it, just so he could move on and function in the community. They needed to get the kale sorted out. The infestation was a real problem. As soon as he got this out, he could think again, wouldn’t be distracted all the time by those eyes that weren’t as brown as he’d
always thought, and that voice that could reach out and touch him just where he needed it— he
needed it so bad. And Negan could smell it on him.

When it was done, Rick lay panting, drained, empty. He could see.

He’d given the man what he needed. First, in the back of the truck when he’d buckled beneath the
pressure and kissed him. Then again here, when he’d allowed himself to fall into Negan’s “game.”
Twice now, he’d given Negan the permission to move ahead, permission to push harder—in invade.
He wouldn’t have done it if Rick hadn’t shown him he could. The Savior had taken everything but
Rick had given him more. What power did Rick have in his words when he negated it with his
actions?

It that way, it was no better than with Simon. With Simon, he’d let it happen. With Negan, Rick
invited it.

Beneath the pillow, Rick started sobbing. He didn’t stop until he heard a small, blubbering voice.

He lifted his head out from beneath the pillow to peer through the darkness at the tiny, wild-haired
figure in the doorway.

“Baby? What—what’s wrong? What is it?”

“Can I sleep with you, Daddy?”

Rick sniffed and quickly wiped his eyes. “Yeah, baby, you have a nightmare?”

She wiped her eyes, nodding.

“Yeah, yeah, baby. Come—come'ere.” He started scooting aside but remembered with a sticky jolt
what he’d just done there. “Know what, baby, let’s…let’s go in your room, okay? That okay?”

She nodded and Rick smeared his hand on his sheets as he rose to follow her.

On the narrow bed, Rick held his daughter close and they slept.

Rick stopped hiding away. There was no sense in pretending to be sick anymore now that he’d been
found out.

Rick continued meeting with Dwight on pickups and continued hating it. The man just rubbed him
wrong. Rick had asked Carl offhandedly a few times what he thought of Negan’s new Second, and
the young man shrugged, said he was alright. Even Gabriel, who’d agreed that the scarred man
seemed an odd choice, said he could be a little unfriendly but otherwise seemed fine. Rick even
asked Rosita what she thought, but she was brief and noncommittal. Eugene was much less brief, but
Rick extracted from the over-wordy response that he too didn’t mind the promotion.

So, it was only Rick who was put off by Negan’s new Right Hand. He had to wonder if the position
itself would always unnerve him no matter who held it. Still, Rick couldn’t help feeling that Dwight
harbored ill feelings toward him, and with every pickup seemed to grow more obvious about it. It
never went beyond the clipped responses and strained looks though and Rick guessed he could deal
with that. He’d dealt with worse.
Anyway, there was something more pressing on his radar.

Although the pickups had been shifted to once a month, in the meantime, Negan visited—often.

Despite what Rick had anticipated, Negan wasn’t emboldened by their last encounter. Didn’t look that way anyway. Either from something Carl had said to him or something else, Negan didn’t bring up what happened, nor did he actively seek out Rick when he came. Instead, Negan roamed around Rick’s periphery. Although he didn’t make Rick chaperone him around Alexandria anymore, Rick still felt at all times aware of the Savior’s location within the walls. It was a prickling on his neck, a shiver up his spine, when he caught a glimpse of sleek, black hair, or a flash of a wolfish smile, or heard that deep, rolling laugh that seemed to carry across the full length of Alexandria.

The Savior leader strutted around the settlement like the mayor he thought he was. Everyone else seemed to be of the same mind and flocked out of their homes when they saw him coming.

Rick was ambivalent. The man had now brutally murdered two men in their streets and they treated him like some kind of celebrity for it.

It was early stages of dementia likely. Most of the townspeople who poured from their homes when Negan came around were only available to do so because they were too old or frail to be out on supply runs or assigned to building projects. That sedentary life had deteriorated their minds, Rick was sure. It’s what happened when you didn’t get out beyond the wall. The new world had a way of thinning out that kind of thing. It was a morbid train of thought, but Rick felt justified as he watched their smiling faces and eager hands reaching out to shake Negan’s like he was some kind of war hero.

Negan engaged every Alexandrian he came across, making Rick feel, with more wonder than jealousy, that he didn’t have the same connection with his people.

From across the street, Rick had been digging Mrs. Muller a new french drain, when he started watching an interaction.

Rick only realized he’d been staring when suddenly, Negan turned. His eyes left the woman he was speaking with and locked onto Rick’s.

Even from across the street Rick could see the golden green. It seared through him like a hot spike. I’m going to fuck the shit out of you, the eyes said.

Then, as fast as the eyes had found him, they were gone again, leaving Rick feeling like he’d been doused in ice water.

As he recovered, suddenly short of breath, Rick looked again and saw that Negan was once more talking to the woman, fully engaged in conversation as if nothing had happened.

It was too hot out to be digging a french drain.

Once inside, Rick shut the door immediately. He would have to find Jeffrey later and apologize. In his hurry, Rick had nearly knocked the older man over.

Rick locked the door, unlocked it, cursed.
He would send Carl out for the next meeting— all the meetings. He was better with Dwight. And anyway the boy was a man now; he ought to start taking more responsibility.

“What are you doing, Dad?”

Rick jumped. He turned to find his son watching him from the stairs, Judith half asleep in his arms. Rick stammered a moment before getting a response out.

“Just— Just. Make sure everyone’s alright, Carl. I need to— I need to…” He shuffled up to meet him at the stairs and took Judith without explanation.

“Where are you going? I was about to lay her down.” But Rick was striding off to the kitchen. “Dad, I just made her a snack. What are you—“

“Just— do as I say, Carl. Go check on everyone.” Rick was going through cabinets, opening drawers. Carl only stood, watching the aimless raid from the doorway.

As if on schedule, there came a knock at the door.

Three knocks. Slow and even.

Both men froze.

For a moment, Carl eyed his father dubiously. Then he moved to the door.

Rick had to stifle the urge to stop him.

“Ah, Carl. Good man,” Rick heard from the next room.

Judith was beginning to struggle in Rick’s arms, pressing him and fussing groggily. Quietly, Rick pleaded with her to be calm.

There was some small talk in the other room, some jabs exchanged before the voices began moving toward the kitchen. Soon, the unmistakable shape filled the doorway.


Carl pressed in past him and moved to the cabinets.

“Jesus,” Negan said, “Y’all get robbed?”

Rick turned to see what the man was looking at. Nearly every cabinet and drawer in the room was open. Warmth crept up his face.

As Carl went around closing everything and putting everything back in place, Negan stepped into the room.

“How’s that bed, Rick?”

“Negan,” Rick warned, stepping back and adjusting Judith on his hip to actively draw the other man’s attention to her. It was low to use his daughter this way, Rick knew, but he didn’t have anything else. Negan wouldn’t try anything with Judith there.

But Negan stepped forward again, and Rick tensed up.
“I was talking about Judith’s bed, Rick.” Negan said softly.

Rick’s shifted, set his jaw. “It’s fine,” he hissed.

“Really?” Negan’s eyes dipped to the toiling girl in Rick’s arms, who was so tired she’d reverted to an infant and was putting on no airs for their guest. “Doesn’t look like it, Rick. Mind if I hold this little princess? I just gotta get me some Judith time in.”

Even as Rick was rigidly shaking his head, Negan was pulling the irritable girl away from him and into his considerable embrace.

“Just a cranky little thing today, aren’t you, sweetheart? Someone needs a nap, huh? Not just talking about your pops either.”

Rick cut his eyes at him.

“Yeah, she does,” Carl said, setting their waters on the table and moving in to take his sister from Negan. “I was just about to put her down.” Rick ignored the pointed glance.

“Well, little lady, it was good seeing you. God, you’re just the cutest thing since miniature muffins. Sorry you’re having a bad day. Big brother’s gonna fix you up good.” His soft eyes followed Judith as Carl carried her out of the kitchen.

Rick couldn’t help lamenting their departure as well. Now they were alone. He felt oddly naked without Judith in his arms, like he’d lost a final line of defense.

On the table, was a plate of oddly shaped cookies. While reaching for his water, Negan noticed it and grabbed one without asking.

“You make these, Rick? Shit, you little homemaker.” He smiled wolfishly and took a bite.

In fact, Daryl had brought the cookies on his last visit. The hunter had been staying with Carol in The Kingdom and she’d been teaching him to bake.

“Holy shit. These are tough as bricks, Rick. What, did you substitute some major ingredient for cement? Jesus… and bitter too? Homemaker you are not, Grimes. No, Sir.” Despite his obvious revulsion, Negan seemed determined to finish chewing the piece in his mouth. Whether it was out of good manners or having no place to spit it out, Rick wasn’t sure.

In truth, he’d thought something similar when he tried one, but actually had spit his out, Carl too. It was why the plate was hardly touched. Still, they kept it around because it reminded them of their friend. And although the cookies were bitter and tough as bricks, the thought of the gentle, reserved hunter baking them was actually very sweet.

"How's Daryl?" Negan asked, as if reading his thoughts.

Rick looked up. “Uh, he’s good. He’s good.”

He never knew how to respond when Negan brought up Daryl. Just because the Saviors had stopped searching for him, didn’t mean that they would just turn a blind eye on the off chance they passed him on the side of the road one day. Or if they knew his location. Rick really didn’t know the specific parameters of the agreement and was always cagey when the subject of his friend was broached.

Rick waited.

“Well, how is your bed, Rick? Since we’re on it. Never told me how you liked the new one.” Negan moved closer. “You using it?”

Rick tried to ignore the dip in the man’s voice that reminded him of just how much he’d used the bed last night. “Yeah,” he said, maintaining a level tone.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s good, Rick.” Negan’s eyes trailed over his face. “I like when you do as I say. When you take care of yourself.”

Rick didn’t move, though every instinct told him to. He stayed as still as he could. When he swallowed, drawing Negan’s eyes to his throat, he thought the man swayed forward. He stood his ground.

Then, as smoothly as Negan had closed in, he drifted away again, leaving a cool space between them.

The sounds of footsteps on the stairs carried from the next room.

While they sat in the kitchen, Carl read in the living room. Rick loved him for it. For nearly an hour they talked and the young man never left.

It was business mostly: recent projects, new materials, nearby herds that needed thinning. They were just two leaders discussing the state of their territories—Negan’s territory. Rick told him about one of the unused houses they were turning into a library, and Negan described a new settlement he’d scouted and briefly mentioned the ice-cream machine they’d finally gotten up and running. If it bothered him that Carl lingered like a shadow in the next room, he didn’t show it.

When it was time to start dinner, Rick rose to his feet. Negan got the hint and wordlessly followed him to the door. There they stood for a moment until it looked like the Savior was about to attempt some kind of goodbye, but then a small, high-pitched voice called down from above.

“Negan!”

Both men turned to see Carl and Judith descending the staircase. The little girl held her big brother’s hand as she carefully took on one step at a time.

“Look who’s up!” Negan beamed. “Hey, sweetheart.”

Fresh from her nap, Judith was still groggy, but overall much more tolerant than she’d been earlier and now ready to take visitors.

“Where are you going?” she called down.

“Gotta go, sweetie,” Negan said.

She frowned. “Why?”
“Well, I’m…” Negan’s large eyes drifted over to Rick. “I’m busy.”

“Negan’s gotta work, baby,” Rick jumped in. “He can’t stay.”

“Can he eat dinner with us, Daddy?”

“Baby, he…”

The instant her foot touched down on the bottom of the stairs, Judith yanked free of her brother’s hold and wrapped her arms around Negan’s legs.

“Please stay. Please. Please.”

“Sweetie, I’d love to but I gotta go.” Smiling down at her, he ran a large hand over her curly head. “I’ll be back real soon.”

"When?"

“Few days. Can you wait ‘til then? I’ll bring you something, how’s that? Would you like that?”

“Yeah!”

“Alright, but you gotta be good for your dad while I’m gone, alright? None of that fussing like earlier. You gotta be sweet to him, can you do that?”

She nodded up at him.

“And no beating up on your brother either, okay? I know it’s easy but you gotta hold back a little.”

She giggled infectiously, and Negan ran a hand through her hair one last time before pulling away and reaching for the door.

“I mean it. Guy’s sensitive.”

Carl swatted him and Negan swatted him back. “You be good too.”

“Negan,” Rick said as the Savior began to exit.

Hazel eyes drifted back to him.

“Stay.”

So Negan stayed for dinner.

It was starting to get dark outside as they all sat in the living room. Carl, sprawled on the floor, was telling a long joke he’d learned from a Savior named Joe. It was crude and sounded like something Shane would’ve appreciated. Rick shook his head as he listened and was glad that Judith had fallen asleep. Full and content, the girl was curled up on the couch between them, her curly head mushed against Negan’s side and one leg in Rick’s lap. Negan’s thumb stroked her shoulder absently while
he listened to the bad joke. As he huffed softly to himself, his smiling eyes gleamed in the candlelight. Rick looked away.

When Carl finished, Rick applauded and Negan gave a deep, rolling laugh. Carl rose up and bowed, scooped up his dozing sister, and went to put her to bed. That left Rick and Negan alone again.

“Welp!” Negan clapped his hands to his thighs. “Thank you for the meal, Rick. Gotta say, after what you did to that cookie, I was a little fucking scared.”

The toddler had been out of sight all of a minute and already the cursing had started up again.

“But you surprised me, Rick. Not bad. Not fucking bad.”

Rick smiled wryly, nodded.

"Guess it’s time for me to mosey on.” Negan began to rise up, but stopped. “Unless you’re up for a game, Rick…”

Rick gave him a look that brought on more of that lush laughter.

“Another time then.”

Through the window, Rick watched the leader of the Saviors gather his men and head for the gate. He felt Carl come up behind him.

“Thank you,” Rick said after a while. “For… stayin’.”

“It’s alright, Dad.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t need—“

“I know.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s alright, Dad.”

They stood in silence a moment more, watching the last of the Saviors clear out, then Carl spoke up.

“Did he say something about a game?”
Down the Drain

Chapter Summary

Rick's ring falls down the garbage disposal.

“What about the others?”

Rick was washing Judith’s dish when his ring slid off his finger and rolled down the garbage disposal.

He cursed and for a while only stood there, staring into the black pit. Finally, he turned the water off. He reached for the drain. He stopped.

He reached again. He stopped again.
He shook his hand out.

On the third try, he reached down and, like before, his hand trembled worse the closer it got to the drain. He pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” Daryl asked, coming up behind him.

Massaging the bridge of his nose, Rick waved toward the sink. “Just…dropped my ring down the damn garage disposal.”

There was a deep thoughtful sound and Rick felt the other man brush past him. He opened his eyes to see the hunter reaching with one bulky arm down into the disposal. A moment later, his hand emerged holding the ring. Rick took it.

“Look spooked about somethin’,” Daryl observed, leaning against the counter.

“No, it’s just…” Rick slid the ring back on. His hand was still shaking a little so he put it down on the countertop.

Daryl didn't know all of what happened, and that was for the best. Still, the concern in his blue eyes as he watched Rick in his quiet way made Rick feel like he could tell him this.

“There was that … that Savior who came around…”

“Simon,” Daryl said.

Rick nodded. It occured to him that with Daryl at Sanctuary all that time, he'd likely seen Simon as much as Rick had.

“Well, one of those times, he was fixin’ the disposal and had me check inside for a jam while it was runnin’.”

“What, with…your hand?”

“Yeah,” Rick huffed a laugh. “Guess I’m still a little shook up.”

Daryl didn’t find it funny. “Why’d he do somethin’ like that?”

“I don’t know,” Rick sighed, leaning on the counter. “He just… I don’t know.”

“What if it cut on? What if it cut on with your hand down there?”

Rick shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t think it would’ve, tell you the truth. I think he just liked … messin’ with me. Dominance thing, I guess.” Rick always knew Simon’s type.

Daryl was silent for a while and Rick felt his eyes on him.

Although he’d told Carl about how Simon would use maintenance days to pull him aside, he’d never told him that story. Never told anyone. Somehow he felt safe telling Daryl though. Maybe enough time had passed, or maybe he just always felt like he didn’t have to guard himself around the other man. It felt good to say it to someone.

“Hell, I almost pissed myself, I was so scared,” Rick admitted and really did laugh then, his shoulders shaking with it, his eyes beginning to sting.

He turned to Daryl but the way the man was staring back at him made his smile melt away and his
laughter turn hollow.

“That’s fucked up,” Daryl said after a while.

Rick looked away, down the drain again. The stinging in his eyes worsened. Maybe enough time hadn’t passed.

Daryl’s hand moved to cover his own. Slowly the weight in Rick’s belly eased.

They didn’t move from that position for a while, even when they heard the front door open. Carl back from the Sanctuary, likely. Rick sniffed and wiped one hand over his eyes so the boy wouldn’t see.

He trusted Daryl not to say anything to Carl, not only because Rick wouldn’t want that, but because he was a man of few words. Rick knew very little of what went on in Daryl’s imprisonment beyond the pieces Carl had told him. Daryl was very close-mouthed about the whole thing. As Rick looked at his friend, he wondered how many new scars the man carried.

“Y’all need a minute?”

Rick turned and saw the large mass of Negan filling the kitchen doorway.

In his arms was a tray of what looked like planters, and on his face was a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

Negan glanced downward and Rick realized Daryl still had his hand on him. Instinctively, Rick pulled it away.

“Negan,” he said, clearing his throat and stepping forward.

The Savior regarded him only an instant before his eyes were on Daryl.

*Daryl.*

Rick turned to his friend. Daryl didn’t look as alarmed by the unexpected visit as Rick thought he should. In fact, the hunter stared back at Negan cool and steady. He was a free man.

“Negan,” Rick said again.

“Just dropping this off,” the Savior said with that same frozen smile. “Don’t let me interrupt.” He moved to the table but Rick quickly met him.

“I’ll take it,” Rick gathered the tray of planters in his arms.

Carl came in then. The tall young man had a tray too. “Hey, Dad, did you see the— Daryl!” When Carl saw the third man in the kitchen, he set down his tray and went to embrace him while Rick and Negan stood off silently.

“We found a bike. You gotta see it,” Carl said. Forgetting the other two, the young man eagerly lead Daryl from the room.

“Be right back,” Daryl murmured to Rick, though his eyes never left Negan’s.

In the strained silence that followed, Rick looked down at the tray in his arms and noticed that each planter was labeled.

“Dwight said you guys were working on an herb garden or something,” Negan said. “Thought you might have a place for ’em.”

“Oh,” Rick said.

They’d just set it up recently. Rick had let Judith help him plant them, but so far none had germinated. In each of the small planters in Rick’s arms, a small green seedling was sprouting.

“We got like six greenhouses,” Negan said. “Fucking crowded as shit.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Yeah, like I said. We got plenty. Might as well start distributing some of it.

Gabriel’s words once more echoed in his head. “What about the others?”

He wondered if any of the other communities had been gifted some of the herbs. He considered asking, but Negan was already moving for the door.


Without a word, Negan left.

It was days earlier when the two men sat alone in the church, Gabriel insistent and pressing, Rick defensive and unmoving.

“What about the others?” Gabriel had asked.

Alexandria was doing well, very well. Although Rick couldn’t say as much for the other communities, they were on good terms with Sanctuary and it wouldn’t take much to change that.

“I need to worry about my people. That’s all I can do. Might be able to work something out for Hilltop, but the rest… they’ll have to figure something out on their own.”

"You can help them, Rick."

“It’s not my responsibility. I can’t save everyone.”

“What if you can?” The priest persisted. “He listens to you. He’ll hear you out.”

“You’re wrong. It’s not like that. Whatever… influence you think I have, I… I don’t have it. I can’t change anything.”

“Rick, you already have.” Gabriel proceeded to list off the ways: the guards, the physicians, the maintenance, the gifts, until Rick was waving to indicate he’d heard enough.

Gabriel had it wrong. He took the gestures as signs of Negan’s humanity, evidence of his care for Alexandria—his care for Rick.

The priest couldn’t know that Negan had already made it clear what he wanted, and it wasn’t
anything so tender or noble.

Still, the absence of Lucille, the food crates, the bed for Judith, the bed for Rick—even Rick knew it couldn’t all just be atonement for Simon, guilt for Glenn and for Abraham, though he’d let himself believe that for a while.

As if reading Rick’s thoughts, Gabriel asked, “What about Carl?”

Rick knew where this was going.

“He’s good with a gun,” he said, staring at his hands. “And strong. Negan was smart to want him.”

“I’ve never heard of a Savior who didn’t live in Sanctuary.”

“He’s the Alexandria Liaison.” But even as he said it, he knew how it sounded.

When he finally looked up, Gabriel was watching him plainly.

Of course Rick had thought about it. He’d always just assumed that his son had refused to live in Sanctuary. If anyone could refuse Negan, it was Carl after all. But now, as Rick looked back over a year and half of dealings with the obdurate man, it seemed obvious that Negan had made the call. So he’d given Rick’s son a gun, a title, and the express instruction to be his eyes over Alexandria.

And who better than Carl, the only one Negan could trust… with Rick.

“Oh, fuck me,” he mumbled miserably.

Although Negan continued to visit, he lacked his usual pep. After two weeks of meandering along the fringes of town like a lonely hobo, the Savior leader finally agreed to sit down with him.

On the porch, Negan sat quietly. Beside him, Rick didn’t go into detail but hit the major points: Sofia, the prison, Merle, the Claimers. After so much had gone between them, they couldn’t help the bond they’d formed in the last few years. Still, it wasn’t so different from what Rick had with Carol or Glenn or Maggie. True, it wasn’t just friendship. It was…

“Family,” Rick said, still searching. “Daryl’s like…my brother.” That was it. Hesitantly Rick lifted his gaze, but Negan wasn’t looking at him.

Maybe Rick hadn’t needed to say all that. Maybe he’d read it wrong. Maybe Negan was just having a rough couple of weeks and it had nothing to do with walking in on Rick and Daryl like that. Still, Rick couldn’t deny the weight that left his shoulders now that he’d said it. Whether it mattered or not, he couldn’t go on letting Negan think that he and Daryl were anything more than what they were.

After a long time, Negan finally said, “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Oh.” Negan stood up and moved to leave.

“Negan.”

The Savior turned around, eyes clear, waiting.
“You could stay— for dinner, I mean.” Rick stood up as well. His hands moved simultaneously from his pockets to his hips to his hair. “I mean, Carl’s cookin’ tonight. Judith’s been…been askin’ about you. I think Enid’s on her way… You could—if you wanted, I mean— you could… stay.”

Negan stared at him. After a while, his lips spread into a smile, and Rick thought he looked as unlike a wolf as he’d ever seen him.

“I’d like that.”
Some nights when Rick can't sleep he goes to Judith's room.

Negan was participating more today than he had in a long time. The Savior always hated going through the inventory and orders, moaning all the while and even throwing a wrench in the process when he could. But today his mood was light. He didn’t bat away Rick’s questions and even asked as few of his own, surprising Rick with how engaged he was with the answers.
Maybe Rick had let himself be distracted with how smoothly things were going. Over time, he became more aware of the long arm over the back of the couch and wondered when the distance between them had closed.

Negan reached over Rick’s lap to draw his attention to an item, which he said they were overstocked on and didn’t need. As he slowly pulled away, he grazed Rick’s arm. Negan seemed to keep finding more items to draw Rick’s attention to and his voice went softer. Soon, he was addressing his comments directly into Rick’s ear and Rick found that if he turned his head even slightly, they would touch.

“Uh, that’s… all today,” Rick said, feeling restless.

“That’s all? There’s like four more pages. Thought you wanted this done.”

Rick closed the binder. “It’s enough today. We did a lot. We’ll finish another time.”

“Something wrong?”

“No, no. Tired.”

“You’re not sleeping?”

“No, it’s fine. Just last night…”

“The bed?”

“No, no,” Rick said gently. "Bed’s fine. Judith’s just been up… cryin’ at night. Mollers comin’ in.”

“Sure you’re good?” Negan’s hand came up and brushed against Rick’s temple. Rick thought he was pushing the hair from his face as he sometimes did. “You’re sweating, Rick.”

Rick swallowed. “It’s hot.”

Negan watched him. “If you want,” he said. “I could…”

“I think it’s enough today.”

Negan withdrew his hand.

At the gate, Rick stiffened as the Savior leader drew near him again.

“We could finish that tomorrow?” The Savior said, nodding to the binder.

Rick glanced down. “Uh. I gotta do a run tomorrow actually. Been a while. Might be gone a couple days.”

“A run,” Negan repeated, then nodded slowly. “Okay. Where to?”

Rick thought a moment. “Uh, a little gas station a few miles out by the strip. Been avoiding it a while cause it was overrun, but it’s clear now. Gonna check it out.”

Negan nodded again. “Okay. Guess I’ll see you in a couple days then.” He hovered a moment longer before finally pulling away and climbing into the large vehicle waiting for him.

In the truck behind Negan’s, Rick caught Dwight’s eye. Rick nodded at the blonde, not expecting anything. In typical fashion, Negan’s second only stared back, though his thin mouth twitched briefly
like he was restraining the urge to spit as the truck rolled by Rick.

Lately, Dwight had only become more obvious with his disdain for him. Although Rick couldn’t say what he’d done to the man (beyond knowing Daryl), he’d come to accept it. They only had to deal directly with each other on pickup days anyway, and even then, Negan was always there to defuse any possible tension. Rick couldn’t bring himself to dwell on it. It was just one of those things.

When the Saviors were gone, Rick closed the gate, watching the trucks vanish down the road.

He thought of Shane. It was always the oddest times when he was reminded of his oldest friend. Shane had run through countless women and didn’t hesitate to regale Rick with the details, even when he didn’t ask. He called them “teases” when he thought the women only strung him along with no intention of putting out. Like they owed him that for the time he’d invested in them.

Negan had made it very clear what he wanted, and Rick had only given him sporadic, conflicting signals. He could imagine how frustrating it was. How Negan hadn’t lost patience altogether and moved on, Rick didn’t know. Still, he felt somewhat relieved. While he was grateful for the time the lie had bought him, he couldn't deny he was comforted by the idea that Negan would keep coming back.

The nightmares came less frequently now but were no less vivid. When it got bad, Rick would get up, change into a dry set of clothes and creep into the next room. It was bad tonight.

He used to go to Carl’s room when he couldn’t sleep, back when the boy was away all the time. Those long nights, Rick would lay on the cool, empty sheets, and feel comforted by the lingering scent of his son. Although Rick worried less about Carl now, he still had trouble sleeping some nights, and it was with Judith where he found peace.

There was a time when Rick dreaded his daughter's room, when even the thought would makes something twist in his gut. Time and refurnishing had changed that now but Rick still didn’t like to be shut inside.

Cuddled around the small girl like she was a bonfire in a winter storm, Rick was falling asleep when he heard something. It was dull like the sound of the house foundation shifting. Rick ignored it. As he started to drift off again, there was another sound, clearer now and closer.

He turned to the door, squinting through the dark.

He could’ve sworn he left the door open.

He blinked a few times, willing his eyes to adjust.

No, the door was open but someone was standing in the threshold.

Rick shut his eyes and pressed his face into Judith’s hair.

“Rick,” Simon said, whispering like he’d done then. *Don’t want to wake your baby girl, do we?*

Pulling the small body closer into him, Rick focused on his breathing and waited for it to pass.

The dreams rarely followed him there.
The apparition moved further into the room, and Rick knew it was by the bed. He grit his teeth and concentrated. It would pass.

“Rick.” Something nudged his leg and Rick turned instinctively. When he looked to the foot of the bed, he saw that it wasn’t Simon.

Slowly Rick rose up, careful not to wake his daughter. When they were standing across from each other, Rick could make out, in the bluish moonlight pooling in through the window, that the pistol wasn’t drawn. It didn’t matter; it was there.

“Not here,” he said. The words fell from his lips like they’d been waiting there for months; like every time he’d looked over his shoulder or glanced beyond Negan and caught that icy blue fixed on him, the words had been readying themselves on his tongue.

Dwight wasn’t a very large man, a little taller but no bigger than the Alexandrian. Still, Simon hardly ever used his size to subdue Rick. He just knew where to hit him.

“I’ll go… with you.” Rick spoke softly. “Just… not here.”

Rick thought he saw something shift in the gleaming eyes then. The icy stare flicked to the sleeping girl and then back. Then the Savior jerked his head toward the door.

Rick hesitated a moment, jarred by the eerily familiar scene. Right now, Judith was within arm’s reach, but if Rick moved to the door, he would no longer be the buffer between her and Negan’s second-in-command. He shook the thought and moved, feeling an ache with every step he took away from the child.

When he passed the threshold into the hallway, Rick was hit in the face with a wall of cool air that seemed to flow through him. The relief didn’t fade even as Dwight nodded to the next room. Rick lead the way without complaint, glancing back briefly to be sure the other man was following.

In the master bedroom, Rick stood by the bed, waiting for Dwight to make the move.

The knife was between the wall and the mattress, where Rick had placed it months ago.

But Dwight was too far. The blonde lingered in the doorway like he was waiting for something.

Simon never cared if Rick undressed. He didn’t know if Dwight was the same. Rick gauged him a moment then tugged the t-shirt over his head and tossed it aside. Now bare-chested, Rick only stood a moment, feeling the silence compressing his skull. Dwight still made no move and Rick’s fingers twitched idly at his sides. If he went for the knife now, Dwight only needed to draw his gun and he’d have Rick easily. He needed to lure the Savior in, distract him, get him on the bed if necessary.

Still, the blonde wouldn’t come forward and seemed to be growing impatient. They’d get to the bed eventually, Rick guessed. Resolving himself, he reached for the hem of his boxers.

“Whoa, whoa,” Dwight said, raising his hands. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Rick blinked at the other man, frozen with his thumbs hooked in the elastic waistband and boxers tugged half-way down his hips.

“You don’t need to change your fucking underwear. Just get dressed and let’s go.” Dwight kicked Rick’s boots toward him and turned around, looking exasperated.

For a while, Rick only stared at the other man’s back as the pounding in his ears slowed and faded.
They waited for the patrol team to pass then climbed the wall. It was very much like how Rick had seen Carl lead Daryl and the others out of the settlement when they fled the Savior search team.

Outside, a truck was hidden in the trees.

The drive was long and Dwight wouldn’t speak to him, though Rick was still too rattled to try to engage him anyway. His eyes darted furtively between the pistol on the man’s belt and searching the space for any other potential weapons. His mind ran through various scenarios, all ending dangerously; He couldn’t do much with his target at the wheel.

Still, if Dwight meant him harm, he would’ve bound him, incapacitated him somehow. The man just stared ahead, rigid and silent, only barking once at Rick not to try shit when they’d first got in the truck and later to get out when they arrived at their destination.

Rick didn’t recognize the plot where they stopped. Dwight waited for him outside the car. When Rick didn’t move but only looked warily around the dark woods, the Savior pulled his gun out and pointed it at him. Rick got out.

The gnarled branches blotted out the moonlight as they moved through the woods and Rick stumbled once, unable to see the ground.

Dwight dragged him up by the collar and shoved him ahead.

The Savior had put his gun away but stayed behind him as they moved through the woods. It was wise. Although it might not have been smart for Rick to try anything in the dark and without a weapon of his own, he kept his wits about him. He had no idea what they were doing there but if things went south, Rick would need to grab Dwight’s pistol and get himself out of there. During the long drive, he’d tried to keep track of the turns and felt reasonably confident that he could find his way back if he needed to.

They’d been walking for a while and Rick was memorizing every curve of the path, when he stumbled again. From the shadows, a legless walker lunged out and grabbed his wrist. In an instant, Dwight caved in the creature’s head with his gun. As Rick stared, slightly stunned, Dwight dragged him once more to his feet. Rick nodded at the other man in thanks, but Dwight was moving ahead. Rick turned and realized they’d reached what must’ve been their destination.

It was a squat, rundown house right in the middle of the woods. All the shattered windows were dark and it looked abandoned, but Rick wouldn’t doubt that there was something still moving inside.

As Rick watched, Dwight approached the door and did a pattern of knocks.

“You’re fucking late,” said the man who promptly opened the door. The armored stranger then looked to Rick. “Dwight, what the fuck?”

The Savior shoved through. “Shut the fuck up and move.”

Seeing nothing else to do, Rick followed after him. The man, whom Rick didn’t recognize, closed and barred the door behind them, shaking his head.

Dwight moved through the house as if he’d done it many times before. Rick could do nothing but follow after him, stumbling occasionally in the unfamiliar space. They finally came upon a large trap
door in a back room and Dwight lifted it to reveal stairs leading down.

With a jerk of his head, the Savior indicated for Rick to go first.

Hesitant but undeniably curious, Rick did. As he carefully descended, everything became pitch black except for a sliver of light at the bottom.

When Rick finally reached the base of the steps he realized that the light was coming from a door. Faint voices were coming from the other side. Once more, Dwight came up behind him and did the knock.

There was a sound of the something coming unlatched and suddenly Rick was being shoved forward.

Rick staggered into a small candle-lit room. As his eyes adjusted, he saw it was filled wall to wall with people, all staring back at him. Rick went from surprise to confusion as he took in the familiar faces.

He’d been wrong.

“Rick.”

A few people stood up from the table in the middle of the room.

“Dwight, what did you do?” Someone said.

“What the hell, Dwight?” Came a shout from someone else.

Ignoring them, Dwight took Rick by the arm and dragged him forward. “Tell them,” he spat. “Tell them the truth.”

“Dwight,” Michonne warned.

“I’m tired of waiting,” the Savior snarled at her then turned back to Rick. “Tell them you can’t do it!”

Rick didn’t know what was going on. Overwhelmed by the sight of them all there, he could only stare around the room. He hadn’t seen many of them in a long time, certainly not all together like this. Some, he didn’t recognize at all.

All he could think as he took in the room was that he’d been wrong. They hadn’t stopped planning. They’d only hidden away.

“Tell them you can’t make him stop.”

“Enough, Dwight,” It was Morgan now.

Daryl was standing up now.

“Y’all act like we got all the time in the world,” Dwight addressed the whole group. “But every day, he’s getting stronger. Gathering more people, more guns! Only a matter of time before he catches on. And when it happens, we’re all done—not just me. And I’ve been watching them.” He pointed at Rick. “It’s not helping shit. He isn’t getting any closer.”

“Dwight, calm down.”

“Tell them!” The Savior barked at Rick. “Tell them you can’t do it!”
Dwight was shouting in his face but his voice was fading out. Soon Rick didn’t hear him.

He’d been wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Back in classes so there may be some delays ahead. Thanks for the patience and I hope you enjoyed!
Chapter Summary

In the basement of the shack, Rick learns what the others have been up to without him.

Dwight had been shouting at him, questioning him, accusing him. No sooner had he stepped into Rick’s space than the scarred man was being yanked away.

Rick turned to see Daryl pinning the Savior lieutenant to the wall, his thick forearm shoved into the skinny neck. When it seemed like Dwight had settled down, from lack of oxygen or something else, the hunter backed off of him. Rolling out his shoulders, Daryl nodded to Rick before taking his seat again.

Morgan came forward. Rick, who was still too confused for words, only embraced the man he hadn’t seen in several months. The shock and anger Rick had met upon first stumbling into the room cooled some as people nodded to Rick in greeting. He couldn’t help noticing the somber air that remained in the room.

“What are y’all doin’?” Rick asked, as Morgan stepped away.

Rick’s eyes traveled the room and he saw Gabriel standing by the wall. The priest nodded when their eyes met

“You’ve all been…been meetin’ here?”

“Well, this isn’t all of us,” Morgan said, his eyes passing over the group as well. “Carol’s been camping out by sanctuary, keeping an eye on things,”

“Carl too,” Michonne added.

Rick looked at her. “Carl?” He gaped. “Carl’s a part of this?”

They all glanced around at each other.

“Not exactly,” Morgan said. “Your son is interested in finding a more peaceful end to this.”

“He isn’t alone,” Gabriel spoke up. “Violence isn't the only way out of this.”

At the table, Sasha snorted.

Morgan ignored her. “Your son seems to think that Negan can change.”

Silence fell over the room.

“What about you?” Rick asked the man, whom he’d known longer than anyone there. “What do you think?”
Morgan’s arms flexed around his chest. “Doesn’t matter what I think. This needs to end, Rick. You know it does.”

Rick eyed the armor Morgan wore. He didn’t recognize it, nor the hard lines in his face. He wondered what had happened in the recent months to turn the once peaceful man.

“So, what’s Carl’s part in all this?” Rick gestured to the room.

“Carl’s our eyes and ears on the inside,” Maggie spoke up. “He’s been feeding us information about the Saviors’ movements, new communities, weapons. Mostly, he stays close to Negan and keeps us updated on his plans.”

Rick considered this a moment. “Y’all got him,” he said, glancing back at Dwight. “He knows Sanctuary. He knows Negan. What do you need Carl for?”

The room fell silent once more.

“Dwight hasn’t been able to get as close to Negan as we’d hoped,” Maggie said at last, looking troubled.

Rick huffed. “Isn’t he his second-in-command?”

“He tells me to be some place and I go,” Rick turned to the bitter voice. Dwight’s jaw was tight and his eyes downcast. “But he doesn’t tell me his plans ’til we’re damn near on the site. Some times he goes off places and doesn’t say anything. Since Simon, he isn’t so trusting I guess.”

The pale eyes slowly rose up and Rick noticed for the first time the dark sockets, and the vivid blue veins beneath thin, pallid skin. Dwight looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks. Rick considered the constant strain of working within arms reach of a man he meant to overthrow, a man who would burn him alive at the slightest scent of disloyalty. Rick couldn’t help the small amount of pity he felt suddenly for Savior lieutenant.

Still, the idea that Negan kept Carl closer than his own appointed Right Hand struck something in Rick.

“Most everything we know about Sanctuary, we owe to Dwight, but what we know of Negan is all from Carl,” Maggie said, drawing Rick’s attention back to her. “He took a huge risk joining the Saviors, but because of him, we now have valuable information we can use to outmaneuver them. He’s our path to Negan.”

“One of them,” Michonne commented, and Rick caught her eye.

“What,” Rick huffed dazedly. “Y’all got more double agents?” Next they’d tell him half of Sanctuary was in on it. With everything that had happened tonight, he wasn’t sure he’d be surprised.

Maggie came around the table and clasped Rick by the shoulders. She wore a tentative smile. “You, Rick.”

“Me?” He almost laughed. “I’m not… this is the first I’ve heard of all this. Still not sure I know what this is.”

“You’ve been more help than you know, Rick,” Michonne said, coming up beside the other woman. “By keeping Negan’s attention elsewhere, Sanctuary defenses are down.”

“With so much of the Saviors’ resources and manpower going to Alexandria, they won’t see us
coming,” Morgan added.

Rick looked between their stern, earnest faces, all half-shrouded in shadow. They seemed completely convinced of what they were saying to him.

He turned to Gabriel by the wall. “And you…you knew ‘bout all this?”

A pained look passed over the priest’s face. He looked down.

“It was important that you didn’t know, Rick,” Maggie said, drawing his attention once more back to her. “We needed you to stay as clean as possible. And whatever you’re doing with Negan, it’s working. We don’t want to interfere.”

“What I’m doing with—What do you think I’m doin’ with him?” Rick’s eyes traversed the room. All the faces were watching him intently, expectantly. All except Daryl, who’d been sitting silently at the table throughout the proceedings. The hunter’s expression hadn’t changed since they’d started. He only watched and listened. Whatever happened, Daryl wouldn’t fault him for it.

“What do you need me to do?” Rick finally asked.

Maggie’s hands tightened for an instant on his shoulders. Her blue eyes flashed in a way that looked almost manic in the hard shadows. “Carl wanted us to wait before we made a move. He wanted us to be sure.” She spoke fast in her urgency. “Tara found a community of fighters outside the grid and they have guns and numbers and they want to beat the Saviors. We found another community that managed to keep out of Savior detection, so we’ve more than doubled our numbers. With a little help from Alexandria when the time comes, we think we can really take them.”

Rick swallowed, piecing it together. “So,” he said slowly. “Y’all want me to get Alexandria ready to fight.”

There was some exchanging of looks from the group.

“No,” Maggie said at last. “No, we don’t need that. We can mobilize everyone when it’s time. We just want to know first, Rick.” She licked her lips. “Do you think you can end this without war?”

For a long time, Rick stared at her.

“I fucking told you!” Dwight threw up his arms and rounded on them. “He can’t do it. We need to move now.”

“Easy,” Maggie said, shooting a look past Rick.

“I’m tired of waiting! Every day Negan gets closer. I can feel him watching my every fucking move. I swear he knows—he knows! We have to go! We have to—”

“Dwight,” Michonne warned, and the man bit back his tongue. After a moment, the brown eyes returned to Rick. “We need an answer,” She said softly.

Rick stared from one to the other, then around the room. Everyone was watching him intently. “I could…I could try,” Rick croaked at last.

It didn’t seem to be the answer they wanted. Only Gabriel looked hopeful.

“How long?” It was an armored man with long graying dreadlocks and a stately voice.

Rick stared at him, not understanding the question.
“How long do you need, Rick?” Maggie elaborated, with an effort at care.

“I don’t…I don’t know. I need… I need some time.”

“How much time?” Michonne asked now, stepping closer.

Rick opened his mouth, closed it, ran a hand through his hair.

He didn’t know. He didn’t even have a plan. He’d only been dropped into this tonight. He felt like he was stuck in cement while the room was spinning around him.

“I don’t… a—a month.”

“Too long,” the dreadlocked man said. “Unlike you, we’re still dealing with weekly pickups, and the Saviors only grow more unreasonable with their demands. I won’t sit by and watch any more of my men die senselessly.”

“And Hilltop is scraping by as it is,” Sasha chimed in. "They don't care if they leave us starving, as long as they get their tribute."

"A month is too long,” Maggie agreed. “Can you try for sooner, Rick?”

“Alright.” Rick shook his head clear. “Two weeks. Gimme two weeks.”

Maggie and Michonne looked at one another.

“Alright, Rick,” Maggie said, at last relinquishing her grip and smoothing her hands up and down Rick’s arms. “Alright. Two weeks.”

The spinning of the room slowed. Rick brushed his fingers over his pounding temples while the others spoke amongst themselves.

“Carl won’t like this,” someone said. “He didn’t want Rick involved. Said he was out of the whole thing if we tried to get Rick.”

“We won’t tell him then. We need him with us on this. If he stops keeping us updated on Negan’s plans, we’re as good as blind. Rick?”

Rick blinked and looked up to find a room of faces all staring at him.

“Rick, it’s best if Carl doesn’t learn you were here. Do you think you could keep this quiet?”

“Just ‘til it's over, Rick. It’s important he doesn’t know.”

“Could you do that, Rick?”

“It’s important, Rick.”

"Please, Rick."

Rick nodded.

While the meeting went on without them, Dwight drove Rick back to Alexandria. They rode in
silence again but it wasn’t anticipation and peaked adrenaline that muted Rick. He was drained.

When he got out of the truck and approached the wall he turned around. He thought he should say something to Dwight, but nothing came to him. Without a word, the Savior leaned over, pulled the passenger door shut, and drove off.

And so Rick had another secret to keep from his son.

“Dad!”

Rick blinked and turned to where Carl sat at the table. “What?”

“I said your name four times.”

“You did?” Rick was standing at the sink. He didn't know how long he'd been staring out the window.

“Well, what?”

“No, no. Fine. Just didn't really sleep last night, I guess. Hey, uh…” he cleared his throat. “Wanted to ask you somethin’…”

“Yeah?” Carl went back to cleaning his guns.

“What do you know about, uh…Negan’s wives?”

The young man looked up. “What about them?”

“I mean, I was just, uh, thinkin' bout it the other day. Wondered how it worked.” Rick appeared busy, putting up dishes. “Is it sort of a…forced thing, or…”

For a while, Carl didn’t answer and Rick could feel that perceptive eye watching him.

“Not really…forced,” Carl said at last, speaking measuredly. “It’s more…an arrangement.”

“What do you mean?” Rick asked, casual.

“Well, they… they all seem to like him, but they also…get something out of it like…I don’t know. I know one of the women has a sick mom and she gets taken care of.”

Rick nodded.

“Why?” Carl asked after a moment.

“Just curious.”

Rick needed more but was afraid that Carl would get suspicious if he kept asking about it. He’d made a promise not to let Carl find out he was in on it now. Still, it made things difficult when he needed information.
There was only one other person Rick could ask.

“So, do they have to… give him somethin'? Like a trade?”

Negan’s Right Hand hissed at him to hurry and sign the logbook.

Ever since Rick had learned that Dwight was on their side, he felt more inclined to talk to the scarred man. It was like he’d found a new ally in all this. And Rick needed one, certainly now that he couldn’t talk to Carl about it.

Yet Dwight was just as standoffish as always, if not more so now. He seemed antsy about them being seen together for too long and was determined to end their interactions as quickly as possible so as not to raise suspicion.

“Is it like a... a contract or—”

“Yeah, it’s called a fucking marriage contract,” Dwight snapped, gesturing again for Rick to hurry it along.

Distractedly, Rick’s eyes trailed down to the list of items in front of him, where they lingered a moment before he looked up again. “I mean…” he said, and Dwight's lips thinned to a line.

"That's all they give him? In return for...the things they need? Just the marriage—a piece of paper, that’s all they give Negan?”

Dwight jabbed a finger at the line where Rick needed to sign. When Rick signed, the Savior snatched the logbook from him. “They fuck,” he spat, then strode off toward the trucks.

Rick stared after him.
“Negan.”

Negan hummed, but didn’t look up from his work.

Rick cleared his throat. “Negan.”

Another idle hum. “Now why the fuck… see, this shit is why I can’t deal with that swamp community. Assholes keep trying to give us roadkill. Swear I told Joe damn near ten times now—we don’t take anymore goddamn possums.”

Negan brought his Sanctuary work there sometimes. Rick didn’t know why; it rarely had anything to do with Alexandria and the Savior usually just sat with it on his own, ignoring Rick entirely. He did so now as he sat on the porch bench. Meanwhile, Rick stood in the doorway trying to settle on one way to hold his body. “Negan,” he repeated, shifting his weight again.

Irritably Negan finally looked up. “What, Rick? What?”

Rick stared at him.

Negan stared back. "You want something?"

Rick blinked a few times, squinted his eyes.

Negan shrugged, shook his head.

Rick leaned against the doorframe angled his head and squinted harder.

Negan regarded the move. “You need glasses, Rick? The fuck are you doing?”

Rick huffed, straightened. “Negan,” he tried again. Maybe the man would hear it in his voice.

“Rick,” Negan mimicked the tone.

Sighing, Rick pressed his fingers in his eyes. How was this always so easy for Negan?

“You been hanging around that priest too much, Rick. You’re creeping me the fuck out.”

Rick huffed to himself as he heard the creak of Negan rising up from the bench.

“What is it? Feel sick?”

“No, no.”

“Someone bothering you?”

“No.”
“Is it Carl? Judith—Rick, is it Judith?”

“No, no. She’s fine. Everything’s…everything’s fine.” It wasn’t fine. People were going to die, people Rick loved, and all because he couldn’t seduce this man.

Dark boots stopped in his field of view. When Rick raised his head he almost laughed in the other man’s face. Those hazel eyes watched him so intently. There was such tenderness, such warmth there. It negated all the violence that was soon to come. Rick wished he could just tell him.

“I can’t… I can’t do this,” Rick admitted and did laugh.

Negan’s hand came up between them. Rick froze as a thick thumb swiped over his cheek. “Shit,” Rick hissed, flinching away to wipe his own face.

“What is it? Rick, what is it? Tell me. I’ll fix it, Rick. Whatever it is. Just tell me.”

Rick looked up again. Negan’s eyes were large and filled with all the colors of autumn. He felt a pull in his chest. He pressed up on his toes.

They stumbled into the house and fell back on the couch.


Rick was prepared. “Aaron and Eric have her ’til tomorrow. Carl’s on a run with Enid. Back in a week.”

Negan stared down at him. For a moment he looked like he could cry. “Oh, sweetie,” he said reverently. “Oh, sweetie.”

They crashed together again, all grasping hands, open mouths, and rushing breath.

In truth, ensuring that his kids would be elsewhere wasn’t all Rick had done to prepare for Negan. In the bathroom upstairs, while the Savior sat on the porch, Rick had bit down hard, hissing as he breached himself on fingers coated in kitchen oil. The sting was something he hadn’t felt in more than half a year.

“Oh, sweetie. Oh sweetie,” Negan was saying. “Oh, baby. Gonna be so careful… Gonna take such good care…fucking gentle, baby. Soft…”

Negan kept breaking off until his sentences were just disjointed words, and those became moans against Rick’s lips. But Rick could hardly focus anyway.

He’d never kissed like this. It felt new. It wasn’t just the bristly beard scraping not-unpleasantly against his mouth, but there was teeth and force and a thick rolling tongue that licked his insides and pulled his own into action. Rick felt now that the wolf in Negan hadn’t strayed far.

Still, Rick had to keep his head clear. He couldn’t lose sight of what he was doing there.

Negan was settling between his thighs, filling the gap with his own body, sliding a hand beneath the curve of Rick’s back to pull them even closer. Rick’s hands were lost in thick, slicked hair and had
managed to assist in divesting a leather jacket. Their limbs tangled together and Rick couldn’t keep track of whose limbs were whose.

“Oh, sweetie, oh sweetie, oh fuck…”

It was good. Rick thought he’d have to coach himself through this, thought he’d have to muster up the strength for every move, every breath. Yet here he was falling into Negan’s touch, breathing him in, being filled with him. They melted together like they’d been doing this all along. Every pickup, every side-room talk, every nudge and shove, it was all just versions of this. It was all Rick could do not to let it happen. It was right. It was good.

It was too good.

“Wait, wait—Negan.”

“What? What?”

“Wait…” No.

“What?”

Rick had to make it. It wouldn’t work if he didn’t make it.

“Ne…Negan.”

“Rick?”

It was too late.

Negan pulled away, eyes first large with alarm, then melting into something else. “Rick, jesus. Did you…”

As Rick came down, his muscles relaxed and his hips stopped moving. His heart was in his ears.

“Oh, no, Rick.” A laugh, deep and rich, rolled from Negan’s smiling lips. Rick felt the vibration of the man’s belly against his own. “Oh, no, sweetie. You didn’t. Baby, did you come?” He brought his hand up to Rick’s burning face.

“Just—don’t.” Rick said wearily as Negan laughed again, full and luxuriant. Rick didn’t have the energy to push the larger man off, and so lay limp as Negan kissed him again, now with more tenderness than hunger. Rick kissed him back.

This put a wrench in things.

“Oh, sweetie,” Negan purred, pulling away. “Oh sweetie, it’s been a long time, hasn’t it? Fuck, you been waiting so long. Been so patient. No wonder you been so fucking tense. Wound up like a goddamn spring…”

Trying to ignore the stickiness in his boxers, Rick considered the last time he’d worked tension off in that way. This new development with the others had kept him occupied.
“Just a ball of nerves, huh?” Negan cooed, eyes dancing over him. “I’m such a fucking idiot. Next time, you gotta tell me or I’m not gonna know, okay? Don’t wait so long. You gotta let Daddy know when you need it, okay, sweetie?”

The soft drawl of Negan’s voice stroked something in Rick’s chest and he felt himself give a nod. Despite himself, he was drawn in by the warm gaze, feeling cradled by it. It felt better than Rick thought possible giving himself over to the other man. Was this what it was to let Negan care for him?

Then the Savior was pulling away.

“Where—you’re goin’?” Rick croaked out.

“Gotta go.”

“Go?” Rick watched him reach for his boots, which he’d kicked off at some point. “Where? Why?”

“Long drive, Rick. Just me and Arat. I tell you what, lady’s got great music but she can’t sing worth a damn. Tries though, bless her heart.” He heaved a long sigh as he tugged on the first boot.

“You could,” Rick began. “You know you could…”

Negan eyed him sideways. “What, stay? Yeah fucking right,” he snorted. “If I stay, we’re fucking. That’s the only way it’s going down.” He tugged a knot into his laces. “That ain’t happening.”

Rick couldn’t help but laugh at that. “I’d have to agree to it, you know. Who said I wanted to?”

Negan looked for a moment like he would take the bait, but huffed and returned to his boots.

“Hey!” Rick kicked him in the back.

With a growl, Negan sat up and turned to him. “You want this?”

Rick shrugged and stared back at him plainly. “Thought it was obvious.”

Negan’s eyes trailed down Rick’s reclining body. He swayed ever so slightly closer but caught himself. “Fuck that,” he said, and went back to his laces.

“What?”

“No way. With what I’m working with and you… looking the way you do right now…” His eyes had another go on Rick’s body, and Rick himself looked down, searching for what he meant.

“No,” Negan snorted and started working at the second boot. “I’d wreck you.”

Rick meant to laugh but what came out was dry and a little breathless.

“Well, I—” he cleared his throat. “Well I can handle myself fine, last I checked.”

“Sweetie,” Negan’s large eyes rolled around to him. “You just creamed yourself not two minutes ago and I barely touched you. It’s too fast, Rick. Too fast.”

“We don’t have to… do that. We could just… sleep.” Rick couldn’t believe he was working so hard at this.

“I said no. Rick. I know you think you mean it, but I’ve seen how this shit goes. Too many times.
Starts out innocent. All it takes is one of us getting too close, someone brushing up against an arm, getting jammed up in a doorway—shit goes south real quick.”

Rick studied the man, who was diligently working at his laces now.

“Come on, Negan,” he drawled, leaning forward and letting his voice drop low. “If you’re worried about it, I promise I won’t take advantage of you.”

“Don’t joke.”

Rick threw up his arms and fell back. “What do I gotta say to convince you to stay?”

“Look,” Negan said. “I been wrong before. Crossed the line. Pushed it when I shouldn’t have. Maybe you don’t see it—God knows it took me a while—but I see it now, Rick. Shit doesn’t feel right. Not gonna…not gonna do that. Not yet.”

Rick stared at the other man a long time. “Did…Did Carl say somethin’?”

Negan faltered briefly in his lacing but didn’t look up.

“Negan.” Rick sat up on the couch. “He did. He said somethin’ to you.”

Rick thought back to the day he’d heard the two men arguing in the backyard and the bits he’d caught. That particularly striking “thinking with your dick,” that had come from none other than Rick’s own son. What if that wasn’t the only talk they’d had about Rick. What else had Carl said to Negan?

“It’s nothing, alright. Just drop it. Anyway, he didn’t say nothing that wasn’t true.”

“Negan. Tell me.”

“Look, he just…” Negan sighed. “He just said…that I was making things hard for you, that I wasn’t helping. He just said to…to take care of you.”

Rick stared.

“And I just don’t think us rushing into things is a good way of going about that.” As Rick watched voicelessly, Negan rose to his feet and strode to the door.

“Negan, wai—” The door slammed.

For a while after Negan left, Rick lay there on the couch, replaying the whole scene to the end. This set things back, that was certain. How far back, Rick couldn’t tell. He’d just have to try again, that’s all. But what if he’d spooked him? What if he’d pushed too hard and Negan stayed away again? Rick had already used up most of his two weeks just building himself up to do this. He couldn’t afford to let Negan pull another one of his month-long disappearing acts.

He needed more time.

As he rose to his feet and went for his jacket, Rick ran through all the things he’d say to Maggie, Morgan, and the others. There would be pushback for sure, more arguments, more of Dwight moaning and hissing about wastes of time. It didn’t matter. Rick would get them to delay the plan, no matter the cost. He had to.

He opened the door and froze. On the other side, Negan was standing still as a statue on the porch, like he hadn't moved from the spot since leaving. He looked confused, almost lost, like he wasn't
sure how he got there or what he meant to do.

“Negan?” Rick said, surprised and a little concerned.

Then the Savior blinked and seemed to become aware of his surroundings. All at once the lost look fell away and Negan looked at Rick like he knew exactly where he was, and what he meant to do.

Then they were both moving forward.

Negan kicked the door shut behind them. "I’m gonna stay, but—we’re not gonna—do anything, okay?"

“uh’huh.” Rick nodded hurriedly.

Joined at the lips they shuffled together back to the couch.

“Just gonna do—this, okay?” Negan said, and for all the time he took in getting those boots on, he shirked them off again without a thought. "Gonna— take it slow, okay, Rick? Not gonna—not gonna go too far—too fast. Okay?"

“Uh’huh.” More dazed nodding.

They fell onto the cushions, their bodies melting together once more. Rick spread his thighs to allow Negan to slide between them. They were locked together just like before and were like that for a while when Negan started speaking again.

“Rick,” Negan panted, pulling away only enough to speak.

“Huh?”

“Rick, what are— what are you doing?"

Still locked against Negan’s lips, Rick had begun unbuttoning his own shirt.

“Rick, we’re gonna—we’re gonna take it slow.”

“Uh’huh” Rick said, shrugging out of the button-up.

“Rick, what—what are you doing?” Negan asked as Rick began pulling up the hem of his undershirt now. “Rick, slow.”

“Uh’huh,” Rick said, tugging the t-shirt up over his head.

“Rick,” Negan moaned against his jaw. His hooded eyes watched Rick’s fingers work at the belt buckle. “Rick, we’re not doing that. We’re going slow, sweetie. Slow.”

Rick tugged the belt free.

“Rick…”

Rick unbuttoned his pants.

“Rick!” Suddenly Negan yanked away, leaving Rick leaning forward to chase his lips. “Baby, wait,
wait. We’re not doing anything like that tonight. Just this, okay. No need…no need for that, okay?”

“Negan,” Rick panted. “I said it’s okay. I want this. You don’t…you don’t need to worry. It’s fine. It’s good.” He reached for the other man.

“Jesus Christ,” Negan said, dodging out of his reach once more. “Maybe I’m not ready. You ever think of that? It’s too fucking fast, Rick.”

Rick stared up at the flushed and panting man, the understanding slowly seeping in like a sticky syrup.

“Why the rush, Rick?” Negan huffed, making an effort at sounding casual, but he was sweating obviously and there was a slight tremor in his voice. “We got…we got plenty of time here. Let’s just…let’s just enjoy this, huh? No need to push things.”

But time was just what Rick didn’t have. With some effort, he gave a nod.

“Don’t give me that look, Rick. Goddamn.” Negan settled back down on the couch, beside him now. Although they were touching, Rick could sense a new distance between them. “Where was all this months ago, huh? What happened to that stuffy little prude who wouldn’t come out of his room?” He tried a laugh but it was hollow and dry.

“Negan.”

“Now, when I’m trying to be good, all of a sudden you turn into this little wildcat. Jesus, Rick. Always find a way to drive me up the fucking walls. Goddamn.” He cursed again, voice softer now.

“Negan, listen.”

“Got me working so fucking hard, Rick.” A thumb traced absently along Rick's jaw. Hazel eyes followed the lazy path. "All the damn time, trying to hold this shit together. When all I want to do is...terrible fucking things.” he let the thick digit glide downward, tracing lightly over Rick's neck.

Rick held his breath as Negan's touch drifted further, tracing slowly along his collarbone, then on down his bare chest, following the line from sternum to navel.

“Negan,” Rick breathed out as the feathery touch glided over his bellybutton, dipping briefly inside before moving on, finally reaching the open top-button of his jeans. "I want something,” he said.

“Yeah, Rick?” Negan hummed, leaning down to mouth at Rick’s neck. “Talk to me. Tell me what you want. We can do the game, Rick.”

“No, Negan,” Rick said, and brought his hands up between them. “I need something.”

Slowly Negan pulled away.

“I need you to break this deal with Alexandria and Hilltop.”

Negan stared at him. A long time passed.

“What?”

Rick licked his lips, repeated it.

For a moment Negan seemed to take this in, then got up and started getting dressed.
“Hey, wait—”

“Fuck that.”

“What? Negan—”

“No. Fuck that.”

“Just listen.”

“No, I fucking heard you, Rick. You’re saying you want Hilltop and Alexandria to walk, right? Any more requests while I got my hand down your pants? Real fucking subtle. What, you think I’m Simon? Fuck that martyr shit, Rick. Not gonna use your body to pay for shit. Oughtta spank your ass right now.”

Negan was stomping around gathering all of his discarded items.

“Hey, just wait! Isn’t it like… like with your wives?”

Negan stopped. “What?”

“How’s it…how’s it any different?” Rick stammered, feeling a cool chill fill the room.

“You better watch your fucking mouth, Rick.” Negan held him in his dangerous gaze a moment before recommencing his exit. Fully dressed, Negan strode to the door.

“You owe me!” Rick blurted out.

“For what?” Negan balked.

“You said—you said you owe me two big asks for… the bed and for—for Simon.”

“Yeah. And you got your two things. You got your Daryl and you got your bi-monthly pickups—or, I should say—monthly pickups now. You’re all out of asks, Rick. Nice try.” He pulled open the door.

“No! No!” Rick scrambled over the couch and slammed the door shut. “What about… Gabriel! What about Gabriel?”

“Who?”

“Priest!” He slammed the door again when Negan tried once more to open it.

“What about him?”

“Simon, he—he beat him—beat him bad. You owe him for that. You owe me.”

Negan shook his head, looking ready to laugh. “No, no, Rick,” He placated, rubbing a finger across his upper lip. “That was taken care of. Your priest got roughed up a little bit but I think three fingers, two bullets, and a fucking knife in the neck about covers it. Cute though, Rick.”

“Wait! just… wait!” Rick now threw himself against the door. “You did that for me,” he asserted.

Negan eyed him a moment. Rick felt the weight of his attention like a gun aimed at his head.

“Okay,” Negan said at last. “Let’s just say that’s fair. What then, Rick? You’re saying I give up an
entire settlement—“
“And Hilltop.”
“Two settlements as penance for one priest who had bedrest for like a week?”
“No…”
“No? Then I’m a little confused, Rick. Cause that’s what it fucking sounds like.”
“No.” Rick shook his head clear. “Just… you get that but you also get…”
“What? What do I get, Rick?”
Rick mumbled.
“What was that?”
“Me,” he said again. “You can… you can have me.”
There was a brief moment of utter stillness then in one stride, Negan was upon him. One hand was planted above Rick’s head supporting the large frame as Negan crowded into him.
“Fuck. That. Shit. Rick.” The Savior said, livid. “I’m not taking your body as payment for shit. It’s not on the fucking table, or don’t you know a goddamn thing about me.”
Rick was shaking. “Then, what…what do you… what do you want?”
What else could Rick give him? He needed to break this deal, needed to show the others that Negan could be civil. If he could get Negan to release at least those two communities, then maybe that would slow the others down a little until he could figure out how to buy off the rest. But if Negan wasn’t going to bend at all, then Rick failed. There was nothing to stop Maggie and the rest from going forward, nothing to stop the war.
Ignoring Rick’s question, Negan gave his final word and Rick found he couldn’t dispute.
“Move,” the Savior said with such cool and resounding resolve that Rick could do nothing but obey.
Negan brushed passed, yanking the door open and leaving Rick with an ice-block in his chest. It was when the Savior had nearly reached the end of the sidewalk that Rick bolted forward.
“They’re gonna strike first!” He cried out.
Negan stopped.
“They have guns! They have numbers! They’re strong and they’re ready to die for a cause.”
The street was silent and although Rick didn’t see anyone, he didn’t doubt that they were being watched. He didn’t care.
“If you don’t break this deal then… then I can’t make them stop. I just…” He took a deep breath and stared down to hide his burning eyes. “I can’t let anyone else die. I can’t— I just—” He choked on something. “Please, Negan. Please— just…”
Slowly Negan came back.
Chapter End Notes

Hey, do you guys remember me? No? *slinks away*

Thanks for the patience. Been busier than I thought.

I adore the encouragement. Really. Comments are like payment for fic writers so thank you. Also they remind us to get our butts in gear with updates so thank you :p I hope you enjoyed!

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