After the Storm

by legolastariel

Summary

What if they hadn't stayed in Alexandria? What if the events of season 6-8 (and beyond) had never taken place?

In the barn, after the storm, Rick is having a terrible nightmare.

He sees a town named Alexandria, watches it being overrun by walkers and attacked by hostile groups, until in the end it goes up in flames.

There is a war and his group is caught up in the middle of it. Rick has to witness in horror as one by one the people he loves have to die.

But a dream is no more than a dream.

At least that's what Rick thinks – until Aaron comes into the barn and tells them about a town named Alexandria … After that, bit by bit the things Rick has seen start coming true.
Desperate to save his family, he tries changing what he knows is going to happen in order to stir their fate into another direction.

But can death really be cheated?

Psss .... spoiler: It's got a happy ending.

Notes

Starts at episode 5x11

The first chapter is very dark and angsty due to Rick's nightmare. BUT it is just a dream, folks.

I promise the rest of the story will be lighter and there will be sweet, emotional and funny moments, too. Don't let the first chapter scare you off. The canon stuff on TV is much worse ...

P.S. Thanks a lot to my wonderful beta staceyke, who is betaing this piece despite whatever RL throws her way. Flu, snow storms, power failure, allergies ... she's working on my stuff tirelessly. You rock, dear!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

After the storm

The storm was over. Somewhere, far in the distance, only the last quiet rumbling of thunder could be heard. The lightning had long since ceased and the only light falling through the wooden walls of the barn were the first rays of the rising sun. Dawn was breaking.

A new day. Another night of darkness and threats lay behind them, another day of more threats and hardship was ahead of them.

Daryl ran his hand lethargically over his red-rimmed and stinging eyes and suppressed a yawn. He was tired – physically, emotionally and mentally. So incredibly tired, but sleep evaded him.

Only an hour ago the entire group had fought side by side to keep the doors of the barn shut, while a horde of walkers had pushed against it from the other side, trying to get in. He couldn’t even tell how long they had mustered every bit of strength their half-starved bodies still had within them, but in the end fear, desperation, anger and the will to survive had helped them win this battle.

And maybe it had been sheer luck.

The lightning and thunder had almost come simultaneously when the storm was right above them and the noise had been deafening. And then there’d been cracking sounds, louder than the moaning and hissing of the walkers, louder than the roaring of the wind in the trees and even the thunder itself. After that the scratching on the doors and pushes against them had stopped suddenly.

One by one the exhausted members of the group had dropped to the ground and fell asleep as though someone had pulled the plug. Their last remaining strength drained and fatigue getting the better of them, soon soft snoring and deep, even breathing were the only sounds in the old barn.

The only one unable to sleep was Daryl. The adrenaline was still pumping through his veins and an uneasy, eerie feeling deep in the pit of his stomach wouldn’t let him find any rest.

What if he had slept, too, before the walkers showed up? No one had thought about assigning a sentry, so it was by mere coincidence that he’d still been awake when the danger stood right on their doorstep. How could he sleep now, when the entire rest of the group was asleep again? People had died on his watch before and that would never happen again. It just couldn’t.

It was almost peaceful now, but Daryl couldn’t help thinking that it was just the calm before the next storm. There’d always be a next storm, one way or the other. Whatever they did, wherever they went – Fate was a bitch, who would time and again bare her fangs and lash out. There was no escape. And there was no peace, either, just a time of ceasefire before the next battle. They’d always be fighting – against the walkers, against other people, against hunger and disease, maybe even against God himself. What were their chances of winning under such circumstances? Why even try?

He couldn’t blame Maggie for wanting to give up. Or Sasha for her fury and bitterness. Losing people was wearing them all out and after all this time they all felt as though they were stuck in a vicious cycle they were unlikely to ever break out of. They found a new home and lost it again, they found new people, new friends and lost them, too. Or
worse – people who’d been by their side ever since the apocalypse started. People they had known from *back then*, when the world was still *normal* and a place where death and destruction happened once in a while, not on an almost daily base. This life was a never-ending funeral, a journey through a dark tunnel with no light at its end, no hope of deliverance. When even priests stopped believing in God, they didn’t have a prayer.

Daryl cast a tired glance over to where Maggie lay sound asleep a few feet away from him, hugged tight by Glenn who’d spooned up behind her. She had lost her entire family – a fate she shared with all of them now, save for the Grimes. But that last loss, that was on him, Daryl. He should have taken better care of Beth, shouldn’t have let her out of his sight for a single second. She was way stronger than she knew, but still, a young girl as gentle and innocent as Beth just wasn’t made for how the world was now. She’d been his responsibility and he failed her. Failed Maggie. Failed all of them.

No storm and all the rain in the world could wash away all the guilt that tainted him now. It would stick to him like a stigma, a curse he’d never be able to shed again.

He should have protected Sophia and failed. He should have protected Merle and failed. He should have protected Beth and failed. And those were just three of the people whose death was weighing hard on his soul. Three of way too many.

What if it happened again? If next it would be Li’l Asskicker, or Carl, or …

Daryl shook his head fiercely and stubbornly, refusing to even allow the thought while he rubbed the back of his hand over teary eyes. No! Not Rick. No way. Never.

He lowered his head and looked to his left where Carl lay curled into a tight ball next to him. He never thought that one day he’d have a son, a child at all for that matter, but although neither Carl nor Judith were blood, they were his children nevertheless. In his heart they were.

Rick lay to his right, his back pressed tightly to Daryl’s leg and Judith securely wrapped in his arms. The archer would have loved to stretch out next to his partner now and spoon up behind him the way Glenn did with Maggie, pull him close, feel his heartbeat beneath his palm, get some rest wrapped in the warmth of the familiar body close to him. But he wouldn’t. He couldn’t.

“*Love’s for pansies*,” he heard his father’s voice echo in his mind. “*Dixons ain’t no pansies. We ain’t needin’ no one, we’re better on our own. And if I ever see any display a’ fuckin’ emotional crap, boys, I’m gonna beat that shit outta ya.*”

And he had, until Merle had figured that longing for the *emotional crap* wasn’t worth the trouble it would get him into with their father. When Daryl’s brother died he’d been on this Earth for over fifty years without ever being in love. Not once. Will Dixon had beaten the ability to love anyone that way out of his eldest son and that was probably what Daryl hated his father most for. He had taken the most wonderful thing in the world away from Merle, an invaluable gift, and that was a crime and a tragedy alike.

Will hadn’t been successful as far as Daryl was concerned. And the archer had long since stopped feeling uncomfortable when Rick hugged him or even kissed him with the others present. They were family and most of them had seen their relationship coming long before the two of them had realized how they felt for each other.

It wasn’t the closeness or display of intimacy that kept Daryl from laying down, although he could barely keep his eyes open any longer. This was his watch and these people were his responsibility right now – Rick and their kids first of all. And until the moment someone else woke up and took
over, he would sit here and keep vigil. Simple as that.

He lifted a hand and ran it feather-light over Rick’s unruly curls. The younger man’s hair was too long now and his beard was a mess, making him look like Grizzly Adams and adding ten years to his actual age. But then maybe that was due to their way of living these days and not the beard alone. Daryl couldn’t have cared less. Even at his worst, Rick would always be beautiful to him. He was the reason this once hot-headed, immature redneck had grown into a man – a family man. He was the reason Daryl finally knew what love was, the reason he had stopped existing and started living, the reason he got up in the morning and kept going.

Rosita said it was important to have someone to die for and maybe she was right. But Daryl preferred to have someone to live for.

Rick didn’t wake. He didn’t feel Daryl’s hand on his hair, didn’t notice the warmth of the baby in his arms, didn’t hear the breathing and ruffling of clothes when the members of his group moved in their sleep. The leader was lost too deep in a dark, eerie dream, knowing even while he dreamed it that it wasn’t going to be a good one.

Everyone felt a nightmare coming on when it happened, yet only very few people were able to wake by choice to avoid them. Rick wasn’t one of those lucky ones.

Darkness. It is impenetrable and surrounds Rick like a black, heavy, smothering blanket. He feels sweat break out on his forehead as the unpleasant feeling of imminence creeps into his heart. The deafening cracking of thunder startles him and instinctively he reaches for his gun – the feel of the solid cold steel always makes him feel safe … safer – but it isn’t there.

Lightning illuminates the dark world around him and gives him the chance on a quick glance around.

A barn. He’s in a barn and they are all there. Maggie and Glenn, Rosita, Tara, Abraham, Sasha and Eugene, Noah, Carol, Michonne and Gabriel.

Rick’s pulse rate accelerates almost painfully.

“Where are you?”

His family is missing! Where are they? Daryl, Carl and Judith – he cannot have lost them. No, no, no!! They have to be there.

Frantically he looks around, while a cold hand gets hold of his heart and squeezes mercilessly. A world, this world without his partner and his children … The mere thought is entirely unbearable. He has to find them.

A movement to his right draws his attention and Rick strains his eyes to see what’s in the far corner. It is so damn dark and with this being a nightmare, he expects to see nothing else but a walker – or worse – the moment the next lightning illuminates the area he’s staring at. The moment the room becomes as light as day again for just that split second his heart skips a beat and he can hear his own surprised gasp. He sees himself lying on the ground, apparently asleep like the others. His back is pressed against Daryl’s thigh as his partner keeps vigil, sitting in between Rick’s sleeping form and his peacefully slumbering children.

Is this really a dream?

Rick feels his heart throb panicky against the inside of his ribs.

Since when do people watch themselves sleep? And why doesn’t this feel like a dream any longer? It’s rather as though he has left his body and is an outside observer – the thought and the feeling is
both scary and fascinating at the same time.

The thunderstorm has ceased from one second to the next and it is lighter in the barn now.
Daryl just reaches out a hand and runs it tenderly over his partner’s curls and it hurts Rick profoundly to see this incredible sadness in the archer’s eyes.
Over the day Daryl tries to put on a brave face, tries to pretend that he’s okay, but at night he apparently lets the veil drop and the raging chaos inside of him is shining through.
If only there was something Rick could do. If only he could take some of that pain away and bring a smile back to the archer’s face, but Daryl has erected walls again, as though he feels like he doesn’t deserve help, trust and affection anymore.

The shadow blue cat eyes flicking over to his spot derails Rick’s train of thought and without even noticing it, he is holding his breath suddenly. Is Daryl able to see him? Is any of this real or just the weirdest and most realistic dream he’s ever been in?

From one second to the next the scenario changes all of a sudden.
The darkness retracts, sunlight floods through the wooden walls of the barn and bathes the room in a soft orange glow. People are waking up, they stretch and rub the sleep from their eyes before flashing each other smiles, happy to have survived the night and be able to greet a new day.
Rick watches himself get up and place a loving kiss on the golden hair of his baby girl, before he flashes Daryl, who’s standing right next to him now, a smile and pecks his lips.

The door is opened cautiously the next moment and Maggie slowly sticks her head through the gap.

“Hey, everyone? This is Aaron.”

Slowly she comes in, followed by a stranger – a man in his thirties with curly hair, a friendly face and surprisingly clean clothes. Sasha is right behind them.
Even while Maggie explains that they met Aaron outside, that from the looks of it he’s on his own and she and Sasha have already taken his weapon and gear, Daryl darts through the room instantly and takes a look outside, before checking the stranger for weapons himself.
Trust is good, verifying is better. Daryl doesn’t take chances anymore when the lives of the people he cares for are at stake.
He takes up post right behind Aaron, nervously stepping from one foot onto the other and clutching his crossbow in an iron grasp. The second that stranger takes but the smallest step towards Rick, Daryl immediately follows the move, ready to do whatever is necessary to protect his partner.

For a moment a warm feeling spreads through Rick’s body despite the tension in the room. This is just one man, unarmed and not hostile at all, but even if it was Ali Baba and the forty thieves, Daryl would be right there the way he has always been, his crossbow in hand and alert, ready to do what has to be done.
The narrow eyes constantly flick over to where the leader is standing, waiting for a signal from Rick in case their visitor is considered a threat. It is soothing to know that, no matter what, Rick can rely on Daryl unconditionally.

Aaron is jabbering now as though his life depends on it – and maybe it does. He is talking about a community, shows them pictures of a town surrounded by a solid wall, talks of food and safety. The next second Rick watches himself walk straight up to him and punch him unconscious without a warning.

The reaction to that is surprising. For the most part there are no frowns, no ‘what the fuck’ looks, no protest. Tara and Rosita don’t even move while they keep guarding the door, while Daryl and Carol tie the unfortunate guy up and Maggie checks on him to make sure he is alright.
The only one who openly questions Rick’s decision and action is Michonne.
“So we’re clear – that look wasn’t a ‘let’s attack that man’ look, but a ‘he seems like an okay guy to me’ look.”

Maybe she’s right. Maybe Aaron is who is says he is, but there is always the chance that he is not. After all they have been through, is she really willing to entrust the lives of fifteen people to a perfect stranger and a couple of promising words?

Maggie cautiously speaks in Aaron’s favor, too, and Rick watches himself start pacing the room now, torn. He wants to believe the promise of a safe place for all of them to live – it’s what they’re all longing for – but while apparently quite a few of his group are willing to trust Aaron’s words, Rick can’t shake that very uneasy feeling inside.

And he can see the same uneasiness on his partner’s face as well. Talk is cheap – Daryl would be the first to adopt that policy and he interrupted Aaron’s monologue even before Rick’s punch. Words don’t prove a thing. Pictures don’t prove a thing, either. After Woodbury, after Terminus – how could anyone of them still believe in words about safety or be impressed by walls, fences and food? Michonne first of all should be more suspicious, but she chose to speak up and doubt Rick’s gut feeling.

The leader ignores her and turns to give orders for people to keep a lookout, patrol the area, be on guard. He doesn’t let it show, but Michonne’s objection annoys and pains him alike.

When it comes down to following him against her own conviction, she would turn against him each and every time. There is no doubt on Rick’s mind. That is the difference between her and Daryl. His partner would speak his mind, give advice and a second opinion, but regardless of his objections, he would always follow his partner no matter what. That is one of the many reasons why Rick loves him so much, why he and the archer make the perfect team, especially in times like these.

Rick needs someone he can trust, someone he can rely on, someone who’d have his back – and not stab him in it first chance they have and do their own thing as soon as opinions clash.

He likes Michonne and values her as the strong, smart woman and good fighter she is, but it hurts to know that she still isn’t a team player and likely to always question his calls. If the place Aaron is trying to lead them to did look like paradise itself and still Rick decided against it, would Michonne follow him? Or would she split the group and drive a wedge between them?

It isn’t her words or the pleading looks on his people’s faces that convince Rick in the end to take a look at Aaron’s home – it’s Daryl saying that the barn “smells like horse shit”. The leader knows very well that Daryl couldn’t care less. What the comment really means is: “This is no place to let the kids live – they deserve better.”

And he is right. They all deserve better. Four walls, a roof and food – that is a promise he cannot simply ignore due to his gut feeling alone. So they’d go and check that place out. Rick just hopes and prays that this isn’t a mistake – again.

All of a sudden the pictures he is seeing pick up pace and next he finds himself standing in front of a large gate. There is a sign that reads:

Welcome to the Alexandria Safe Zone –
Mercy for the lost
Vengeance for the plunderers

It is a threat rather than a promise, which is charmingly realistic these days. They have been promised a refuge for all, a sanctuary, before and it turned out to be their worst nightmare. Rick has
decided a long time ago that sanctuaries didn’t exist any longer and if anyone called a place that, they had better be careful what was lurking inside.

Alexandria looks like a good place to live and yet Rick is unable to shake a very bad feeling deep down inside as he watches the group walk through the gate. When it closes behind them Rick notices expressions of uneasiness on the faces of his companions as well.

A wall can be protection, but it also means being caged in, trapped inside with no way out. His pulse rate accelerates once again as the scenarios change and picture after picture flashes up before him.

Noah dies on a run. Rick watches in horror as his dream shows him how the poor kid it torn to pieces by walkers. A senseless death. An unnecessary death. Glenn had a good plan to get himself and his companions to safety, but that coward Nicholas screwed up. One of their own died due to one of them.

This is the first time, yet not the last that Rick wonders if staying in Alexandria was a good idea.

There are screams and shots and blood all of a sudden. A hostile group invades the town, strangers with a W marking their foreheads are killing people, hurting them, taking everything they can get their hands on.

Walkers! There’s an entire horde inside the wall, roaming the streets and killing even more people.

So much for promises. So much for Aaron’s words about Alexandria’s wall the first time they met the man.

“Nothing, alive or dead, gets through that without our say so.”

A fool’s hope to think that either the dead or the living could be stopped by a simple wall.

There’s chaos, panic, some people trying to run, others fighting back, but many are not able to do either. In all this commotion there’s a shot close by suddenly and when Rick’s head whips around with a start, he sees Carl just stand there, frozen in his spot and blood all over his face. There’s nothing but a black, empty hole where the boy’s right eye used to be. Then he drops.

“No!!!!”

The people of Alexandria fight back and regain control of their home, rebuild and go on. And thanks to the help of a courageous young doctor Carl survives. But he’ll see the new world Rick is promising him with only one eye from now on.

While Carl is injured and suffering wounds inflicted from the outside, Daryl is suffering silently within. Rick can see it.

With each day they are staying in this town, each minute Daryl is caged in with way too many people and surrounded by the wall, with each new loss they have to bear the archer’s spirit crumbles and that incredible sadness in his eyes becomes permanent. He grows quiet, almost mute, is moody and withdrawn and for the most part Rick barely recognizes his partner anymore.

Where is that cocky hothead he met years ago at a quarry outside of Atlanta? Daryl’s rants back then were little helpful, but these days Rick would do anything to hear his partner say only half as much or muster just a little bit of the energy he depicted back then, even if it meant for Daryl to rant, yell and curse. Anything but this silence. Anything but this sadness.

The new world grows larger bit by bit. They meet new people, encounter new communities – some are friendly and valued companions. Others mean no more than new hardship, new pain, more
fighting. And loss.

Alexandria was a mistake.
More and more Rick comes to the conclusion that they should have stayed away from this town, but it’s too late now. They’re here, and despite the attacks and their loss he won’t be able to convince the others to leave, to give up shelter, food and new found friends and lovers due to his bad feeling that the worst is yet to come.

Rick is dreading to find out what ‘the worst’ will be.

A clearing in the woods at night, illuminated by the headlights of several cars.
The change of scene comes so sudden that Rick is confused for a moment, unable to comprehend what is happening. Then his eyes linger on the eleven people kneeling in a line-up on the ground, surrounded by armed people pointing every kind of weapon imaginable at them and it’s obvious that this isn’t a BBQ.
Another hostile group, another enemy, a new threat.

He’s in the middle of his people with the larger part of his group to his left and right, including Daryl and Carl. That Aaron dude is there, too. What has that man gotten them into? What is going on?

A tall, handsome man in a leather jacket, introducing himself as Negan, is walking up and down in front of them, carrying a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire over his shoulder and grinning like an idiot, as though this scenario was in any way hilarious.

Rick told Aaron the day they first met him that it is hard to trust anyone who smiles after having been punched in the face. But somehow he has a feeling that it’s him or one of his companions now, who is about to be punched in the face – or worse – and the one delivering the punch smiling is definitely way scarier. Whatever that guy is about to do, he is enjoying himself way too much for this to end in a good way.

Blood is swooshing painfully loud in Rick’s ears suddenly and drowns out all sounds around him. The last thing he is able to make out is that dude starting to do the “Eenie, meenie, miney, mo” rhyme, before he lifts his bat and hits Abraham over the head.

As if the fast forward button has been pushed the pictures follow quickly after one another now and make the way that maniac is hitting on the long since dead man look even more insane.

Bile is rising in Rick’s throat and he swallows thickly against the nausea and the scream he is almost choking on.

He watches in terror as Daryl jumps up suddenly and hits Negan.
NO! Daryl, please, no! His partner is being pinned to the ground by some of Negan’s henchman, one of them – a blonde guy with a burned face – pointing a crossbow at Daryl’s head that looks suspiciously like the one the archer owns. Only now Rick sees the wound on Daryl’s shoulder and the blood and realizes that Daryl has apparently been shot.
So much for safety, so much for paradise.

Before Rick has a chance to follow that train of thought or even breathe, the bat is raised again and bashes Glenn’s head in. Above the sound of the swooshing blood Rick hears Maggie’s screams and with tears dwelling in his eyes he watches the entirely terrified look on Daryl’s face. All of their faces.

Negan is having a ball challenging Rick, humiliating him, bringing him to his knees – and then he forces him to chop off Carl’s hand. Almost.
This must have been the worst moment of Rick’s life. Worse even than watching his boy getting shot,
twice. Those incidents he had no control over, didn’t do the harm himself and had no way to prevent them, either. But this just now … He was about to inflict that harm on his own son. How can anyone come back from something like that?

“I like him – he’s mine now.”

No. Please, no! Daryl, his Daryl, is being grabbed by that blonde guy and shoved into the back of a van. The archer flinches as the crossbow is pointed at him once again and flashes Rick one last look before the doors of the car fall shut. A look filled with guilt, despair, sadness, fear, pain …

Even in his sleep Rick is crying now. Silent tears for his lover who is being taken away from him. For the two beloved people they just lost and for the survivors of this massacre who sit on the ground, frozen to the core and with lost and empty looks in their eyes.

This is on him, Rick. Coming to Alexandria was definitely a mistake. It was his decision and one of the worst calls he’s ever made. Maybe there was no way for him to know these things were going to happen. And then maybe it’s been him who started these conflicts by screwing with the wrong people.

Abraham and Glenn just paid the price for his arrogance and the underestimation of their enemies. And Daryl is going to pay for it in the weeks to come.

When the archer returns, he isn’t the same anymore. He had fought so hard ever since the days back in Atlanta to learn how to trust, to care, to love, to allow all these feelings that were new and scary to him. Feelings that he had shied away from, because he’d grown up being told that emotional ties were dangerous and a sign of weakness.

The Saviors have sent him back to square one. They tortured him, humiliated him, beat him and therewith evoked the demons of his past.

The Daryl that is back by Rick’s side now is a darker version of his former self. He is murderously angry, ruthless, merciless and vengeful. And he doesn’t trust anymore, doesn’t give anyone the benefit of a doubt, especially if that someone is threatening people Daryl cares for. He is not going to lose anyone else due to asking questions first or shooting a second too late. Daryl doesn’t ask questions at all anymore – he shoots on sight. He is unpredictable, out of control and doesn’t listen to anyone anymore, not even his partner. He’s become a stranger Rick cannot rely on anymore and the loss of their bond, of that unconditional trust pains the leader to no end. He misses Daryl like crazy and watches helplessly as the once gentle and caring soul of Daryl Dixon grows colder with each passing day.

Sasha dies next and Eugene switches sides. Rick cannot even blame him. People don’t side with someone new for the fun of it – there is always a reason.

No one ever bothered to see things through Eugene’s eyes, no one ever cared what he felt and thought. No one, but Negan.

Eugene is a nerd and a coward – unable to defend himself, let alone anyone else, unable to track or hunt, to shoot or even stab a walker, to set one foot before the other without stumbling. He has been considered valuable as long as he allegedly was the cure, the answer to their prayers. Once he had turned out to be a liar on top of being a nerd and a coward, they had dragged him along in an act of mercy, but no one had considered him a valuable member of the group any longer. And they had let it show or even told him to the face.

Fact of the matter is though that Eugene is probably smarter than all of them together. He has several doctoral degrees and is highly educated. He’s capable of repairing, building and inventing things, which especially in times like these is an invaluable gift. Yet they have all of them just sneered at him, ignored his advice and never acknowledged his potential.
Negan does. He tells Eugene what the man is craving to hear – that he is appreciated, listened to, important. And so, although it means turning against his former companions, Eugene starts working for the other side, for the man who killed his friend Abraham right before his eyes.

It’s tearing him apart and confuses him to no end not to be sure whether Abraham really was a friend or not. Abe had seen him in the end, had shown some appreciation – did that qualify him as ‘friend’?

Things are way more simple with Negan and the Saviors. There is no friendship in the Sanctuary. They know what Eugene is able to do and they want him to do it – for them. Repair, build and invent things and for that he is being rewarded. No doubt he will be punished, too, as soon as he fails. So Eugene cannot fail. He keeps on repairing, building and inventing, even if that means shifting the war in the Saviors’ favor.

War. This is how far it’s come. The three communities are at war with the Saviors and the casualties on either side are sickeningly high.

Maggie lives in Hilltop now, Carol in the Kingdom and Gabriel is being held hostage in the Sanctuary. They were fifteen when the group arrived in Alexandria and now, four months later, only seven of them are still around.

Safe Zone. If it wasn’t so tragic, Rick would laugh.

There’s flames and smoke, the disturbing sound of collapsing buildings and with a violently throbbing heart Rick watches Alexandria go up in flames.

Again. It just happens again. After the farm and the prison this is the third time their home burns down to ashes, along with all their hopes and dreams. Is it always going to be like this? Are they caught in a vicious cycle, doomed to move on, only to lose their home to fire and destruction over and over again?

He finds his family and the remains of his group hiding down in the town’s sewer and Rick can barely refrain from balling his fists in rage and shame alike. So this is what safety and paradise looks like these days, this is how far they have come. Hiding in the sewer like rats.

He is tired. So immensely tired, but there is no stopping now. They cannot just give up and give in – they have to fight back. He promised Carl a new world and this is definitely not it. Rick wants a place where his children can grow up in peace, where they are allowed to live and not just exist from day to day. He just doesn’t believe any longer that Alexandria is that place. That either of the communities is.

This war needs to be ended – they owe the folks living in these towns that much. But afterwards he’d gather whoever is still alive of his people and leave, find a new place, a different place, a better place. A place where he and Daryl can grow old together, while they watch Carl and Judith grow up and have their own families. Rick would lean back in a rocking chair one day with Daryl by his side, turn the helm over to Carl and enjoy his well-earned retirement. And the way people are aging in times like these, that day is not as far as it would have been before the apocalypse. Rick feels like an old man already.

It’s deadly quiet down in the sewer as he walks past the members of his group. No one looks up, no one says a word, no one seems to dare breathe – it’s eerie and disturbing to see them so … defeated. He finds Carl way in back with a deadly pale Daryl sitting right next to him, Judith on his lap. They hesitantly look up when they hear the sound of his boots ring on the concrete floor and the moment Rick looks into the two sets of blue eyes he knows that something has happened. Daryl’s face is a stony façade, while he visibly struggles to keep his composure and holds on to the little girl on his lap for dear life.

Oh, God, is she hurt?

Rick reaches out a shaky hand to the blond curls and instantly Daryl gets hold of that hand with an
iron grasp and fingers as cold as ice.

“Ain’t her”, he just croaks, tears in his voice.

“Dad?”
Rick turns to his son with tight knots in his stomach and a frantically beating heart. He knows, even before Carl says:
“There’s something I need to tell you.”

Two months later the war is over.
Alexandria is destroyed for the most part, Hilltop is under the dominion of the Saviors once again, producing and providing for them, and after the larger part of the Kingdom’s population has been killed in the war, the Saviors have made that community their new home.
It was all in vain. Countless people died for nothing. Negan won.

It doesn’t matter anymore. Not to Rick. His world is destroyed, his hopes and dreams trampled into the ground, his future dark and bleak. There’s nothing left but silence and despair.
Four. Four of the fifteen people that came to Alexandria with high hopes are still alive. And he is one of the misfortunate survivors. It probably serves him right. He has lead them to their doom and it’s only fair for him to be the last man standing, to watch his world go up in flames and suffer all these losses. Survival is the punishment now. Survival and all the memories, all the horrible pictures in his head that keep haunting him every single second of the day.

Back at the farm Rick used to think that watching his son getting shot was the worst day of his life. Until it happened again and Carl even lost an eye. But just when you thought things couldn’t get any worse, they always did.
Carl’s death pulled the rug out from under Rick’s feet. Bit. His boy, who had survived in this world for years and was a skilled fighter, was bitten by a walker he could easily have avoided. He didn’t die in battle defending his home and family, wasn’t bitten due to being highly outnumbered or in the process of trying to protect his sister or kill Negan. No, Carl died because he supported a guy he’d known for about five minutes in carrying out his mother’s silly religious belief. This didn’t have to happen. It was such a senseless, stupid death, if any death could be stupid at all.
A part of Rick died with Carl that day. His son was the future, one of the reasons he kept fighting. That future is lost now.

Step by step the Saviors regained the upper hand, one by one the people of the three communities fell.
Gabriel died due to an illness in the Sanctuary. Shortly after, Negan personally executed Eugene when he found out that the good Doctor Porter had reconsidered and was helping Dwight to support the communities. A week later Michonne and Rosita were caught in an ambush and beheaded with Michonne’s own katana.

Rick, Daryl, Judith, Tara, Maggie and Carol were the only survivors of the group until the Saviors launched a last attack on the remains of Alexandria.

Simon came through the gate with his men the way he had months before, cocky and arrogant as usual, and headed straight for what used to be Rick’s house.
Maggie was still in Hilltop, Carol in the Kingdom and the last four of Rick’s group still living in Alexandria were staying in what had always been their home, certain that this would be the last
place the Saviors would expect them. But apparently they had learned and couldn’t be fooled any longer.
A well aimed rocket launcher destroyed the house in one huge blast and made it collapse on top of them. Both Rick and Daryl were pulled out of the debris alive and miraculously nearly unharmed, but they never saw Judith and Tara again.

“There is no statute of limitation, remember?”

That’s what Simon said before he knocked both Rick and Daryl over the head, his gloating laughter the last thing they heard.

When Rick opens his eyes to a throbbing headache he is momentarily disoriented. The place looks familiar. He’s been here before, knows the houses and streets and even some of the faces he notices in the near distance staring at him, pale as ghosts and with wide fearful eyes. There’s Henry and Nabila. The Kingdom. Simon has taken him to the Kingdom.

“Look who’s back with us”, Simon’s gloating voice reaches Rick’s ears. “So glad you could join us.”

The next second two of the Saviors grab Rick by his arms and pull him onto his feet, but his legs barely support him. He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, hoping for the dizziness and pain to subside, before he opens them again and casts a glance to his left. His heart almost stops when his eyes come to rest on Daryl, Carol, Maggie and Jesus. They are lined up against the metal wall, tied to it by heavy chains and cuffs around their wrists. Dear God, now what? What is this? What have these bastards planned now? Daryl, Jesus and Maggie meet Rick’s eyes, but Carol just stares at the ground with her lips pressed together to a thin line.

Is she blaming him? Does she think all this is his fault? Coming to Alexandria, taking over the town and challenging the Saviors – all of that was Rick’s call. Fact. So, yes, maybe it is all his fault. He has brought war upon them and now he would be responsible for his entire group and a large part of the communities’ population to be wiped out. Carol hadn’t meant to fight anymore. She wanted peace. She wanted the killing to stop, but what choice did she have when her family, people she loved, were in danger? She had found a new place for herself, here in the Kingdom, and had dared love again when Ezekiel had started to court her. But the King is dead now, like so many others. All the fighting, all the killing – for nothing. Rick is well aware of the fact that Sophia’s death years ago has always stood between him and Carol. They made their peace with one another, but deep down inside she has never stopped blaming him for her daughter’s loss. It doesn’t matter anymore. Whether or not he is, it would be just one more name on a long list of deaths he’s responsible for. There is nothing Rick can do to change that. Just like there is nothing he can do or say to Carol to make amends or make her change her mind. It’s too late for that now.

“I told you he was gonna pull you down.”

Rick thinks he can hear her whisper these words to Daryl and the archer’s head whips around to her instantly.

“Nah”, Daryl’s voice is gruff. “I had a life, a family ‘n’ a couple a’ very happy years thanks ta him. He’s the best thing that ever happened ta me. Ta all of us.”

For a moment it looks as though she is going to retort, to point out that things didn’t go too well for her and that Daryl’s happy years ended way too soon due to Rick starting a war. But she
reconsiders and keeps quiet. Instead she lifts her head and looks Daryl in the eyes, fighting back tears now. Then she nods while a single tear slides down her cheek.

“I’m happy for you”, is all she says.

There is no sense in spitting venom, in blaming anything on anyone. The game is over and maybe it is time to make peace with this life and everyone who is a part of it. She has always loved Daryl and she still does, and there is no way she is going to spoil these last precious moments they have together.

When cuffs audibly snap shut as Rick is being chained to the wall next to him, Daryl turns away from Carol and looks his partner in the eyes. They hold each other’s look for a long moment, knowing that this is probably the last time in this life that they have the chance to do so.

“Rick! Look everybody – it’s Rick. Again.”

The familiar voice has the leader reluctantly break eye contact with Daryl and watch Negan appear in back of the gathered people, approaching his prisoners with the usual swagger. Is that man never getting tired of repeating the same bad jokes over and over? No doubt, before this day ends he’ll drop a stupid remark about someone’s pants. Again.

“Pissing our pants yet?”

Rick can’t help rolling his eyes. That guy’s madness is apparently deliberate.

“You know, Rick. Back then when you killed quite a lot of my men at that outpost, because I killed some of your people after you guys blew up my bunch of bikers, I still thought this was just a misunderstanding between us. And after I bashed the head of that ginger in and of the Chinese guy...

“... He was Korean”, Daryl growls, but is being ignored.

“... I figured you would have gotten the message and understood how things work around here. But obviously you’re pretty slow in catching on.”

He stands right in front of Rick now and from one second to the next the usual derisive grin just drops off his face and makes room for a killer scowl.

“Or”, he spits, “you’re just one hell of a stubborn sonuvabitch. All you had to do was provide for my people – all of you! And you’d all still be sitting in your cozy communities and live a happy life. But you had to start a war and a whole lot more people were killed.”

He slams Lucille on the ground with a loud thud, furious now.

“People are a fucking resource! I’ve got a business to run, God damnit, and I cannot do that without people. Everything was working out pretty fucking peachy before you and your people had to show up and destroyed all I worked my ass off for.”

He leans back in his usual grass stalk-in-the-wind imitation and breathes in deep to compose himself.

“Bottomline is, Rick, you and the rest of your merry bunch had all the chances in the world, and you blew it. You got aaaalll of these fine people into deep shit and quite a few of them killed and even my patience knows its limits.”
He picks up Lucille and starts walking up and down the line-up the same way he’s done that night on the clearing in the woods.

“Not today, not tomorrow”, he imitates Rick’s threat to him, while the grin returns. “Pretty disappointing being threatened like that at least three times and then never even seeing any serious attempts on your side. Face it, Rick, as a leader you’re an epic failure.”

“You got me here now”, Rick tries to reason with the man. “Let the others go. This is between you and me.”

“No”, Negan hisses in his face, clearly invading Rick’s personal space. “This is between them and me just the same. I’ve said it all this fucking time – you, the king and the widow, you’re gonna end up at my fence to let people know what happens when they do – not – obey – the rules!”

His voice is growing louder now and cold fury burns in his eyes.

“But guess what – I don’t have a fucking fence anymore. Instead I’ve got a fucking hole in my fucking wall.”

He casts a furious side glance to Daryl.

“So until further notice me and my people are gonna be guests of the Kingdom – and so will you. Sort of.”

He starts walking up and down the line again.

“You have to understand that I cannot let you live this time. That would just give you a chance to start more trouble and I’m pretty fucking tired of that.”

“Maggie is pregnant!” Rick helplessly tries to save at least one of the others.

“I didn’t think she had too much cheese cake lately. But here’s the rule – you screw with me, you end up at this lovely wall. Simple as that. That goes for the leader and their right-hand man and they tell me Jesus and the lovely lady over there”, he points the tip of Lucille at Carol, “were just that to Maggie and Ezekiel. Pity the good king cannot be with us today, but since we have to count Mags there as two people, the head count is correct again.”

“You’re seriously gonna kill an unborn baby?” Jesus asks, a disgusted air on his face.

“It’s okay”, Maggie says with a determined voice. “The two of us are gonna go see Glenn now.”

Instantly tears start pooling in her companions’ eyes and all four of them fight to swallow them down.

“I’ll see you on the other side.”

“Maggie”, Jesus tries to say something more to her, but a shot ringing out and hitting him square in the chest cuts his words off for good.

“I hate sappy goodbyes”, Negan says matter-of-factly, a smoking gun in his hand. “Now, where were we?”

He grins when he sees the shocked faces of both his prisoners and the people of the Kingdom who are forced to witness this.
“Why not play a game again? I really liked that the last time.”
He slowly starts walking past the line-up again.
“Eenie, meenie, miney, mo. Catch a tiger by the toe.”

“Yeah, better luck next time. Looks like that tiger bit ya in yer ass pretty good”, Daryl cuts in
with blazing eyes, but the look in them turns to mere horror when another shot rings out and hits
Carol this time.

“Aren’t you tired of getting people killed, Daryl?”

Entirely unfazed Negan starts his stroll up and down the line again, while Daryl is biting his lower
lip so hard that he draws blood.

“It wasn’t your fault, Daryl”, Maggie reassures him, her face as white as a sheet, but
confident. “Glenn, Beth, Denise and now Carol – it wasn’t your fault.”

Another shot rings out, accompanied by screams from the people behind Negan’s back. Having to
witness the execution of prisoners in cold blood is horrible enough, but a young mother getting killed
only days before the baby was due, that is the most terrifying, most despicable thing anyone of them
has ever seen.

“I hate being interrupted all the damn time”, Negan just comments and then continues with
the counting rhyme.

In his sleep Rick is crying again, while he’s witnessing Negan stop right in front of Daryl and
himself. Any moment now he will watch his own death and that is the most eerie, most horrifying
thing he can imagine.
Then again, no, the most horrifying thing would be having to watch Daryl die. For a second Rick is
torn, but then he starts silently imploring the maniac with the gun.

“Let it be Daryl next. Please. Make it quick and painless and don’t make him watch me die.
Spare him that. After Merle, Beth, Glenn, Denise, Carol, Maggie, Judy and Carl, don’t let him …”

Bang!

Another shot rings out and Rick watches in horror as a blood stain spreads in the center of the chest
– his chest. Not even his last wish has been granted.

“Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!” he adjures himself, but it doesn’t work.

The nightmare continues and no doubt the worst is yet to come. Jesus, Maggie, Carol and now he
himself – Negan shot all of them in the chest.

“He’s gonna let us turn”, Rick thinks with a painfully throbbing heart.

Daryl! God, no, not that. He really is the last man standing now. The last one of their group still
alive and that sick bastard obviously has his very own way of punishing him for running, for
showing defiance till the very last moment, for never kneeling to him, never giving in.
There are tears in the shadow blue eyes now and despite himself a stray one runs down Daryl’s
cheek.

“Wow.” Negan is standing right in front of him now, smiling again. “You really are one tough
sonuvabitch. It took the destruction of your home and the loss of your entire family and all your
friends for you to finally shed a single fucking tear. Your balls must be made of steel.”
The smile turns into a grin.

“I’m glad to have you back. I missed you. Make yourself at home – you’re gonna stay with us a while longer. And this time you even have company.”

Laughing he turns around and walks away the moment the first hissing sounds and snarls can be heard from Jesus’ direction. The devastated and terrified look in Daryl’s eyes is more than Rick is able to bear. Chained to the wall with no chance to get away, Daryl has to watch Jesus, Maggie and the two people he loves most in this world turn to either side of him. Pale, watery eyes open and stare at him, while fingers start clawing in his direction, unable to reach him though. The hissing and snarling barely covers the sobs he cannot hold back any longer. The walkers’ noise will accompany him day and night for days, maybe even weeks to come – for as long as Negan still enjoys his sick, perverted game and is able to keep him alive.

Choked by his own tears, Rick watches Daryl turn his head and look at the walker-version of what used to be his partner, his friend, the love of his life. As though he is hoping to see traces of the former Rick Grimes in the dead eyes, he returns the stare and even reaches for the fingers that claw in his direction.

“Rick?” He can almost touch the tip of the walker’s fingers. “I promised ta always be with ya, but … guess ‘s gonna take a li’l while till I can get there. Wait for me?”

Although it hurts his wrist he manages to reach far enough to shortly touch the tip of his finger to Rick’s.

“Give Judy ‘n’ Carl a kiss from me, will ya?” Tears run down his cheeks unhindered now. “Luv ya.”
Chapter 2

My test reader says the dream sequence of chapter 1 is the worst she’s ever read. LOL And she badly needed chapter 2 to digest this.

Sorry about that!! You guys might feel the same, so I’ve decided to post the next chapter sooner than planned.

Hope you’ll like it!

With a suppressed scream Rick sat bolt upright, panting heavily. Cold sweat covered his face along with the tears that have run over his cheeks while he’d been caught up in that nightmare. He squeezed his eyes shut again for a moment and rubbed his palms over his face, trying to ban the pictures he had seen from his memory. It didn’t work. Unlike countless dreams he had had in his life and forgot instantly on waking up, this one stayed with him, each picture crystal clear before his mind’s eye as though he was looking at photos.

“Rick?”

A drowsy voice next to him startled him and when he turned his head he looked straight into Daryl’s concerned eyes.

Before the archer had a chance to say anything more, he was pulled into a tight embrace and hugged crushingly, while Rick buried his face on his shoulder. A tremble ran through the leader’s slim body and Daryl noticed how Rick struggled to suppress a sob. There was no need to say anything more or ask – Daryl knew.

Wordlessly he returned the hug, ran his hands soothingly over the younger man’s back and placed a gentle kiss on Rick’s curls.

A nightmare. Most members of this group used to say they hadn’t had nightmares since they were little, as though being haunted at night was an experience reserved for children only. These days they all had nightmares on regular terms – some more often than others and some dreams worse than others. It didn’t make too much of a difference to Daryl. His nightmares had never stopped and he knew that Carol’s hadn’t, either. That was probably because they had lived them, had been caught up in them all of their lives, no matter if they’d been awake or asleep. There were worse things than the dead walking. In a way the apocalypse was the best thing that had happened to both of them. Behind Daryl’s back Rick looked up and reached out a shaking hand to his sleeping son. He had to touch him, had to make sure Carl was alive and well. When the boy woke to the touch and opened his eyes, another stray tear slid down Rick’s cheek. He couldn’t help staring at Carl’s right eye, the one he had to watch being shot out of his son’s handsome face, marring him till the day he died.

Died. Dead. Gone.

“You’re okay, dad?” Carl asked the moment he noticed the haunted look in his father’s eyes and the way he held on to Daryl for dear life.

Rick forced a little convincing smile and nodded, before he pulled back and locked eyes with his
partner. Daryl looked at him calmly, conveying the reassurance and strength Rick needed through looks alone, but it couldn’t make the tight knots in his stomach resolve entirely or still his racing heartbeat.

“Judy’s right behind ya”, Daryl said softly before Rick could even ask. “We’re here. They’re all here. ’s okay, Rick.”

The younger man cast a quick glance over his shoulder at the peacefully sleeping Judith and let out a sigh of relief. She looked absolutely adorable, laying wrapped in his jacket next to him, her little thumb tucked in her mouth and totally unbothered by what was going on around her. Rick envied every baby in this world for the ability to sleep this tight, regardless of chaos and destruction around them. He had meant what he told the others last night – that living in the world as it was now was easier for children who grew up in it. Especially the real young ones like Judy, who’d never know it any other way. She would never miss any of the things that just didn’t exist anymore, and the dead walking would be as normal to her as the sun rising in the East and setting in the West.

People started to wake up around them now. There were muffled yawns, the ruffling of clothes as one by one got up and a few suppressed moans when cramped up muscles reminded them painfully that sleeping on the ground was not how they grew up, what they were used to. One more reason why Rick saw his theory about children these days clearly proven. He turned to pick his baby daughter up and then struggled to stand, too. It took him a few deep breaths to regain his composure, but when the first members of their group started casting glances his way and nodded in greeting, nothing about Rick’s expression or posture gave his inner turmoil away. He was getting good at keeping up appearances.

When Daryl stood as well, he touched his shoulder to Rick’s, giving him a soft nudge, and despite his smile tugged at the corners of the leader’s mouth. He slipped his hand into Daryl’s for a moment and gave it a squeeze, before letting go again.

“Thank you”, he whispered to him, noticing out of the corner of his eye how the archer responded with a small ‘Don’t mention it’ nod.

When Rick looked around and did a quick head count, the smile vanished again and made room for new concern.

“Where’s Maggie and Sasha?”

“Outside”, Daryl responded, while he suppressed a yawn. “Mags got up ’bout an hour ago. We had a li’l chat ’bout …”, he swallowed thickly and then reconsidered about bringing Tyrees and Beth up. “We jus’ talked ‘n’ then she woke Sasha ta work somethin’ out with her. Guess they needed that time … ‘cuz … ya know …”

Rick leaned into him for a moment.

“Yes, I know.”

He cast his partner a quick glance and only now noticed the archer’s red-rimmed and tired eyes and the dark rings underneath them.

“Did you sleep at all?”

“Uh-huh.”

He tried to avoid his partner’s scrutinizing glance, which was about all the answer Rick needed.
“Daryl”, Rick cocked his head and pulled in a deep breath, but then released it without saying another word.

What was there to say? Was he really going to tell his partner that he needed his sleep or wouldn’t be able to keep going like that? He could just as well save his breath. Daryl wasn’t a child and he knew all that, just like Rick knew why he couldn’t find any sleep or wouldn’t allow himself to rest.

“It’s been a tough night for all of us”, the leader said softly after a moment. “We won’t walk far today, so you can get some shut-eye later, if you want.”

He pecked Daryl’s lips and just left it at that.

Time passed slowly. Probably because they were all of them still exhausted, hungry and drained of their energy. Each movement was a hassle, each task took twice the time it usually did as though they were walking through water, had lead attached to their arms when lifting them and honey in their heads that made their thoughts run slow and sluggish. No one was keen on leaving and hitting the road again.

About an hour ago they had taken a look outside to see what damage the storm had done and had been greeted by a fascinating scenario. The wind had knocked down quite a couple of large trees, which must have caused the cracking sounds they had heard during the storm. They had fallen right onto the horde of walkers and had buried each and every one of them underneath. Some were still moving, trapped under tons of wood and unable to get out. Others were pinned by branches or squished to mush. Miraculously none of the trees had even grazed the barn and Gabriel felt inclined to say a silent prayer of thanks for all of them. Maybe there was a god after all.

Their small breakfast consisted of the last bites of dog meat and a couple of wild berries Tara and Carol had been able to gather. It was not even enough to fill Judith’s stomach, let alone any of the adults’, but at least it was enough to stop the baby’s whining.

Quite a few of the berries Carol had distributed among the members of the group had found their way into Judy’s little mouth and both Rick and Daryl had noticed that with a warm feeling spreading in their otherwise empty stomachs.

They were all of them blessed with having friends, a family like this. People who stuck together and shared, although they were hungry. People who would give the last bit they still had to the youngest and least useful member, simply because no decent human being could enjoy their meal when a baby was crying of hunger.

She wasn’t able to fight for them, to protect them or find them supplies. All she was able to give back was silence, which meant more safety in a world where the undead were attracted by sound, and her adorable toothless smile. Both were invaluable.

When Tara and Carol had returned with the berries they had let the others know that they’d seen Sasha and Maggie sitting on a log a few yards away from the barn. From the looks of it they weren’t talking or doing anything else but stare into the distance, watching the sun rise.

They had both lost a sibling, the last member of their family, and they both needed someone to share their sorrow right now. Someone who understood, someone who could relate to their feelings and thus numbed the pain a little just by being there.

Without a word being spoken the group had secretly decided to give Maggie and Sasha the time they needed.

There was no rush, no place they needed to be. Whether they left now or later that day or tomorrow or next week – it made no difference. After Terminus they had just put one foot before the other
without a goal, staggering along day by day, just following the road into whichever direction it lead. It didn’t matter. North was as good as west, west was as good as east – only south was ruled out. There was no going back.
There was nothing for them back there but painful memories, the bodies of people they had lost, homes that had burned down to ashes, hopes and dreams that were crushed and blown away by the wind. They could never go back there.

Rick was well aware of the fact that they needed a plan and a safe place to stay. Soon. This barn was bearable for a day or two, but after that they had to move on. They needed food, water and shelter, a place like the prison with a fence around it, so no walker or hostile people had easy access to their doorstep.
Maybe another prison or a school, a factory, an animal shelter or preferably some rich people’s mansion with a high wall and a heated pool. It wouldn’t be easy finding a suitable place. Even if they knew where they were at all and had any idea where to find one of those places, other people had probably had the same idea by now. Public buildings or factories were big, too big for their little group actually, and they would always draw attention. And this wasn’t Beverly Hills, so finding a mansion waiting for them was highly unlikely. Plan or no plan, what they needed was a miracle.

It was unnaturally quiet in the barn, as though the thirteen people present, including baby Judith, were holding their breath.
They had all of them found something to sit on and were either silently maintaining their weapon or staring blindly ahead of themselves. No one spoke or even looked at the others – they were lost in their own thoughts, torpid, waiting without knowing what they were waiting for.
Every now and then someone cast a glance in Rick’s direction, but they didn’t dare address the leader.

After they had had their sparse meal, Rick had played with Judith for a little while, trying hard to forget his dream, but failing miserably. Time and again he had to swallow back tears when he remembered how his house in Alexandria had collapsed right on top of his little, innocent daughter and it had cost him every bit of strength he still possessed to smile at her while they played, when all he wanted to do was cry. No matter how hard he had tried not to think of Carl’s fate, or Daryl’s or any of the other’s, they all popped up one by one, over and over and over. He wanted to forget so badly and couldn’t.
Eventually he had just stopped playing without even realizing that he had, as though he was a toy whose battery had run low. His motions had become slower and slower, until he had stopped moving altogether and had ended up sitting frozen on the ground with his back against one of the supporting beams, just staring ahead of himself.
He didn’t realize that Michonne and Daryl were watching him or that every now and then Abe, Glenn and Carol cast him a glance and considered addressing him, only to quickly reconsider when Daryl’s killer scowl clearly warned them not to.

The archer knew what they wanted. A plan, answers, a direction, as though Rick was the Messiah and not just a man as clueless as they all were. He wouldn’t let anyone bother his partner right now. Not just because Daryl knew that Rick didn’t have any answers, but because he felt that there was more. Something was up, something that threw the leader off balance and was eating away at him. Just like Maggie and Sasha, Rick needed some time to work things out and Daryl would make sure that he got that time.
Despite barely being able to keep his eyes open any longer, he checked and cleaned his crossbow without letting his man out of sight. He was absolutely positive that especially Abraham just waited for the right moment to bug Rick with questions and complaints, so Daryl would make sure that right moment wouldn’t come any time soon. And he’d be here, if Rick needed someone to talk to. Sleep was overrated.

_We sleep when we’re dead._
He couldn’t remember where he had heard that saying before, but he wondered if the person who once came up with it knew how totally wrong they’d been.

“It was just a dream! Get a grip. It was just a dream.”

Rick was silently berating himself and tried desperately to convince himself that dreams were nothing but lies. But even though his mind was willing to accept it, his heart wasn’t as easily convinced. If it had been no more than a dream, then why didn’t it feel like one? Why was every picture still so terribly clear in his mind? Why was his heart still racing and the knots in this stomach leaving painful cramps? Why was he almost expecting, dreading, for that Aaron guy to be standing in the doorway any moment now?

“Hey, everyone?” Maggie’s voice sounded from the door. “This is Aaron.”

Rick felt as though someone had punched him in the guts and breathing was impossible for a moment.

“No! Couldn’t be …”

He was on his feet in a split second, just like everybody else and stared at the new arrival. It was him! Although he had never met that man before for real, Rick would have recognized him anywhere. The same curls, the same friendly face, the same kind eyes. How could the messenger of calamity look like an angel?

Out of the corner of his eye Rick noticed Daryl dart past him to take a look outside and then check Aaron for weapons.

Every single detail played out exactly like he had seen it in his dream, or whatever the heck that was. A foresight? An omen? A vision? Giving it a name didn’t make it any easier to comprehend. Aaron was talking now, telling them about the community he came from, about his job, but the words just bounced off of Rick’s ears without making any sense. He heard them and yet did not. He didn’t have to. He heard them before. The joke about the dance troop, Aaron’s emphasis on how important a resource people were and the praise of Alexandria’s wall.

“Nothing, dead or alive, gets through that without our say so.”

Even before Aaron had finished the sentence, pictures of the Wolves, the horde of walkers and the Saviors getting through that wall without anyone’s say so flooded Rick’s mind and something snapped inside of him.

Before he knew what he was doing, before he even realized that he was doing it, he had walked up to the Alexandrian and had knocked him unconscious.

Rick wasn’t angry with him, didn’t blame him for anything he knew was about to come. He even liked him, thought he remembered them becoming friends, but that didn’t change the fact that this man was the beginning of the end. It all started with him.

Rick just wanted him gone, wanted him to take his bad quality photos of walls and houses and all his promises and leave. Maybe they should toss him out now and lock the door? Or better yet, pack their stuff as long as Aaron was out cold, take the RV that was parked in the near distance and hit the road?

He knew where the car was, knew which direction to take in order to avoid Alexandria. What he didn’t know was how to explain this to his people.

He couldn’t tell them that he would spurn the chance on an allegedly safe home, the end of hunger and an endless journey because he’s had a dream. Rick knew how that would sound and a few of the people here had witnessed how he had seen ghosts and pretty much lost his mind before. Next
time he said or did anything of the likes, they would lock him up and toss the key. And letting them
know he was having visions of the future sure qualified.

But he had to stop this. They couldn’t go there, couldn’t stay. He wasn’t going to watch each and
every one of his family die. Again.

On the outside Rick was the calm and confident leader, but inside he was screaming at the top of his
lungs. A silent scream of helplessness, despair and fear. He felt like a time traveler who found
himself on board of the Titanic, knowing with frightening certainty that the ship was going to sink,
yet being unable to convince anyone without being thought insane – and without a chance to get
away.

Unnoticed Daryl watched his partner incessantly. Ever since Rick had woken from his nightmare,
Daryl hadn’t been able to shed the feeling that something was wrong. Rick wasn’t just unnaturally quiet, he was frozen to the core. And while he appeared to be serious
now and suspicious of Aaron like they all were, there was something close to panic in his eyes,
visible only to those who knew him as well as the archer did. Daryl heard the silent scream, felt
Rick’s anguish and knew that there was more than mere concern.
But if this had been the moment to talk about whatever it was, Rick would have ask him for a private
conversation outside. Obviously this was neither the right time, nor the right place. And then maybe
there was another reason why Rick was reluctant to share his worries with his partner or anyone else.
He would, sooner or later. He always had. After all, there was still no reason for Rick to be doing all
the heavy lifting.
Chapter 3

Another nightmare started for Rick. One he had to watch helplessly with his eyes open and wide-
awake.

He couldn’t tell anyone about the dream. Not yet. And thus he did not have a reason to say ‘no’
when it came to taking a look at Alexandria. He could see it in their eyes – Aaron had convinced
them and they all longed to go see that promised paradise. There was no stopping them.

Everyone was hungry, tired and dirty beyond words. Nothing bad would happen tonight, so why not
let them get something to eat, a shower and a good night’s sleep? If Rick was being honest, he
wouldn’t have minded something else to eat than dogs, bugs, worms or thin air, either. And a
shower, shaving that gruesome beard and snuggling up in a warm, soft, cozy bed with Daryl … He
was almost convinced himself now.

Tomorrow was another day. The day he had to find a way to tell them, to convince them to
move on. Tomorrow.

When the group left the barn and followed Aaron to where the cars were parked, Rick felt as though
his feet were made of lead. Something seemed to pull him into the opposite direction and he had to
struggle to keep moving.

The little wheels in his head were turning and turning, but for the life of him he couldn’t come up
with a solution. How do you stop a ship from sinking once it has hit the iceberg?

Only marginally Rick noticed Daryl walk by his side, little Judith on his arm. When had their
daughter ended up on the archer’s arm? A frown flashed shortly over Rick’s face. He’d been
carrying her himself when they left, right? Apparently Daryl had lifted the girl off his arm without
him even noticing it.

Rick cast a side glance at his partner and was met by calm, yet concerned blue eyes that left no doubt
– Daryl knew that Rick was fighting an inner struggle. Of course, he knew – they were soulmates.

Rick would have loved to fill his lover in, was craving to share the load and get a second opinion,
but he couldn’t. Not yet. First he had to make sure that this was happening for real and that he wasn’t
just losing his mind. Again. If he needed him, Daryl would be there and that was a soothing thought.

Daryl would always be there, until the end.

Again Rick swallowed back tears and looked away quickly so Daryl wouldn’t see them.

The end … Daryl would be the last of their group to be alive. That wasn’t a blessing. It was a curse.

Daryl was doomed to watch everyone he loved die, including Rick, their children and Carol.

Doomed to endure being left alone in his agony and grief with no hope, no one to hold

him, no one to take the tears away.

Rick wouldn’t let that happen. He would spare all of them their fates, but especially Daryl’s had to
be altered.

Altered! Changed! A glimpse of hope rose inside of him.

Maybe that was all he had to do – change things, make the ship take another course, so it would
never even hit the iceberg. Maybe if he altered one or the other thing, the outcome would be a
different one and disaster wasn’t going to strike. Maybe he could find a way for them to live in
Alexandria without the Wolves or the walkers or the Saviors ever finding it. Maybe this is why he
had had that dream in the first place – to know what was about to happen and be able to change the
future for the better.

And the changes had already started. Originally they had left at sundown and he had forced Aaron to
take another road as planned. This time he’d been so distracted that he hadn’t paid attention to either
and they were about to head to Alexandria in broad daylight, on route 16 like Aaron suggested.

Rick nodded secretly to himself. Good. This is how they were going to play it. He didn’t have all the
information, hadn’t seen every single detail of their future, but he knew enough to do the changes that might be required to alter their fate. It was worth a try.

When they had reached the two vehicles that would take them to Alexandria, Daryl nodded towards the RV and said:

“Guess I best ride in there with Judith ‘n’ Carl. Watch out for ‘em, while ya have an eye on our guide there.”

“No.”

Rick was surprised to hear himself protest, although what Daryl said made perfect sense. It was safer in the RV for the kids, fact, but he had lost Daryl and Judith after the prison fell and it was by mere chance that they had found their way back to each other. And then in his dream the RV had just disappeared and was gone, along with Daryl and their children. He couldn’t take the chance of that happening again. Damn, but how was he to explain this now?

“You’re right”, he relented, “but … I’d feel better if we rode together in one car. You, me and the kids. And that Aaron dude. Can’t tell you why, it’s just …”

“’kay.”

No argument, no ‘buts’. Just a simple ‘okay’. This wasn’t the first time Daryl had reacted this way. He was most likely to give in, if someone said they made a decision or had to do something due to a notion, a hunch, a feeling. He gave a damn about what was the most logical thing to do.

“Ain’t Spock”, he used to say.

He followed his heart and so far that hadn’t betrayed him. So he respected anyone else who let heart rule over mind. And right now he could totally understand why Rick didn’t want for them to separate. He felt exactly the same way.

It was quiet in the car while they headed north on route 16. Rick was behind the wheel with Carl in the passenger seat and Aaron seated behind the boy, while Daryl rode in the backseat right behind Rick’s back, Judith securely in his arms.

“I’m right behind you.”

That’s what Daryl had said to him months ago in the prison and a small smile tugged on Rick’s lips now when he realized that even now Daryl was indeed right behind him. The archer barely ever missed a chance to prove that he meant what he had said. And apparently he still did not trust Aaron, which was why he had insisted on this seating arrangement.

“Yer gonna be drivin’, Rick”, he had said before they had left. “And the kids are gonna be there with us in the car. Ain’t gonna let that dude sit right behind ya or next ta ya, where he can attack ya.”

“Why would he do that?”

“’s a question I stopped askin’ a long time ago, man. People do stupid or shitty things for no reason whatsoever, but if that dude is plannin’ anything, he needs ta get passed me first. Period.”

This had been one of countless moments when Rick Grimes was reminded again why he had fallen in love with Daryl Dixon.

Fifteen minutes into their ride Aaron said suddenly:
“About a mile down the road there’ll be a tree marked with a ribbon.”

“A yellow one?” Carl cut in with an amused chuckle, but he earned only incomprehensive looks.

“That song”, he explained. “Mom used to love it. You know, the song about that dude coming home after he’s been in prison for three years. And he asked his girlfriend in a letter up front to tie a yellow ribbon to the tree in front of her house if she still wanted him.”

“Sappy crap”, came the grumbled remark from the backseat right on cue.

Rick almost laughed. He hadn’t expected anything else. Daryl was one of the most sensitive and emotional people he had ever met, but when it came to admitting that some sappy crap actually touched him, he’d always be a Dixon.

“Er, well”, Aaron stammered, “I wouldn’t know that song, sorry. The ribbon I was talking about marks the spot where my partner is waiting for me to pick him up. I did mention being with one other person out here, remember?”

Instinctively Daryl held Judith a little tighter.

“There better be just one dude out there, man.”

He placed a loving kiss on the baby’s soft blond hair and then lowered her gently into the foot well the same moment Rick said:

“Carl, get down.”

“What? But dad …”

“Don’t but dad me, just do as I say. This could be a trap.”

Rick knew that it wasn’t, that Aaron was in fact out here with just one other person, but things had been changed, so this part of the story might go down differently, too. He wasn’t going to take any chances.

Aaron couldn’t help sighing.

“What do I need to do for you to trust me? Everything I’ve told you so far was the truth, right?”

“As far as we can tell”, Daryl growled at him with his hand resting threateningly on the butt of his knife.

“But maybe that was just part a’ the plan ta lure us here. Ya better hope yer partner or whoever the heck is out there cares for ya enough not ta try nothin’ stupid, ‘cuz if they does, ‘m gonna rip yer head off right there ‘n’ then. Got it?”

Aaron just stared at him with wide eyes for a moment, before he swallowed thickly and nodded.

“You’ve made yourself quite clear there.”

Another chuckle sounded from the foot well of the passenger seat, but went unnoticed as the tree with the ribbon came into sight.

Slowly Rick stopped the car and held his arm out of the window to give a signal to the RV for everyone to keep their eyes open. As soon as the larger vehicle had come to a full stop, the roof hatches were being opened and the tips of rifles showed even before Sasha and Rosita stuck their
heads out.
Once again Rick felt proud and immensely blessed with this group.

The next moment a single man emerged from the woods with his hands raised and waited calmly for a reaction from the people inside the cars.

“Eric”, Aaron whispered with a happy smile on his face while he reached for the door handle, but Daryl pulled him back.

The curly-haired man cast him an almost desperate glance.

“Please, let me talk to him for a moment. I just need to know he’s okay.”

“Looks fine ta me.”

Cautiously Rick opened the door with his gun drawn and got out the same moment Abraham emerged from the RV. They both took a look around, but there was no sign of anyone else lurking in the nearby trees. Apparently this was not a trap.

“Hi. I’m Eric”, the slim red-haired man introduced himself.

“Yeah, I know”, Rick just replied and pointed with his thumb over to the RV. “Get in.”

Eric cast Aaron a glance and then reassured him with a smile that everything was alright before he hesitatingly walked to the RV. A moment later the door fell shut behind him, while Rick slipped behind the wheel and closed his own door as well.

Aaron sighed once more.

“He doesn’t like being out here.”

“Then why is he?” Rick replied with a glance over his shoulder.

“It’s our job. We’re recruiters, try to find new people to come to Alexandria. But he’s not made for how things are out here.”

“Got no one else ta do the job?” Daryl cut in.

“Not really. Maybe. I don’t know. He volunteered and it was never questioned. I guess he did it so we can be together.”

Rick and Daryl exchanged a look, then Rick turned back around and accelerated the car again.

“Yer that kind a’ partners?” Daryl asked while he picked Judith up and lifted her onto his lap.

“Guilty as charged”, Aaron replied softly. “I hope that’s no problem for you. People are still people even in an apocalypse, but for the most part we’re a pretty open-minded and liberal community. So if you …”

“’s cool, man. Chill.”

Daryl bounced Judith on his knees and then looked out of his window with a tiny smile playing around his lips. For the first time ever since that man showed up Daryl felt comfortable around him and had less concerns about the place they were going to.

Aaron was right – people were still people. And a lot of them held on to their narrow-minded and prejudiced ways of thinking. Daryl had grown up with homophobic people and had learned to hide
and pretend, but he was tired of it. On the farm and in the prison he and Rick had been able to be what they were – a couple, lovers, partners in every sense of the word. He didn’t want to hide and pretend ever again or be in a place where people made Rick feel as though he needed to be ashamed. Daryl had already heard every insult imaginable and was used to being treated like an outsider – or worse. It bounced off of him, so he didn’t care what people said about him. But no one would ever call Rick names or spit in his face for loving someone of his own gender. No one, unless they cared to end up with a crossbow bolt in their ass.

The closer they came to Alexandria, the more Rick’s heartbeat raced once again. There was no turning back now, so he was hoping and praying that things were already taking a different course. Maybe they would come to a completely different gate and the town beyond wouldn’t look anything like the one in his dream. Maybe everything that had appeared like a foresight so far was in fact no more than a coincidence. Maybe. And maybe not. The moment the gate came into sight all hopes vanished in an instant. It was exactly the same one.

With a mercilessly throbbing heart Rick stopped the car, got out and approached the wall in slow, hesitant steps. He heard the RV’s brakes creak behind him, car doors opening and people gathering behind him, but he didn’t turn to look. His eyes had come to rest on a sign next to the gate. A sign that was achingly familiar although it hadn’t been in any of Aaron’s pictures, and Rick didn’t even have to read it to know what it read.

Welcome to the Alexandria Safe Zone –
Mercy for the lost
Vengeance for the plunderers

That dream hadn’t been one and as of that moment Rick refused to call it that any longer. He had known who Aaron was before he had first met him. Had known what the man was going to say, knew about the place he was going to take them to. And he knew what this sign would read, although he had never been here before.

Dreams mixed and confused places and people a person knew and more often than not created the most absurd scenarios. What Rick had seen last night were pictures of stunning clarity, images of places and people he had never seen before in his life, scenes playing out in his mind that were going down exactly the same way now that he was awake.

A vision, a foresight, that’s what it’s been. And although he had altered some of the events, they had still ended up standing right in front of this gate.

“Ohpossum”, he thought suddenly.

Three seconds later a noise from a trash can to their left made everyone whirl around and aim their weapons, a heartbeat before Daryl shot the opossum that had caused the commotion.

Rick squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and breathed in deep.

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God.”

The sentry up on the wall had already seen and recognized Aaron and just gave a signal to the person on gate duty. Slowly, inch by inch the metal bars started moving to the side and Rick felt bile rise in his throat.

Any second now they would come face to face with that coward Nicholas, who had gotten Noah killed. Who will get Noah killed. These time lapses in his mind were starting to confuse Rick and he reminded himself not to punch anyone in the face for occurrences that hadn’t even transpired yet.

The next second a tall black man stood in front of them and watchful eyes moved from one face to
the next. Rick’s mouth gaped open. This was not Nicholas.

“Welcome”, the black man said reserved, but friendly. “I’m Scott. Come on in.”

Scott. Who the heck was Scott? Rick couldn’t recall anyone by that name, so either that man hadn’t been in his vision or reality had been altered and he didn’t exist in that other reality. Knowing his luck it was the first. Scott was probably just a tiny detail he hadn’t seen last night, not the proof he was hoping for that their fate had changed and followed a different track now. Originally they had arrived at a different time, so there was someone else on duty. Simple as that.

Aaron and Eric hugged and smiled at each other happily when they were reunited and then the curly-haired man took the lead.

“Come in, please, so we can close the gate.”

Slowly one by one they entered Alexandria and Rick could feel everyone’s reluctance and concern. No one had forgotten Terminus and a few of them had been at Woodbury, too. Entering this place was a risk and when the gate fell shut behind them no one felt safe. They all of them felt trapped and had to take one or the other deep breath to fight that feeling.

“Before we take this any further”, Scott addressed the group, “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to hand over your weapons.”

No one reacted and the black man started feeling uncomfortable.

“It’s how we live here. We don’t carry weapons throughout town. Only the sentries and people going on runs get to carry guns. So if you’re staying …”

“We don’t know if we wanna stay”, Rick cut him short and he could tell that it wasn’t just him thinking that.

Daryl was squirming next to him, obviously feeling highly uncomfortable in here, and he saw frowns on more than one of the other’s faces, too.

“It’s alright, Scott”, Aaron tried the diplomatic approach. “Let them talk to Deanna first.”


“She’s the head of this community and has been here right from the beginning. She can tell you everything you’d want to know about this place.”

“Jus’ wanna know if they got a back door”, Daryl muttered under his breath.

The comment went unheard when Aaron added:

“Rick, why don’t you go talk to her first?”

The leader breathed in deep and let his eyes wander over his people. He didn’t need to talk to Deanna to know what she had to say, to know what she expected of this group. These people here had been living behind walls all this time and very few of them had been out there at all, had ever come face to face with a walker, let alone killed one. She was probably aware of the fact that they were living on an island here, unprepared and oblivious to the dangers out there. She wanted experienced people to help her make this place even better than it already was. It was so ironic. Deanna was going to ask Rick to help her people survive, not knowing that it was Rick and his group who would set an avalanche in motion that would mean the
destruction of everything she has built.

Rick’s eyes flicked to Gabriel, who was standing in back by himself, clearly keeping his distance. He wasn’t part of the group, of the family. They had met him only a short while ago and it wasn’t easy to trust the man. Rick couldn’t remember if he and Gabriel would ever be friends, but at this point they were most definitely not. What the leader did remember about Gabriel was that he would warn Deanna, would let her know that he thought this group was dangerous.

“The day will come when they’ll put their own lives before yours and everyone else’s. And they will destroy everything you have here, everything you’ve been working so hard to build.”

It sounded like treason, but maybe Gabriel had a vision, too. In a way he was right – they would destroy everything she had worked for. Not deliberately, but they would. Their good intentions or maybe the arrogance to believe that they knew better than anyone else would cause Alexandria to go up in flames in the end. The people here had lived unbothered ever since the apocalypse started. At this point no Saviors or Wolves even knew they were here, until Rick and his group would draw too much attention. Maybe they had better leave right away. Leave these people alone and let them live their lives the way they had before. Deanna just let Alexandria’s doom in through the front gate, welcoming it with open arms.

Even in his vision Rick had warned her about letting people in, but she had seen that as a sign of concern and a will to protect her home. She hadn’t listened. Hadn’t seen that he was right. Today he would tell her the very same thing over – to keep the gate closed and be suspicious of strangers, even if they apparently meant well. And if she asked him again whether he warned her not to take his group in, he’d say ‘Yes’.

Whether she’d listen to him this time or not was up to her, but she had to know. She had a right do know. She deserved to know.
Chapter 4

While Rick was talking to Deanna, the rest of the group went exploring. They walked up and down one or the other street and took a closer look at the impressively large and well maintained houses. This place looked like one of the fancy new developments they had seen in ads and brochures. Before, places that were planned and built from scratch, not naturally grown towns, with solar grids and cisterns and houses neither of them could ever have afforded. It looked entirely misplaced in an apocalypse and no one was able to shed the uneasy feeling deep down inside. They stuck together, kept a watchful eye on doors, windows and on each other, while their hands rested on the butts of guns and knives. Their suspicion and uneasiness didn’t go unnoticed by Aaron and Eric, who accompanied them.

“You can relax”, Aaron said friendly. “No one is gonna harm you here.”

“Yeah, no offense”, Daryl retorted, “but we heard that before.”

“There were other communities”, Maggie explained. “Places where we were welcomed with open arms and smiling faces, too.”

‘n’ then we barely got out alive”, Daryl ended the sentence with a growl. “So we gonna relax when we’re goddamn ready to. Got it?”

Aaron and Eric exchanged a quick glance before the curly-haired man lifted his hands soothingly and nodded.

“We understand your concern. And after what you’ve obviously been going through, you’re right to be cautious. But what will it take to convince you that this is a good place to stay?”

Daryl hugged Judith a little tighter and stopped dead in his tracks, casting Aaron an icy glare.

“Makes ya think we’re stayin’?”

“Daryl.” Michonne was by his side suddenly and looked at him sternly. “We need this place. We need a home, and so far we haven’t seen any sign that it’s not a good place to stay.”

“Yeah, till we find out they’re hidin’ walkers in their closets ‘n’ the heads a’ their decapitated enemies in some fish tanks or try ta make us dinner.”

Unnoticed by anyone both Eric and Aaron grew as pale as a ghost.

“I don’t think …”, Michonne tried to protest again, but Daryl cut her short.

“Rick said we’s gonna take a look. ‘s what we did – take a look. He ain’t decided yet, didn’t say we’s gonna stay. Maybe there ain’t nothing that’s gonna convince him that this is really a good place ta stay ‘n’ he might say we’s gonna leave again. Best make up yer mind what ya wanna do then. Y’all.”

He cast a look around.

“We gonna stick together or ya gonna sell Rick for a soft bed ‘n’ a hot tub?”

“You shouldn’t have brought the soft bed and hot tub up”, Carol remarked with a tiny smile tugging on her lips.
When Daryl cast her a dark look the smile widened.

“I was joking, Daryl. It’s too early to decide, either way. We just got here, so give this place a chance.”

They continued walking down the road and as soon as Aaron and Eric were out of earshot she whispered to Daryl.

“Just want you to know – we’re doing the good new resident/bad new resident act here, okay? As long as they watch you closely, they don’t pay attention to me.”

“Jus’ so I ain’t gettin’ things confused – I’m the bad new resident, right?” he said sarcastically.

With a giggle she winked at him and then headed to the front of the group to do a little friendly chat with Aaron and Eric, while Daryl shook his head to himself. Being the bad new resident would be easy. He just had to let show how he felt about this place.

They met no one. Or rather, they didn’t get to talk to anyone, because people they passed on the street or who looked over to them from their front porches or windows just nodded as they passed or waved to Eric and Aaron, but otherwise just watched them with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

“Not too friendly”, Abraham commented dryly.

“Did you take a look at us lately?” Tara commented with a smirk. “I wouldn’t trust us, either.”

“It’s your weapons”, Aaron cast in. “Like Scott said – it’s the rule not to carry any guns inside the wall and, er, you are armed to the teeth as though you were going to war.”

“That’s because we are”, Sasha said flatly. “It is war out there, against the dead and the living alike. But how would you know, living in your ivory tower?”

That said she picked up pace and headed a few feet ahead. The conversation was most obviously over.

“She just lost her last family member, her brother”, Carol explained. “And her boyfriend before that. She’s bitter and angry – it’ll take time.”

Just when Aaron meant to reply, a door to their right opened and Rick emerged from the house. The relief that washed over him on seeing his people was palpable even over the distance. He hurried to meet up with them and let his eyes wander over the assembled group.

“Everything alright?”

“Fine”, Michonne assured him, while he lifted Judith off Daryl’s arm and locked eyes with his partner.

Daryl kept quiet, but it was obvious from the look on his face that ‘fine’ wasn’t what he would have said.

“How was your talk with Deanna?” Aaron addressed Rick.

“Interesting.”

He really did not know what else to say. That woman was impressive, intimidating in a likable way with her strong will and fascinating ability to read people. Her meeting Daryl sure should be
“Usually Deanna likes to speak to both the leader of a group and their right-hand man or partner before she interviews the rest of a group.”

He looked straight at Daryl.

“So, you wanna go next?”

The blue cat eyes even narrowed.

“Who told ya I’s his partner?”

“You just now, genius”, Rosita cut in, but Aaron shook his head with a smile tugging on his lips.

“No, I actually knew all the time. It is quite obvious. To me anyway.”

“The hell’s that supposed ta mean?”

“Just that I feel the vibes and see the same bond between you two that I’ve got with Eric, too. The way you’re looking at each other and …”

Before he could even finish the sentence Daryl grumbled something intelligible, turned on his heels and headed straight to Deanna’s house. Without even knocking he opened the door uninvited and slammed it shut behind himself a moment later.

Aaron flinched slightly, wondering if Deanna would appreciate this rude intrusion of her home.

“Did I say something wrong?” he asked bewildered.

“Uh-huh”, Tara replied with an amused sparkle in her eyes, “pretty much everything.”

“I’m really sorry about that. I didn’t mean to … Er, I didn’t just out them or something, did I?”

Abraham let out a guffaw.

“They ain’t that subtle. Believe me, after a couple of weeks on the road together with your eyes and ears open you know more than you care to know.”

Rick pulled a face and blushed despite himself. He didn’t even want to know what exactly Abraham was referring to – whatever it was, it sure was neither Abe’s, nor anybody else’s business.

“If you mind?” he stepped forward and drew Aaron’s attention again. “I’d appreciate it, if you wouldn’t discuss Daryl’s and my … private … stuff and things in front of my kids. Or anyone else for that matter.”

“Dad”, Carl cut in with a shrug and said nonchalantly: “We all know about your and Daryl’s private stuff and things. The cells in the prison didn’t even have doors, you know.”

Rick’s mouth gaped open while his ears turned a deeper shade of red.

“I don’t believe this”, he muttered to himself, before he decided that it was time for a change of subject.

“Where’s that house now you wanted to show us?”

“Hopefully the bedrooms there have doors”, Abraham murmured to Rosita, not really trying to keep it down though.
Rick cast him a glare.

“Enough.”

“What did I say?” Abraham asked innocently, but knew better than to keep teasing.

Obviously Rick wasn’t in the mood. Who could blame him? During the weeks out on the road, surrounded by over a dozen people all the time, the couples hardly got a moment to themselves. Especially since the little peeping perv Eugene was one of those people. Abraham could totally relate to Rick and Daryl’s crappy mood. He felt like he was ready to explode, too, so those bedrooms had better have doors.

“Both of them?”

The group stood in front of the two houses that Aaron had just taken them to. Despite the houses being beautiful, large buildings that looked very inviting and would most certainly have the soft beds and hot tubs Daryl had mentioned, there was tension in the air. Just a moment ago the Alexandrians had taken their guns away. It didn’t help to be reassured that they were still their property and they would get them back whenever they left town. For now they didn’t have them anymore and felt naked, vulnerable, exposed. The real danger might have been in here, not out there. And being stripped of their means of defense didn’t feel good at all.

“We’ll take the right one”, Rick said determinedly, displaying more confidence than he felt. He recognized these houses and he remembered that they had chosen the left one in his vision. This was one of the many little details he knew about and was able to change.

“I like the left one”, Carl disagreed. “It’s bigger and prettier and …”

“We’ll take the right one”, Rick insisted.

“But, dad …”

“Maybe I didn’t make myself clear”, Aaron interrupted the dispute gently. “They are both at your disposal.”

“Look”, Rick felt tired and worn out and wasn’t in the mood for discussions. “We’re in a strange place, surrounded by people we don’t know and you just took our guns. We’re not gonna split up. Until we know what this place is, we’re gonna stay in one house. The right one. End of story.”

That said he stomped off towards the house he had picked and one by one his people shrugged and followed him wordlessly. Only Carl stayed behind, pouting about having been brushed off like that.

“He never listens”, he grumbled to himself before he noticed that Aaron was watching him.

“You know, why don’t you try the right one tonight and maybe the left one tomorrow and then decide which one you’d all like to stay in? And maybe two days from now you feel comfortable enough to split up after all. Up to you. Just an idea.”

“Yeah, thanks”, Carl said with a sigh and then followed the others to the right house.

“If you guys need anything, I’m four houses down the street”, Aaron called after him.
“Whatever.”

On the front porch of the house Carol witnessed the exchange and smiled to herself. Some days Carl sounded more like Daryl than like Rick and she thought that was cute. She couldn’t wait for Judith to start talking.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I'm doing a "double feature" today, since it's freefromthecocoon's birthday.
All the best, dear!!

Rick stared at himself in the bathroom mirror and almost flinched. Jesus, was that really him? It had been a while since he’d last seen his reflection and in his memory that face looked differently. The scrubby, graying beard he hadn’t groomed in weeks was gruesome and made him look years older than he was. No wonder people looked at him suspiciously and almost afraid around here. He wouldn’t trust himself, either. There were deep lines around his eyes and on his forehead now. Lines that the months of worrying, lack of sleep and nourishment and too much sorrow had put there. And the layer of dirt didn’t help the overall shaggy appearance at all.

They had taken a look around both houses and had found them fully equipped. There was food in the fridges and kitchen cabinets, the beds had fresh linens on them and the bathrooms had supplies of toiletries for both the men and the women.

In the back of his mind Rick still heard the ladies’ enthusiastic squeals about the tampons and pantyliners, while Glenn and Abraham had both secretly slipped a box of condoms into their pockets. This place was the land of milk and honey and Rick couldn’t blame his people for acting like a bunch of kids in a candy store.

They had electricity, hot running water, food, beds and countless things they hadn’t seen in months. The longer they stayed, the more they would grow fond of all this. Each passing day it would be harder to tell them that he wanted to leave again. If he was unable to change fate for the better, leaving was the only option.

Rick knew what he’d be asking. He expected them to turn their back on paradise to live out there on the road again, with no shelter, no supplies, only the hard ground to sleep on, exposed to the elements and dangers 24/7 – because he’s had a dream.

Whether he told them about the vision or gave no explanation at all – it was unlikely for them to follow him any longer. Save for Daryl. His partner would be the only one who’d always stand by him, no matter what.

Maybe it was time to make a decision, to face the fact that Daryl, Carl and Judith might be the only ones to leave with him when the time came.

Would he just leave the others behind despite knowing what might be in store for this town? Was there any way to persuade them without proof? And if they wanted proof, was he willing to sit here and wait until the Wolves showed up or any other disaster would strike? It’d be too late by then.

Frustrated he ran his fingers through the unruly curls and sighed deeply before he started rummaging the cabinets for a shaving kit.

First things first. That beard had to go. Now. And then he’d take a hot shower and wash away the dirt – maybe, just maybe he could rinse off some of his worries along with it. Afterwards things might look brighter, clearer.

The hot jet of water that hit his head and shoulders and then cascaded down his body felt nothing short of heavenly. Rick couldn’t even remember the last time he had had a real shower. That must have been back at the prison.

How long ago had that been? A month? Longer? He was losing track of time, had long since
stopped counting the days since the outbreak. He measured the time that passed by his daughter’s growth and it amazed him time and again how much she had already grown – and that she was still alive at all, against all odds. No thanks to Rick, but because of Daryl first of all. If Daryl hadn’t been there, she would probably not have made it through her first day. If Daryl hadn’t been there, Rick wouldn’t be here today, either. Or Carl. And probably quite a few of the others. It pained Rick that Daryl measured his worth by the people he was not able to save – Sophia, Merle and Beth – instead of seeing the countless times he’d been there to save the lives of people that were still with them today.

The door of the shower stall opened a crack in that moment and, right on cue, Daryl stuck his head through the gap. He was in his birthday suit and for a moment Rick wondered how that man managed to get this dirty even in places that were usually covered by clothes. He seemed to be wearing that layer of grime like a trademark, but people who knew him, who were informed about his childhood, knew better.

“Hey”, the archer greeted his partner. “That space in there taken?”

“Daryl, this is a shower. Sure you got the right door?” Rick teased and laughed when Daryl snorted in fake annoyance.

“Jackass. Move over.”

He slipped through the gap and quickly closed the door behind himself to keep the wonderful hot steam inside. As soon as the water hit the older man, dark rivulets started running down his body and disappeared in a swirl down the drain.

Rick had suspected a long time ago that Daryl’s habit of shunning water went way back to the days when little Daryl Dixon had been the victim of child abuse on an almost daily base. There was a saying that ran: *If you don’t want to be touched, look downright untouchable.* The dirt was an armor, a shield, an attempt to have people stay clear of him. It probably hadn’t worked too well as far as Will Dixon was concerned, but the human mind worked in mysterious ways. Traumas weren’t easily overcome and taking a shower was like taking off the armor. It took a lot of trust on Daryl’s side, people close by he relied on and cared for. In this unknown place with dozens of strangers around, Rick would have expected Daryl to be the last one to wash up. Or to not do so at all. That he was here now showed his immense trust in Rick and the rest of the group to shield him as soon as his armor was gone. And they would. This group had become a family and Rick loved each and every one of these people dearly. The decision he might be forced to make almost broke his heart.

A hand slowly reaching out and touching his cheek derailed Rick’s train of thought. With a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth Daryl let the back of his hand run over his partner’s clean-shaved cheek, before he leaned in and kissed him gently.

“Hmm, ‘s nice bein’ able ta kiss ya without havin’ ta find ma way through that scrub first.” Rick chuckled.

“Is that envy I hear there?”

“Ya got water in yer ears? I sure as hell ain’t envious of havin’ ta shave with a machete.”

The leader broke out laughing, but then the word ‘machete’ sank in and the memories came flooding back. Memories of a machete with a red handle, of a church in the woods, Gareth and his gang and
how their confrontation had ended. 
And along with that memory an endless flow of terrifying pictures invaded Rick’s mind again all of a sudden and had him gasp. 
The smile vanished and he looked into the face of his man with a terrible stinging sensation in his eyes. Not all the dirt in the world would be able to protect Daryl against the maniac with the baseball bat. 

The archer watched the smile not only fade, but almost drop off of Rick’s face as though the steady stream of water had just washed it away. The amusement, that had made the cerulean orbs sparkle for that short precious moment, had disappeared and now they held that haunted look again that Daryl had noticed since that night in the barn. 

Something was going on. Something Rick wouldn’t or couldn’t tell him. 
He lifted his hands and combed his fingers gently through the wet, unruly curls and then leaned in to tenderly touch his lips to Rick’s once more. 

“Turn around”, he whispered to him. 

“Daryl …” 

“Shut up ‘n’ jus’ do as I say for once.”

The words sounded harsh, but the inflection was not. 
With a sigh Rick relented and turned around, trying to relax. He was well aware that Daryl didn’t share the shower with him to preserve water or because he couldn’t wait any longer to wash up. This wasn’t the first shower they’d taken together and he knew where this was headed. It had been a while since he and Daryl had had a chance to be together and he missed him achingly, but his heart wasn’t racing in anticipation – he was scared to death.
The pictures in his mind wouldn’t go away, wouldn’t let him find a moment of peace.

Daryl slipped his arms around Rick and pulled him flush against his chest, so that the warm water cascaded down both of their bodies now. He placed small, almost chaste kisses on Rick’s neck and shoulders while his hands caressed his partner’s chest and stomach tenderly. They went slowly, the fingertips making small circles, than the palms moving in larger circles – round and round, soft and gentle.

Rick relaxed into the touch, the feeling of Daryl’s skin against his own, skin on skin and the archer’s warm breath like a caress in the back of his neck. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Daryl reach past him and retrieve a bottle of shampoo, of which he audibly squeezed some into his palm. Then the hands were back. Fingers ran through Rick’s curls and tried to untangle them cautiously, right before the tips started massaging his scalp in firm movements. Despite the hot water, shivers ran down Rick’s spine and a soft moan escaped him. That felt so good.

“Stop thinkin’”, Daryl whispered in his ear. “Whatever’s botherin’ ya, it ain’t in here right now, so try ta forget it for a moment. Jus’ feel.”

Just feel. Rick tried to ban the vision from his mind, tried to concentrate on what he felt – on the softness and warmth of Daryl’s skin against his own, on the wonderful massaging fingers whose strong yet gentle touches made him shudder with pleasure, on the way his heart seemed to swell two sizes the way it always did when Daryl was with him. He never thought he could ever love someone as much as he loved that man.

Wham. The magical moment was destroyed again as the memory was back. 
Rick squeezed his eyes firmly shut and gritted his teeth, while he desperately tried to forget, not to think, to only feel.
Daryl’s hands left his head and worked their way down to the tense neck and shoulder muscles, kneading them and poking his thumbs into them until Rick started to squirm. It was both painful and a relief at the same time and he deeply appreciated what Daryl was trying to do, but nothing was able to drive the real tension away. Nothing. Unless he found a way to save his people, Daryl first of all.

How was he supposed to relax, to forget, to just feel when the knowledge of Daryl’s fate tortured him to no end.

He couldn’t forget the way this wonderful man had ended up all alone, chained to a wall in the Kingdom after he had to watch the last survivors of his group, including the love of his life, being killed right before his eyes. Mercifully Rick had woken up before he had seen what more was in store for Daryl, but that wasn’t too hard to imagine. That Negan guy was a sick, perverted bastard and it seemed to give him immense pleasure to torture Daryl, for whatever reason. He wouldn’t let him off the hook easily or quickly. He would keep him alive for as long as only possible, force-feeding him to make sure Daryl was going to last a few days, maybe even weeks longer. Weeks in which he was unable to sit or lie down, because the cuffs and chains held him in place, forced him to stand until his legs would give way and he ended up kneeling the way Negan wanted him to. Weeks in which he had to endure fatigue, the heat at daytime and the cold at night, while the walker versions of his lover and close friends next to him started decaying, their stench and incessant hissing and snarling keeping him awake. He would have to bear all that in addition to Negan’s scorn and derision and the man’s sneer when Daryl would literally be pissing his pants sooner or later. Pain and humiliation for days, maybe weeks – that was the way Daryl Dixon would spend his last moments on Earth.

With a suppressed sob Rick turned on his heels and pulled Daryl into a tight hug. The water of the shower concealed the tears that ran down his cheeks, but somehow the archer had a way of knowing when Rick was crying, whether it showed or not.

“You know that I love you, don’t you?” Rick choked out.

A frown appeared on Daryl’s face and he meant to pull back to look into his partner’s eyes, but Rick tightened his hold instantly.

“Rick, c’mon, talk to me. What is it?”

“Promise me something, Daryl”, Rick picked up without answering the question.

“Sure. Anything.”

The archer couldn’t help a very uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Whatever was going on, it was scaring Rick witless.

“Whatever happens, promise me you’ll never doubt and never forget how much I love you.”

“Yer startin’ ta scare me, man.”

“Just promise. – Please.”

“Yeah, sure, I promise.”

He succeeded in pulling back this time and looked his lover in the eyes.

“’s an unnecessary promise, ya know. I know how ya feel. Hope ya know that I feel the same.”

The wet curls bounced as Rick nodded.
“’kay. Now, wanna tell me what’s goin’ on?”

“I can’t. Not yet anyway. There’s something I need to work out first.”

Daryl’s eyebrows rose to his hairline.

“Work out, huh? Now I’m really worried.”

It was an uncharacteristic attempt to lighten the mood by joking, but it didn’t work. With a sigh Rick just let his head drop onto Daryl’s shoulder and savored the feeling of warm hands that ran over his back once more.

“Sorry”, he said in a choked voice. “This is not what you came here for, huh?”

“Came here for you”, Daryl responded matter-of-factly, before he pressed his lips to the side of his friend’s head.
“Promise me somethin’, too?”

Rick nodded without lifting his head.

“Don’t forget I’m on yer side, no matter what. If ya need me, I’m here. Ya still don’t need ta do all the heavy liftin’ or work things out by yerself. ‘kay?”

“’kay”, Rick echoed and for a moment the ghost of a smile flashed over both faces.

“Hey, you two lovebirds in there!”
A loud male voice sounded from outside, accompanied by a fist banging at the door.
“There’s people out here who’d appreciate it if you left some hot water. Get off already and wrap it up!”

“Abraham!” Rosita’s chiding voice sounded down the corridor. “What the hell’s the matter with you?”

“What? I mean, jeez, after weeks out on the road with the whole kit and caboodle and no time to bump some uglies this shouldn’t take nearly that long. I know it won’t as soon as we’re in there, babe.”

“Great. That sounds very promising”, the Latina retorted sarcastically.
Chapter 6

When Rick and Daryl came into the family room – Rick dressed in a clean shirt and a new pair of jeans, while Daryl had donned his old, dusty and sweaty clothes – they were all there. The entire group.

While Daryl cast the grinning Abraham a killer scowl, wordlessly warning him to say but a single word, Rick looked around himself with new knots building in his stomach.

This picture was achingly familiar. Although this was another house and another room, the scenario remained unaltered.

They had gathered every pillow and blanket they could find and had spread them out on the floor to make up camp for the night. No one had even considered not staying with the others. All the bedrooms in this house with their wonderful soft, warm beds – and doors – would be left unoccupied that night, although Rick was longing for a good night’s sleep snuggled up to Daryl. Every single second together with his man was twice as precious, now that he knew what fate they might be headed for. Then again, every single second with each of these people was twice as precious now, too, so the sleeping arrangements were perfect actually.

There was a light knocking at the door and when Rick opened, he found Deanna on the doorstep. He wasn’t even surprised.

His vision hadn’t shown him every single detail, but this he remembered. She would tell them that she just meant to see how they were settling, only to be fascinated by the fact that she found them all in one room together.

“It’s absolutely amazing to me how people with completely different backgrounds and nothing in common could become a family.”

Rick let his eyes wander over the assembled people and swallowed against a lump in his throat. In his vision he hadn’t realized it, but now it was crystal clear to him. She was wrong, that’s why she couldn’t understand.

“Backgrounds don’t mean a thing anymore in this world”, Rick let her know. “And we do have things in common. We all want to survive, at any cost. But unlike those who just take and only fight for themselves, we are all willing to give. We share – not just supplies, but love, trust and loyalty. That’s what makes the difference. That’s what makes us a family. The will to fight for each other, not just ourselves.”

“I see.” Deanna smiled at him. “I knew I was right to bring you in. Our people here have a lot to learn from you.”

Jobs. Rick remembered originally asking about her plan to give his people jobs, but this time he kept quiet. Every change, however minor, might make the difference.

When he didn’t say anything more, she nodded to everyone before focussing on the leader again.

“Looks good”, she commented to his clean-shaved face. “I didn’t know what was under there.”

“And you still don’t”, he couldn’t help thinking.

When she was half-way out of the door, Deanna turned around once more and said:

“By the way, it’s part of this place for everyone to get a job, do their part. I think I’ve got the
perfect one for each of you, except Mr. Dixon.”
She smiled Daryl’s way, but the smile wasn’t returned.
“I haven’t figured him out yet”, she continued. “But I will.”

“Yeah, fat chance”, Daryl thought to himself, while he turned away to check on Judith who was sleeping in a nearby crib.

It annoyed him that Deanna was talking about him in third person as though he wasn’t there or couldn’t hear her.
Nobody asked her to figure him out or make him her latest project, give him a job and mold him, so he would fit into her white-picket-fence-community. He had never had a job before the apocalypse and he sure as hell was not going to start now – work for these people, be something he was not, change to fit in, be tamed and molded to their expectations and specifications.
Maybe being a Dixon still was nothing to be proud of, but Rick and the others, they saw something in him, appreciated, even loved him just the way he was. So being Daryl apparently was something worth being.
He had no intention whatsoever to forget who he was. He’d never be just a piece of the puzzle like everyone else in this town – like shape, like color, so they would fit into the picture. Him being who he was had helped keep his people alive and he had nothing to prove. He’d always be Daryl. Period. Deanna could take her job and put it where the sun didn’t shine.

Rick closed the door behind the woman and breathed in deep.
Damn, this wasn’t working. Despite him changing their location and the course of the conversation, things had played out exactly the way they had in his vision. No matter what he did, the outcome was the same. If it didn’t even work with minor things, there was probably no way to prevent the major events from happening, either.

His eyes wandered over the faces of his people and he saw an odd mixture of fatigue, confusion and hope there. They didn’t know what to make of this place and being exposed to this strange environment without their guns made them feel uneasy, but they wanted to believe in this town, wanted to trust these people, wanted this to be the end of their journey. The longer they stayed, the more unlikely it would be for anyone to still consider leaving here again.

Tomorrow. He’d give this some more thought tomorrow. Nothing bad would happen tonight and they all needed rest badly. Daryl first of all, since he hadn’t slept the previous night, either.
As though they had heard his thoughts, one by one people stretched out on the floor, the couch and the armchair in the corner. After weeks out on the road nobody was choosy any longer. Rick audibly locked the door before he joined Daryl by Judith’s crib and took a look at his peacefully sleeping daughter.
He envied her for her ability to sleep at any time and any place, unimpressed by walkers, a destroyed world and people fighting for their lives. This was the world she’d be growing up in. She would probably never know it any other way.

“I’ll take first watch”, Sasha said from where she was standing, but Rick shook his head.

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary. The windows and doors are locked and if these people here meant any harm, they would have done it already. I think it’s safe to sleep, Sasha.”

She didn’t look too convinced and a few concerned or surprised glances were exchanged between those who were still awake. But in the end they all shrugged and welcomed the chance on an undisturbed sleep. It had been a while since they had dared not to take turns on sentry duty.
The moment Sasha had turned the lights off, the sound of soft snores and deep breathing filled the room as though she had switched her companions off as well.
Daryl stretched out in the gap between Judith’s crib and the window sill, while Rick tucked his baby daughter in and placed a loving kiss on her fine blond hair. Heaven only knew who passed blond hair on to that child, since neither he, nor Shane or Lori had it.

“Blond hair is a genetic component inherited recessively”, Eugene had explained to him the other day. “Just like intelligence and good looks it can skip a generation.”

There were days that Rick felt inclined to just shoot the man, but he had learned his lesson. Eugene was a nerd and had the tactfulness of a sledge hammer, but they’d need him. People who were able to build and repair and drop remarks that made even Abraham speechless were invaluable companions.

When he was certain that Judith was well taken care of and his eyes had adjusted to the twilight enough to see Carl sleep soundly as well, Rick turned his attention to Daryl. He had known that Daryl would pick this spot to sleep even before the archer had stretched out there – Rick could have placed a bet on that and would have won easily.

The rest of the group didn’t mind sleeping like a bunch of groundhogs in hibernation – several people on either side, arms and legs touching more often than not and someone constantly breathing in their face or neck. Daryl was never in the middle of that pile. He was always found in a corner or with his back against a wall, with no one close by than Rick and the kids and this just now – the gap between the window and a piece of furniture – was like his own personal cave. A hideout.

Rick wondered how many times little Daryl had to hide under beds and in closets, and how many times he had slept there, too, hoping that his violent father wouldn’t find him. So many years, so many miles and an apocalypse separated Daryl from Will Dixon now, but apparently he’d never be able to escape him. He carried his old man with him wherever he went.

There was nothing Rick could do to protect him from the demons of his past, but he’d do whatever was humanly possible to keep the ones of his future away from him.

Slowly but surely normality started creeping in, whether they were aware of it or not. Bit by bit the world out there retracted and was pushed into the back of their minds as the people of Rick’s group only too willingly accepted what was offered.

They had cereal for breakfast with real milk, toast with butter and honey, pancakes and even coffee. A normal breakfast. They had all of them the badly needed shower, brushed their teeth with brand-new toothbrushes and toothpaste, dressed in new and clean clothes. Normal. Those who’d already been assigned for a job left the house to go to work, as though the apocalypse had never happened, as though it had all just been a bad dream.

Only Rick knew that this was the bad dream and he felt more helpless than ever.

He didn’t blame them for trying to adjust. Why shouldn’t they, although he hadn’t said they were staying yet? He hadn’t said they were leaving, either, so what were they supposed to do?

Deanna hadn’t told Rick in detail what kind of jobs she had given to his people and no one informed him where and when everybody would be doing them. The group was split and the helm had been taken out of Rick’s hands, which made him feel twice as on edge as he’d felt before.

She had offered to give him his old job back – being a sheriff. During their first conversation he had told her that this was what he had done before the apocalypse, and she hadn’t been surprised, had said that she knew it was something like that.

Rick had no idea how it showed. Because he was giving orders? Because he was willing to do whatever was necessary to protect his people – protect and serve?

That was just part of the truth, only part of who Rick Grimes was now. He had long since stopped
being Officer Friendly and had tainted the uniform often enough. Rick couldn’t tell if he ever wanted to wear it again, if he was ready to.

Michonne was. That’s what Deanna thought. She’d been offered the same job and was supposed to work alongside Rick, but since the leader hadn’t accepted yet, she had started patrolling the town by herself.

Which was a good thing. Before the second day ended she had to settle the first dispute between Rick’s people and some of the Alexandrians.

Glenn had gotten into a fight with Deanna’s son Aiden and Daryl had almost roughed up that Nicholas dude. Michonne had stopped it with the help of Deanna and some of their own people and that was definitely part of the problem, would always be part of the problem – it was them and us. That way of thinking was unlikely to ever change, no matter what they did, no matter how long they’d be here – it would always be the group and the others. In time the lines might blur and they were likely to make new friends here, some would even find love, but if it came to taking sides family would always be family although they weren’t people related by blood.

Rick learned about the confrontation that night at dinner. A dinner they were having together the way they had the previous weeks – sitting on the floor as though they were reluctant to sit at a table and for the most part eating with their fingers as though they had forgotten how to use silverware. A part of them was still out there. A part of them wanted to stay ready to be out there. And Rick was well aware of the fact that a few of them actually longed to be out there again.

Sasha was one of them and most definitely Daryl.

The blankets and pillows were still spread on the floor to give some comfort for the night to come. Again the bedrooms would remain unoccupied and the beds unused.

They were all of them torn. While they tried to fit in and adjust on the one hand, they were afraid to do just that on the other. And some of the Alexandrians telling them to the face that they didn’t belong here, made things even more complicated.

Rick took a bite from the dinner roll in his hand and forced to chew it a few times before he reluctantly swallowed it down. It tasted like tar paper. Everything did as a matter of fact, which had nothing to do with the food, but with the way his mouth was parched and his stomach in tight knots. Every second of the day he expected something terrible to happen and every shout, every loud noise made him jump. The knowledge, the certainty that something would happen, but not knowing when drove him crazy.

He hadn’t slept the previous night at all. Had ended up pacing and searching the house for anything they could use as weapon in case of an attack. Instead of getting some rest he had ended up pulling knives out of kitchen drawers, counting them and making sure they were sharp enough, before he had checked the garage for tools like screwdrivers and hammers.

When he had put Judith down for her nap that day he had tried to finally get some sleep as well, but each time he had closed his eyes the horrible pictures of his vision had haunted him instantly. By dinner time he had found a hatchet and had added some gardening tools and even nail files to their armory. It had become an obsession and the lack of sleep clearly showed now.

If only that glimpse into the future had been more precise. What good was knowing about events to happen, if he didn’t know when?

He remembered Judith’s looks the last time he had seen his little girl in that vision. She’d been able to walk, had said her first words, was able to eat unattended, making even less a mess than Daryl at the table, and she had had those adorable long blond locks. She’d been a toddler of round about two, not a baby any longer, so everything that was going to happen would take place over the course of months.

But there was no telling when it would start.
Maybe today, maybe tomorrow, maybe next week or three months from now – Rick didn’t have a clue when those Wolves or the Saviors would show up. All he could do was sit and wait that they would, if they would. This situation was unbearable.

Even if he kept trying to change the course of fate, he had no way of knowing if it worked. At least until Judith would celebrate her third birthday without any Wolves or Saviors having paid them a visit. That would be cause for hope, but no certainty.

Rick had changed minor details before and it did have small effects, but the whole picture had remained the same. Maybe any change would merely postpone the inevitable or just alter it. Maybe the groups attacking them wouldn’t be the Wolves or the Saviors, but no matter what they called themselves, someone was going to find this place sooner or later and try to take what these people had here.

And if that happened, Rick’s group would fight back. They didn’t know it any other way. Whether months from now or years, one day Alexandria would go up in flames if they stayed. Probably. Maybe. Damnit, he had to know.

“Are you gonna eat that or are you planning to feed the birds with it?” Tara’s voice ended his train of thought.

He cast her a confused look.

“What?”

“The roll.”

When he looked down he found his hand balled into a fist, and without even realizing it he had started to crumble the roll in it.

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with feedin’ the birds”, Daryl came to his defense from where he was standing by the front door.

“ Wouldn’t mind a couple a’ fat doves.”

“Urgh”, Rosita tossed in with a wrinkled nose. “Those flying rats?”

Daryl cast her a piercing look.

She sounded just like Lori right now, being a picky little princess even in the middle of a fucking apocalypse. Lori wouldn’t have made it in this world, even if Judith’s birth hadn’t killed her. Rosita was a fighter, she was tough, she could take care of herself. And still – apparently this place had some influence on people already and it wasn’t one Daryl appreciated.

“Yeah, right, them flyin’ rats. They’re food, just like ‘em real rats ‘n’ out there they’s good enough for ya.”

“We’re not out there anymore”, she shot back with blazing eyes and for a moment tried to stare Daryl down.

A futile attempt, of course. He had invented that game. Rick watched the exchange with a painfully throbbing heart.

“We’re not out there anymore.”

It had started. Some of his people had already decided on staying, while others had clearly not. He had to make a decision for all of them – soon – or they would make up their minds by themselves and tear the group apart.

“What happened by the gate?” he said into the tense silence that had followed the little dispute.
and drew everybody’s attention.

“Don’t worry about it, Rick”, Michonne replied. “It’s settled.”

“That’s not what I’ve been asking.”

She exchanged a quick look with Glenn and Daryl, but before she had a chance to say anything, Glenn beat her to it.

“Tara, Noah and I, we were out there with Aiden and Nicholas. They had a walker tied up to take revenge, because it killed one of their friends. It got away and those douchebags wanted us to just catch it again, so they could play their sick little game. They almost got Tara killed and still that Aiden asshole was in my hair for putting the walker down. Said we were supposed to do things exactly as he says and that we weren’t ready to be out there. Dig that.”

“So you punched him?” Rick asked.

“He started. Tried to hit me first.”

“Huh”, Rick acknowledged that with a nod and then cast a glance to Daryl, waiting for his explanation.

“Guy shoved Glenn, was tryin’ ta hit him in the face”, the archer grumbled. “He deserved ta land on his ass. Same as that Nicholas dude. He was gettin’ involved ta help Aiden – two against one ain’t fair, so I squared it.”

Rick pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers and sighed. He didn’t shy away from confrontations, he was just getting tired of them. And after all they had been through he would have wanted some peace for his people, too, but apparently they were all of them magnetic to trouble.

Nicholas and Aiden. He couldn’t remember Aiden from his vision, didn’t know his fate or what his part in the game was, but he remembered Nicholas. And he remembered what was going to happen to Noah. Someday. Somewhere. Somehow.

“Look, we need to try and get along with these people for as long as we’re here.”

“So we’re supposed to let them harass us?” Tara protested.

“No, but if possible avoid situations like that. Stay clear of Aiden and Nicholas.”

“Especially you, Noah”, he added mentally.

He would have liked to voice a clear warning, was urged to tell Noah specifically not to go on any runs with Nicholas, but he couldn’t. They would want to know why, so for now this general instruction had to do. He’d try to keep an eye on Noah.

When he looked around he saw acceptance in the other’s faces, but they didn’t like it. ‘Staying clear’ meant keeping their mouth shut and their head low, instead of standing their ground.

With an audible snort Daryl turned around on his heels and left the house, slamming the door shut behind him.
Chapter 7

Rick found his partner on the front porch, smoking a cigarette and staring out into the darkness. He stood totally motionless and didn’t say a word, but his anger and annoyance were palpable.

“Hey”, Rick addressed him cautiously. “Are we good?”

“Yeah”, Daryl replied without turning, “ain’t you. ‘s this place. And ‘em people here.”

The leader came to stand right behind his partner’s back and slipped his arms around Daryl’s middle, pulling him close.

“You don’t like it here, do you?”

Daryl took another deep drag from his smoke and then exhaled the gray smoke into the night sky, watching silently as it built a swirling cloud for a moment and then was gone.

“Ain’t ‘bout me”, he replied almost inaudibly a moment later. “Li’l Asskicker and Carl, they deserve a roof. ‘s what I told Deanna, too.”

“We all do.”

Rick leaned his head to the side of Daryl’s, so that his curls mixed with the archer’s straight strands. They just stood like that for a moment, savoring this moment of peace so close to each other, both wishing they’d be somewhere else.

“So we’re staying?” Daryl croaked after a while.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Don’t wait too long. Most a’ ‘em peeps in there are settlin’ in already, get acquainted, do their jobs. If they’re gettin’ too comfortable here, they gonna let their guard down, grow weak. Ya can’t hit the road with a bunch a’ domesticated pansies.”

Frustrated he took a step forward, away from Rick, and tossed the butt of his cigarette onto the sidewalk. He was well aware of the fact that littering was an offense in this town, which was precisely why he did it.

The way Daryl was talking about ‘them’ when referring to their group didn’t go unnoticed and it hurt Rick to see his partner so out of sorts. It had taken him so long to place trust and affection in a number of people and he had become part of the family, was one of ‘them’. But apparently Daryl didn’t feel like he belonged anymore – not with their group and not with the Alexandrians. He was lost somewhere in between. For him, Rick would have loved to pack up this moment and leave. But Daryl was right – it wasn’t about him.

Judith and Carl did deserve a roof, a home, a safe place to grow up and this town couldn’t be entirely ruled out yet.

Rick remember this conversation with Daryl from his vision, but last time Carol had joined them out here. It was her who had voiced concern about this place making the group weak, if they got too comfortable here.

Rick had secretly cast a glance to the door a few times, but Carol hadn’t come out. Something had changed. Something he had done or said had made a difference.

What if their entire fate was already altered? What if leaving this place was the mistake now, not
staying? What if they were safe here and Rick would lead them to their doom out there? How was he to know?

This entire situation was going to drive him insane sooner or later.

“So, ya gonna be a cop again?” Daryl’s voice derailed his train of thought.

“Maybe. I could give it a try for as long as we’re here.”

“Huh.” Daryl lit another smoke and Rick saw how his entire body tensed up. “So, you ‘n’ Michonne, huh? She yer wingman now?”

Rick felt as though he’d been punched in the guts. He remember the day back at Hershel’s farm, when Shane had said something similar to him.

“Wanna take Daryl as your wingman? Be my guest.”

Shane’s words had been a mixture of jealousy, hurt pride and derision – Rick had decided to replace him, Shane Walsh, with a sassy, unkempt redneck. Shane hadn’t considered Daryl even half as good as himself and being replaced by him as Rick’s sidekick was the most ridiculous, most offensive thing he’d ever heard. Many times, ever since that day Rick had wondered what Shane would say, if he saw them now – as partners in any meaning of the word, lovers, soulmates. Would he hate them? Or would he be happy for them?

Daryl’s inflection right now wasn’t in the least peppered with jealousy, hurt pride or derision. There was clearly a tinge of fear and sadness he wasn’t able to hide. Separation anxiety, that’s what it was, and the panic to end up … meaningless, redundant. He was a tracker, a hunter and Rick’s right-hand man. Out there. But in here there was no requirement for a tracker and hunter. This town produced enough food and they had supplies that would last a while, so there was no need for anyone to go hunting. Besides, none of the Alexandrians would ever consider eating squirrel or opossum and the likes. All Daryl had left was being Rick’s wingman – that was his job, his meaning. Without that he was nobody again, nothing. Just the outsider in a town full of people that feared him and looked at him with suspicion and rejection. The walls seemed to be moving in on him a little more with each passing minute and that crowd of prejudiced people was smothering him. He felt lost, alone, confused and entirely out of sorts – Rick was his anchor, his fixed star in this darkness, but Deanna had assigned someone new to his partner’s side. Had given his accustomed spot to Michonne and pushed him aside. She had no idea how much that hurt, what she had done.

“Don’t do that.”

Rick closed the distance between them to hug Daryl again, but the archer avoided him. While he took another drag from his smoke, he started pacing with visible agitation.

“Daryl, it’s just a job. Michonne’s gonna do a little patrolling around town with me and we gonna put a couple of those Alexandrians in their place, but other than that …”

“I can do that.”

A smile tugged on Rick’s lips.

“I said put them in their place, not stomp their ass.”
“Ya sure?”

The smile on Rick’s face widened.

“Nope.”

With a hand gently placed on Daryl’s shoulder he stopped the archer’s pacing and for a long, silent moment they just looked each other deep in the eyes. Then Rick lifted his hand off Daryl’s shoulder and cupped his partner’s cheek instead.

“It is just a job. You’re always gonna be my wingman.”

He leaned in and rested his forehead against Daryl’s until he felt some of the tension in the archer’s body subside and the agitated breathing calm.

“Let’s go back inside, huh?”

He pecked Daryl’s lips gently and then pulled back.

“We should get some rest.”

“Yeah. Ya got a workday ahead a’ ya. Right, Officer?”

There was a tinge of sarcasm that Daryl was unable to hide and Rick realized that a few comforting words weren’t enough to end the crisis. It would take a long time for his partner to adjust to Alexandria and feel somewhat at home here. And then, maybe he never would.

“You’re not off the hook yet”, the leader teased, trying to lighten the mood. “Deanna is gonna find a job for you, too.”

‘Pff, yeah, I bet. Prob’ly somethin’ ‘em people here think appropriate – like gatherin’ the trash or cleanin’ the sewer or somethin’.”

“You could hunt some rats for dinner”, Rick tried to joke, but it fell flat.

“Daryl, whatever you’re gonna do around here, it’ll have a meaning – for everyone living here. And no matter what, you’ll always be an important member of our group.”

The archer’s face remained a stony façade and he didn’t answer. ‘Important member of the group’, right. As if anyone had needed him for anything that day or the one before, or the next. They had been out there somewhere that day – doing runs, patrolling town, building a new government with Deanna, working on the wall, whatever. Even Rick had been too busy to spare a moment while he was trying to work things out, pacing the house, brooding and gathering weapons. Whatever was worrying him, he didn’t think it necessary to share the load with his partner. That’s how important Daryl was.

The only one who had appreciated and needed Daryl’s presence that day was Judith, but taking care of a baby wasn’t rocket science. Everyone could do that. Little by little, step by step Daryl was fading into insignificance, was totally redundant in a town that just wasn’t built for the likes of him. They would all of them start a new life here, one that was similar to the one they had left behind, before the apocalypse. And no one needed an unkempt, uneducated, foulmouthed redneck in that new world.

The archer swallowed thickly against a lump in his throat. Rick.

“I need you.”

That’s what Rick had said to him once. A moment Daryl would never forget, the words firmly engraved in his memory. No one had ever needed him for anything and it had felt overwhelming to have a meaning suddenly, to be needed.
But that had been out there. Just like this town and their group did not need Daryl any longer, soon Rick wouldn’t either. How long would it take for the leader to walk around this neat, high-class town and feel ashamed of the man by his side? How long until he started wondering if perhaps someone else would suit him better? Someone who had a good education, so he could have long, in-depth conversations with them over a glass of wine at the dinner table with silverware, napkins, tablecloth and all – something the archer had barely ever seen in his life. How long until Rick saw an outsider in Daryl, too?

“‘You’re okay?’” Rick’s words tore into Daryl’s dark brooding when the silence lasted too long.

“‘Yeah, sure’”, the archer grumbled while he was fighting the urge to grab Rick’s hand, pull him to the gate and urge him to run away with him right now.

A silly notion that came and went in a second, but the thought remained. Leave. Get out of here. Run as far away as only possible, so he wouldn’t lose Rick, his family, his worth. Everything he’d ever loved.

“‘What changed?’”

The archer’s voice stopped Rick at the door and with a frown the younger man pulled his hand back from the knob and cast him a confused glance.

“‘Changed?’”

“‘Back in the barn ‘n’ b’fore we came here, ya was spooked by somethin’, didn’t wanna come here. And now yer considerin’ ta stay, wearin’ that uniform again, settlin’ in. What made ya change yer mind?’”

“‘Nothing’s changed. It’s like I said – I haven’t decided yet, I’m just considering both options. And in the meantime we can just as well participate here and see how things work out.’”

“‘Huh. So whatever crap job Deanna gives me, ya want me ta do it?’”

“I don’t want you to do anything, Daryl. It’s your call whether you accept a job or not. Actually, if you wanna stay around the house to take care of Judy, that’d be perfect. Would make me feel better to know she’s protected and in good hands.”

Daryl’s heart skipped a beat.

“‘Ya mean it?’”

“‘Course I do.’ He took a step closer to the archer and leaned in, his face only inches away from Daryl’s.

“I know your hands”, he whispered to him and the innuendo had a smile tug on both of the men’s lips.

“‘Uh-huh. Glad ya remember.’”

He hooked his thumbs into Rick’s waistband and pulled him close. A second before their lips met Abraham’s voice called out to them from inside.

“‘Hey, 10 p.m. Lights out. Get a move on out there.’”

“‘Abraham, for crying out loud’, Rosita scolded right on cue, but was cut short by Eugene’s
voice by the window.

“They’re not doing anything yet, in case you care to be accurately informed.”

Rick sighed audibly.

“One of these days I might feel inclined to kill them”, he muttered to Daryl. “Not today, not tomorrow, but one day …”

“What’s stoppin’ ya?” Daryl growled with a scowl towards the house.

“Whether they deserve it or not, they might still come in handy. So just stop me, okay?”

“Hell, no. They’re askin’ for it, especially Abraham. This is the sixth time he’s interrupted a kiss … or more. Ya know the drill – just gimme a signal.”

They looked at each other wordlessly for a moment, then a smile slowly crept onto both faces until they were grinning at each other. It was a rare peaceful moment and Rick drank in the sight of Daryl’s wide smile like a sponge. He couldn’t even tell when he had last seen his partner grin like that. It felt like a lifetime ago.

Only a few heartbeats later the smiles were gone again and both men reluctantly headed to the door to join the rest of the group. Neither of them would have minded one of the bedrooms to themselves now, instead of the narrow gap between Judith’s crib and the window sill. Maggie and Glenn, just like Abraham and Rosita were probably craving some privacy as well.

Rick decided secretly to break camp the next day. Although allowing his people to settle in meant conforming to the way things originally happened, he was willing to take that chance. Forcing the group to stay together in this room for another night or even longer would most certainly result in mutiny.

“There’s something Deanna wanted me to tell you all”, Maggie announced the moment Rick and Daryl came inside.

All eyes were instantly on her.

“She is planning a welcome party for us tomorrow evening at her house. It’s to make us officially part of this community and introduce us to the rest of the people living here.”

“So ‘s gonna be a fuckin’ crowd over there”, Daryl grumbled and it wasn’t a question.

“I suppose”, Maggie replied, not without empathy. She knew how much the archer hated crowds.

“Whadda you guys think? Are we going?”

“We have to”, Carol replied instantly.

“Because it would be impolite to reject her invitation?” Tara tossed in.

“No, because they might have beer”, Abraham grinned and was once again nudged forcefully by Rosita’s elbow.

“Because”, Carol picked up, “we need to arouse as little suspicion as only possible. If we keep up appearances, try to fit in, they’ll start to trust us and let their guard down.”

“What for?”
She shrugged and cast a look around.

“Just so we can stay prepared. Although this seems to be a good place, it looks as though we all still have our doubts.”

Rick looked at her in surprise.

“What makes you think so?”

“We are all still staying in one room, aren’t we? And you’re not the only one who’s gathered knives and screwdrivers, Rick.”

A smile spread over the leader’s face. Why was he even surprised?

In Terminus Carol had showed her true colors and if it wasn’t for her, they’d all have died in there. She looked like the most harmless lady on God’s planet, but the woman was deadly, which made her the perfect collaborator. While everybody in Alexandria was watching their every move for the most part, friendly smiling, baking and cooking Carol Peletier was invisible.

They had best used that to their advantage. She was right – they had to stay prepared. No one knew that better than Rick.

“I agree with Carol”, the leader said determinedly. “I don’t know what this place is yet and I haven’t decided whether we’re gonna stay or leave. But no matter what, we need to be able to defend ourselves.”

There were affirmative nods around him.

“We need to get our weapons back. Or at least a few of them.”

“I miss my katana”, Michonne said thoughtfully. “I still reach for it once in a while and sort of feel it on my back, although it is not.”

“Sorry, sister”, Abraham said from where he was sitting in the armchair in the corner, “but secretly sneaking that giant tooth pick out might be a little tricky.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Her eyes came to rest on Daryl, who was leaning against the door frame. “How come they took all of our guns and my katana, but Daryl got to keep his crossbow?”

“’s ‘cuz I never gave ‘em no chance ta take it away. Deanna said I hadda turn it in ‘n’ I told her ‘no’. End a’ story. After that no one ever tried ta take it.”

There were amused smiles and little chuckles throughout the group.

“I wonder why”, Glenn said with a wink in Daryl’s direction.

He had never told him, but he admired Daryl deeply. By now they all knew under what circumstances the archer had to grow up and Glenn still vividly remembered Daryl’s older brother Merle.

Until the day he died Merle had called people names or done worse, just because one way or the other they didn’t fit into his little perfect master race world. So Glenn had been at the receiving end of Merle’s insults – and his fists - along with the black people of their group, the women and even his younger brother for being who he was. Whether Merle had known that Daryl was gay, Glenn didn’t know. Merle Dixon was the kind of person who didn’t need a reason to call people names, he just did, simply because he had decided early on to hate the world as much as the world hated him.

The moment his brother had been out of the picture Daryl had started to live, to be himself, to show his true colors. And it amazed Glenn that despite the family he came from, Daryl wasn’t a racist, a
sexist, a *narrow-minded piece of shit* like Merle and his father had been. In fact, he was everything his *role models* were not.

Daryl had the biggest heart Glenn had ever seen in a man and while he respected Rick as the strong leader he was, he admired Daryl that tad more. It wasn’t hard to be a man of honor when you came from the right kind of family and had a good upbringing, like Rick. But to become a decent, honorable person in a family like the Dixons, that required *more*, something special, something true and honest that was found in one of a million. ‘A diamond in the rough’, that’s what Carol had called him once and Glenn would agree with her any day.

Half an hour later it was dark and quiet in the room – as quiet as it could possibly be with fourteen people present – as they were all trying to get some sleep.

It was settled. First thing tomorrow Carol would pay a visit to the armory and distract Olivia long enough to open the latch of the window. The party would be the perfect opportunity for her to go invisible again and get in unnoticed to steal some of those guns.

Nobody said it out loud, but they all felt excited about their little battle plan. It was nothing big, but it was something that felt like *them*. Carol first of all was tired of baking and cooking, although she had always liked doing it and was good at it, too.

But that just wasn’t what the post-apocalypse Carol was like anymore, what she wanted to be. She had to work hard to become as tough as she was today and baking cookies day in, day out and preparing casseroles bored her to tears. Being the ‘good new resident’ was dull and an entirely stupid role. Breaking into an armory, now that would be fun.

In the gap between the crib and the window sill, Rick snuggled up to his partner and wrapped one arm over Daryl’s side to pull him close.

The moon peeked through the shutters and bathed the room in a silvery twilight, so the leader was able to make out Daryl’s face and look him in the eyes. He was glad to see a smile tug on the archer’s lips.

“Thanks for sendin’ Carol”, Daryl whispered to him as quietly as possible.

“Thanks for what?”

“The others got kinda cool jobs – they go on runs, Abraham’s with the construction team and gets ta ride ‘em big diggers, ya doin’ yer ol’ job again that ya used ta love, but Carol … She was reduced ta bein’ the li’l housewife b’fore the apocalypse ‘n’ havin’ ta do all this cookin’ ‘n’ bakin’ … ‘s bringin’ back lots a’ bad memories, ya know.”

He pecked Rick’s lips.

“She can do better ‘n’ yer sendin’ her ta do it. So, thanks.”

With a tiny smile Rick leaned in and nudged Daryl’s nose with his own.

“Welcome.”

A second passed, then another one before the archer grumbled to him.

“That it? I look like an Eskimo to ya?”

“What?”

“Rubbin’ their noses together’s how the Eskimos kiss. I ain’t no Eskimo, man.”

Rick suppressed a laugh.

“Oh, you want us to rub something else together then?”
The innuendo went straight into Daryl’s groin and he gasped audibly.

“Yer an asshole, Grimes.”

Without even bothering to cast a look over his shoulder if anyone was still awake, he wrapped one leg over his partner and pressed flush against him, while he smothered Rick’s moan with a firm kiss. Taking Rick up on his idea he did rub his already hard erection against his lover’s groin and felt Rick suck in the air, while he returned his kisses ardently. Almost instantly they found the right pace and angle to cause the most friction through the fabric of their pants and more than once they almost bit down on the other’s lip when they tried to suppress a gasp or moan.

This was the worst possible place and time, with the entire group there in the same room with them, but it had been way too long since they had been together last. And the built-up frustration and worries in both of them needed an outlet. Now.

“God, that feels so fucking good”, Rick gasped into Daryl’s mouth, moving his hip in perfect sync with Daryl.

His face was distorted by pleasure as he felt his climax coming on and it took all of his willpower to keep quiet. As quiet as possible anyway.

Daryl breathed heavily next to his ear, holding back one or the other groan in the back of his throat, while his hands were balled to fists in Rick’s curls. It hurt and turned the leader on at the same time.

“Close”, Rick croaked the same moment Daryl pressed his face into Rick’s neck to muffle a scream when he came and spilled right into his pants.

The way Daryl’s body spasmed in his embrace as the archer rode out his orgasm sent Rick over the edge as well, making him ruin his brand-new pair of jeans. Panting heavily they clung to each other and savored the aftermath of their lovemaking, while they looked deep into the other one’s eyes.

“Pss, Eugene”, a whisper from the armchair in the corner sounded through the room suddenly.

“Did they jerk each other off?”

“Affirmative”, Eugene’s voice from behind Judith’s crib made Rick and Daryl sit bolt upright.

The next moment Daryl grabbed one of the baby’s plushies and tossed it forcefully into Eugene’s face, while he jumped to his feet.

“I’m gonna rip yer head off, ya li’l perv, and I ain’t talkin’ ‘bout the one on yer shoulders.”

“Who’s the perv?” Abraham challenged him with a loud whisper across the room. “The one who’s screwing in the middle of a room full of people or the one watching?”

Daryl cast him a killer scowl, but before he could shoot back a whining sound from the crib drew his attention. If possible his expression even darkened.

“Great, now ya woke the baby.”

“Wasn’t me grunting and puffing like a steam train there, lover boy.”

“Who’s grunting and puffing?” Tara’s drowsy voice sounded from where she was lying on the floor.

“Daryl and Rick – they’ve been screwing.”
Rick’s protest “We did not” and Eugene’s attempt on a detailed description of what exactly had been taking place were drowned out by Tara’s enthusiastic
  “About time! Jeez, they’ve both been in the crappiest mood lately.”

  “She’s right, dad”, Carl tossed in and Rick felt his ears turn hot.

  “I think that’s about enough now”, the leader said, while he got up and cast a stern look around.

Not that anyone would have noticed in the little light that scarcely illuminated the room. A fact both he and Daryl were grateful for, while they were standing there with the evidence of what exactly they’d been doing visible by their wet pants.

  “I told you all before that I don’t appreciate my and Daryl’s private stuff and things to be discussed.”

  “Private stuff and things?” Carol asked with a yawn, while she was rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “What stuff and things?”

  “Rick and Daryl gave each other a hand job or something.”

  “Oh. Good for them.”

A few minutes later the whole group down to the last person was awake and informed each other about the latest news.

  “I want one a’ em bedrooms, man”, Daryl grumbled to Rick, while he was rocking whiny baby Judith on his arm. “With a door, a lock and shutters and drapes at the window. And we need to take Eugene to the vet so he gets his shots. There’s definitely somethin’ wrong with that dude.”

Rick chuckled despite himself.

  “Vet? You meant …”

  “Vet’s what I said ’n’ vet’s what I meant. Actually, ‘m startin’ ta wonder ‘bout all a’ ‘em.”

Eventually the group grew tired of talking about Rick and Daryl’s private stuff and things. When the last one of them had finally fallen quiet, they noticed that the spot where the two people in question had been standing only a moment ago was deserted. Eugene walked over to the crib to peek into the gap once again and found the two men snuggled up with their baby daughter in between of them, all three peacefully asleep.

  “Show’s over”, Eugene commented matter-of-factly and shrugged, before he headed back to the blankets and pillows on the floor to catch some Z’s now.

Before he lay down, he cast a probing glance to Abraham and Rosita, then to Maggie and Glenn, which didn’t go unnoticed.

  “Don’t even think about it, Eugene”, all four of them said in sync, before they decided secretly to ask Rick for a room in the morning.

A room with a door, a lock and shutters and drapes at the window. – Or one to lock Eugene up in.
Chapter 8

After doing his round of patrol with Michonne, as was expected of them in their new position as sheriffs, Rick spent the rest of the following day exploring both of the houses from top to bottom. *Get a room.* That was precisely what he planned to do and for the sake of peace among the group everyone needed to have some privacy again. They were still close enough in case of an emergency, but as of now it was safer to get people out of each other’s hair.

He had taken a look at all the bedrooms and tried to figure out now how to best spread fourteen people, including three couples, a baby and a teenager, on the number of rooms available. There was no way everyone was going to get their own room, so they had to share. Carl with his sister? Or Noah and Carl? Maybe Eugene with either one or all three of them together? That was hard enough to figure out on paper, but probably nothing compared to the commotion and protest to be expected if his teenager son got to share a room with the good Doctor Porter. And he didn’t even want to know what Carl would have to say.

Before Rick had a chance to solve that problem, Michonne’s voice drew his attention.

“Rick, could you come in here for a moment?”

Shrugging he left one of the smaller rooms that would make a nice nursery for Judith, and headed across the corridor to a larger bedroom on the other side.

Michonne stood in front of a full-length mirror, dressed in a fasciated, grayish-blue dress that was so tight that it left little to the imagination, and kept turning to inspect herself from every angle possible.

“What do you think?” she asked, casting him a quick side glance to check his reaction.

Rick’s mouth parched. What was he thinking? Actually, and he hated to admit that this had been his initial thought, he was wondering if she could possibly be wearing anything underneath that dress, since he didn’t see any underwear show. That thing was as tight as a second skin and Michonne sure had a gorgeous body.

He’d have to be blind not to notice. He was a man after all. A bi-sexual man, who’d been married to a beautiful woman and was able to appreciate female charms.

But he was in a relationship now. With a man. With a sensitive, caring, smart, loyal and courageous man, whom he loved more than he could say. And she knew that very well. So what the heck was she doing?

“Hey, Earth to Rick Grimes”, she teased when he didn’t answer and just stood there with his mouth gaped open. “Do you think this is okay for Deanna’s dinner party?”

“Depends”, he shrugged after pulling his jaw off the ground.

“On what?”

“Whether you’re planning to eat anything – or breathe.”

She giggled, while she looked at herself in the mirror again and let her hands run over her flat belly as though she was smoothing down the dress. Not that there was but the smallest crease to smooth down.

“A little tight, huh?”

“A little. And truth to be told, it’s not your color. I think you’d look ravishing in white or red.”
Anything, but that color and that pattern. Anything but that particular dress. It was the one she’d been wearing in his vision.

“Think so?” she smiled at him with a challenging sparkle in her eyes.

*Ravishing.*

“Yup”, he confirmed, keeping his voice neutral. “That grayish-blue is clearly Daryl’s color. Brings out his eyes.”

“Yeah, but that dress’s prob’ly a bit tight across ma chest”, the archer’s voice sounded behind his back suddenly and had both Rick and Michonne whirl around on their heels.

“’m I interruptin’?”

“Of course not”, Rick said with a smile that wasn’t really convincing.

He felt like a little boy who’d been caught with his hands in the cookie jar, although he hadn’t done anything. And he wouldn’t have, either. Maybe Michonne had tried to come on to him and maybe she just wanted his opinion on the dress. This hadn’t gone far enough to be sure, so there was no reason to feel guilty. Right?

Daryl’s narrow eyes flicked between him and Michonne a few times, while his deadpan made it impossible to tell what he was thinking.

“Whadda ya doin’ in this bedroom with ma man?” he challenged Michonne after a long silent moment.

“Stealing him from you”, came the sassy reply.

Rick watched the exchange with growing uneasiness. This could have been a friendly banter, just a joke, teasing, but something in the way they both stared at each other made the temperature in the room drop a few degrees suddenly. He had never before seen Daryl react jealous, but then no one had ever given him a reason to. What the heck was going on here all of a sudden?

“So”, Michonne just picked up again, never breaking eye contact with Daryl. “Whadda you gonna wear to that party tonight?”

“Nothin’”, he growled.

“Nothing?” despite herself she broke out laughing. “Okay, you win. No matter how tight a dress I’m gonna wear, *that* sure beats everything.”

It was actually funny, but not the tiniest smile appeared on Daryl’s face.

“I ain’t goin’ to no stupid party, ‘s what I meant.”

His eyes moved to his partner and although he almost choked on the words he said:

“’s okay if ya wanna go though. Have fun.”

That said he turned on his heels and left the room, while Rick stared after him totally flabbergasted. What on Earth had just happened here? Did Daryl and Michonne really just have a sparring match over him? And Daryl beat a retreat? Couldn’t be.

He took a step forward to follow his partner, when Michonne’s voice stopped him.
“So, red or white, huh?”

She held a white dress up she’d just pulled out of the closet, apparently waiting for his opinion on it. Rick felt annoyance rise inside of him. Whatever this town had started to do to his people, he didn’t like it. Only a few days ago they had been a unit and would have stood by each other no matter what. Now that unit was breaking apart, the chemistry was changing, balances were shifting and they were starting to have arguments and clashing opinions. And Michonne definitely topped things off right now. Was she really just making a pass on him?

“Stop it. Whether or not you were kidding there right now, I don’t even care. Just stop.”

The next moment he was out the room and hurried after his man. He caught up to him at the front door the moment Daryl pulled it open to leave, and with one quick shove Rick pushed it closed again.

“I’m sorry.”

Daryl cast him a probing glance.

“Ya got somethin’ to be sorry for?”

“I’m not sure. – I didn’t do anything to encourage what just happened up there, but I didn’t stop it soon enough, either.”

“Soon enough for what?”

“So it wouldn’t hurt you. I’m not even sure she meant it, Daryl. Maybe it was just a joke, but either way – it hurt you. So, yeah, I’m sorry.”

Daryl lowered his eyes and stared at the tips of his shoes for a moment.

“I’d get it, ya know. She’s pretty ‘n’ sophisticated ‘n’ …”

“She’s not you. Hey …”, he cocked his head and bent a little to prompt Daryl to look at him, “she’s not you. I never judged a book by its cover and I sure as hell don’t love a book for its cover, either. What’s inside, that’s what counts.”

He pulled Daryl into a tight hug and placed a kiss on the side of his head.

“Just the other day you promised to never doubt and never forget how much I love you. Remember?”

The archer nodded wordlessly, while he returned the embrace.

“Good. Cause I meant it, Daryl, and I need you to keep that promise. Our group is changing, this place … I’m not sure what to make of it yet. I have to make a decision and I’m scared to make the wrong call. I need you now. If you start doubting me, too, I …”

Daryl’s lips on his smothered the rest of Rick’s monologue and instantly some of the tension in the leader’s body subsided. He responded to the kiss and a second later both of their tongues flicked out simultaneously and met like old friends, who had missed each other achingly. They engaged in a sensual dance, while the hands of both men went roaming, combed through the other’s hair or disappeared underneath the other’s shirt to run longingly over bare skin.

“’twas nice what we did last night”, Rick breathed into Daryl’s mouth, while he nibbled on the
archer’s lower lip. “But … I miss you.”

“Yeah, I can tell”, the older man teased when the bulge in Rick’s pants rubbed against his own. “Why don’t we …”

The door hitting him in the back as it was forcefully pushed open cut him off. Abraham stuck his head through the gap and gave them a scrutiny with questioningly raised eyebrows, but as soon as his eyes wandered south he was in the picture.

“Again?” he grinned. “You know, we did tell you guys to get a room, but we weren’t talking about the living room.”

Before he could take his teasing any further, Daryl gave the door a rough shove that had the red-haired man stumble backwards, and then slammed it shut right in Abraham’s face.

“Don’t let the door hit ya on yer way out, jackass”, Daryl grumbled in annoyance.

Rick broke out laughing.

“He’s pushing all of your buttons, isn’t he?”

“Yeah. If he keeps that up, ‘m gonna have ta kill him b’fore you do.”

The smile vanished from Rick’s face. It was a joke, just a joke and he had thoughtlessly said a similar thing himself only the previous day. But now he was painfully reminded all of a sudden how Abraham’s life was going to end.

And Rick had done so little today to prevent that. His suggestions may have changed Michonne’s dress, if she reconsidered about her previous choice at all. That was it. Big deal. They would still go to that party, would try to steal guns from the armory while Olivia was in Deanna’s house and he even assigned Carol to do the raid, just like she originally had. Too little changes, too great a risk. He had to do more.

If only he had a clue what. That vision was little helpful as far as accuracy was concerned or the importance of the information given.

He knew about that dress – just a minor detail in the whole picture – but there were people, names, places he had never seen or heard of before, but should have. How was it possible that he knew the color of Michonne’s clothes at a party, but didn’t know Deanna’s sons or her husband? Why did he know about that stupid opossum by the gate, but had no idea why Pete and Ron Anderson were giving him the creeps?

“Yer okay?” Daryl’s voice tore into his brooding.

“Sure”, Rick lied and forced a smile that he hoped to be half convincing. “So you’re not going to the party?”

“Nah. Ya know that ain’t ma cup a’ tea. I’s gonna go huntin’.”

He lowered his eyes and pulled in a deep breath. “I need ta get outta here for a while.”

“I know.

It pained Rick that Daryl was so unhappy in this town. And if they stayed, that would probably never change.

He leaned in and pecked the archer’s lips.
“Be careful out there. And when you come back, I’m gonna have a room for us.”

“Now yer talkin’. D’ya figure the thing with the rooms out?”

Rick held the list of names up and sighed.

“Not yet.”

“C’mon, ‘s only fourteen peeps ‘n’ …what? Eight bedrooms? Lemme see that.”

He cast a look on the list of names, then picked up a pen from a nearby sideboard and started scribbling. Ten seconds later the problem was solved and he pushed the sheet of paper back into Rick’s hand.

The younger man looked at his partner slightly embarrassed. He had pondered over this for at least an hour without coming to a conclusion.

“That was quick.”

“That was easy”, Daryl shrugged. “I like that big room up there, so that’s ours. After all, yer still chief a’ this bunch, right? So ya deserve the master bedroom. No discussions. The li’l one across the corridor’s the nursery, Carl gets to share the third one with Noah and the last ‘s for Carol ‘n’ Tara.”

“Why Carol and Tara?”

“’cuz I say so. I want Carol in the same house with us ‘n’ I sure as hell don’t want Abe ‘n’ Eugene here. So the Psycho house is gonna be next door.”

That brought the smile back to Rick’s face. He laughed out loud for a moment, before he sobered up again and asked:

“Why Tara?”

Daryl shrugged.

“Not too many options left. Maggie ‘n’ Glenn need a room together, same as Abe ‘n’ Rosita, so the only girls left ta share with Carol are Michonne ‘n’ Sasha. Ya know what state a’ mind Sasha’s in and, I dunno, I guess Michonne’s the only one who can get her under control. Maybe Sasha’ll listen to her – or talk.”

“Huh. And what happened up there just now has nothing to do with you wanting Michonne in the other house?”

“Pff.”

Daryl didn’t answer, but Rick had the impression that he might be dead on. He decided to quickly change the subject and gave Daryl’s list an appreciative nod.

“That’ll work – it’s perfect. So Eugene gets his own room, huh?”

“Yeah. Best make it the one all the way up in the attic, where he can’t spy on no one.”

Rick chuckled, although he was fairly sure that Daryl hadn’t been joking. After the incident last night, Eugene would never hear the end of it.

“That room’s got a window”, Rick teased.
“Right. Knowing that li’l peepin’ Tom, he’s gonna peek into people’s windows from up there. Guess we best lock him into the basement ‘n’ toss the key.”

Once again the smile faded from Rick’s face as yet another memory appeared in his mind’s eye. A cell in the basement. A prisoner locked into it – a filthy, dangerously looking man with a ‘W’ written on his forehead. The leader of the Wolves.

Before Daryl would notice his mood swings, Rick nodded towards the door.

“You best get going now or you’re gonna lose the light.”

A smile tugged on the archer’s lips.

“Sounds like ya did learn somethin’ out there after all.”

He kissed Rick gently and then turned to the door without a further word. When he stepped out onto the front porch he found Abraham leaning against one of the supporting beams, taking a sip from the hip flask that seemed to be his best companion these days.

“Pack yer stuff. Ya movin’, ginger”, Daryl grumbled on passing him and then, with his crossbow slung over his shoulder, he disappeared in the direction of the gate.

The moment his partner was out of sight, Rick gave a curt nod to Abraham and then closed the front door. He would never get used to Daryl heading out there alone, despite the fact that the archer wasn’t one of his children and of all the people in this town definitely the one most capable to survive on his own out there. Still, if you loved somebody, the worries for them never ceased. Rick turned towards the stairs to head to the master bedroom, hoping that Michonne had finally found a suitable dress, so he could look for a shirt to wear to that party.

“Not a white one”, he reminded himself, pretty certain that originally he had worn one.

Just when he placed his foot on the first step Michonne appeared at the top and started walking downstairs. Had she waited up there until Daryl had left?

She was wearing the white dress now that she had pulled out of the closet before and it was way more subtle than the other one, although it was tied in the neck and low-backed. But the light linen, the knee-length and lace appliqués made it a dainty summer dress that suited the occasion much better.

Rick took a step back and waited till Michonne had reached the bottom of the stairs. With spread arms she slowly spun herself around once, giving Rick full view of her dress, and then cast him a questioning glance.

“Is this okay?”

Her usual self-confidence seemed to be chastened and Rick hated the awkwardness that was between them all of a sudden. They had had a rough start back at the prison, but for the longest time now he had considered Michonne a close friend. She was family and he admired her strong will, her keen mind and strength. It would be a pity if their friendship got damaged in any way.

“’Uh-huh’, he confirmed. “It’s very pretty.”

“Thanks. – Look, about before …”
“Michonne”, he cut her short, “I said I don’t care. Maybe it was a joke, maybe it wasn’t. Either way, it was a bad idea and I don’t want it to happen again. Okay?”

“I’m sorry. I was just …”

“You don’t have to apologize to me,” Rick cut her short again, while he cast a quick glance to the door as though he feared for Daryl to reappear there and find them talking about him. “You know Daryl. He’s still struggling with his low self-esteem and … well, if it was a joke, it wasn’t funny. And if it wasn’t … if it wasn’t, then you’re risking to lose a good friend.”

“Two actually”, he added.

Without any further word she just nodded, letting him know that she got the message. She wouldn’t know what to say anyway.

Was it a joke? She couldn’t even tell. She liked Rick, respected him and, well, maybe she was attracted to him, too. It had been quite a while now since she had last been with someone, so who could blame her? Maybe she had meant to test if her charms still worked on the other gender at all, only to feel pretty and desirable for a short, precious moment.

She hadn’t called Rick into the bedroom to seduce him. Just to have a man’s eyes look at her the way he had – with admiration. Everybody needed a compliment and some attention once in a while.

But then, yes, she had gotten carried away when she had challenged Daryl the way she had. That had been a mistake and most definitely out of line. The last thing she had wanted was to hurt that man.

She loved Daryl – as a friend. Back at the prison they’d been a good team on runs and when she had been on her vendetta, trying to hunt down the Governor, he’d been on her side. He understood that sometimes people just had to do what they had to do, whether it made sense to anyone else or not.

And if the trail hadn’t run cold, he would have been right out there with her. That’s the kind of man he was – someone who backed his friends up, someone to trust, someone to rely on.

And now she had given him the impression that, after all they’d been through together, she was hitting on his partner. And with the still low self-esteem Daryl had, he probably feared that it would work, too.

She had to put this right. Needed to apologize and clear things up asap. Joke or no joke, it sure wasn’t worth losing a friend over.

“I’ll talk to him.”

“Good.”

And with that things were settled.

Rick was too tired to give this any further thought and he meant what he said – he didn’t care. Maybe Michonne was interested in him, but that was flattering and insulting at the same time. She knew he was in a steady relationship. Did she think he was the type of man to whom that didn’t matter? Who didn’t give a damn about faithfulness? Well, he did. Daryl was his one and only and thus she didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell. Stealing someone else’s partner was low and most definitely below a classy lady like Michonne. No, it had got to be a joke.

Why was he giving this some thought now after all?

Because she wasn’t alone in acting kind of weird ever since they arrived in Alexandria?

Sasha was heading out into the woods with a rifle to shoot at framed pictures of random families, so Carl had told him. Carl himself had almost cut the cord entirely after only few days here and rather spent time with his new friends – including Ron Anderson unfortunately – than with his sister, his
dads and the rest of the group. Abraham was starting to become a pain in the neck, making it a habit to tease everyone at any time as though that was his latest hobby. Tara was eating licorice, Carol’s cookies and any other kind of candy she could get her hands on as though there was no tomorrow. And according to herself she had gained two pounds already in the few days they’d been here. This town was doing weird things to Rick’s group. It seemed to trigger types of behavior they would never have developed before, out there, when it had been just them. When they had still relied on each other.

Bit by bit their strong unit was falling apart and for that alone Rick was almost inclined to tell everyone to pack up and get ready to leave.

“See you at the party?” Michonne’s voice tore him out of his thoughts.

“Yeah. I’m gonna go change and … yeah, see you there.”

With a curt nod she acknowledged that and then turned on her heels to head to the door.

The moment it opened and she stepped outside, Rick heard Abraham give Michonne a wolf whistle, which had the leader roll his eyes. This was exactly the kind of behavior he meant.

What happened to respect and care among his people? Two days working on a construction site and Abraham was already behaving like the typical construction worker. And had anyone bothered to lend a sympathetic ear to Daryl and Sasha, asking if there was anything they could do for them, since they apparently felt totally out of sorts? No, no one had.

Instead this town had them bother about what to wear to a party or what to have for dinner the next day.

Compared to life on the street this place was pure luxury, but Rick couldn’t help thinking that out there they had had more.
The moment Rick came through the door of Deanna’s house, little Judith on his arm and Carl in tow, he felt as though he was stepping into a surreal world or had made a leap back into the past to a pre-apocalypse time.

He saw people standing in small groups, chatting and laughing, all dressed in their nicest clothes, holding glasses with various beverages or snacks. The tables were loaded with food and drinks, music was playing and nobody seemed to have a care in the world.

Rick cast a glance to the members of his group and could tell by the look on their faces that they felt the same way he did. They had apparently ended up in the Twilight Zone.

Millions of people had died outside the walls of this town ever since the outbreak and most of them were still out there, roaming the Earth and threatening the survivors.

But Deanna and her people were sipping cooled beer, wine and whiskey. Hostile groups of living people were out there, too, and they were an even greater threat than the walkers, because they didn’t kill instinctively, they killed to take whatever they wanted, to dominate or just because they could.

But instead of acknowledging the threat and being prepared for an attack, the Alexandrians had parties with meatballs and pickles, coleslaw and Carol’s damn cookies. They were all of them behaving like little children, covering their eyes against any danger, thinking ‘If I can’t see you, you can’t see me, either’.

But the danger out there had eyes and ears everywhere and it would see them, sooner or later. And it would attack, whether that meant rudely ruining a party or not.

Rick saw Deanna approach him with a wide smile and happily shining eyes and a second later poor Judith was pinched in the cheek for the umpteenth time since they had arrived in this town. She endured it without much of a reaction and more than once Rick had wondered if her calm, passive demeanor was just her nature or a matter of circumstances.

“Welcome”, Deanna greeted the new arrivals. “We’re really glad you could come.”

“Why wouldn’t we?” Rick couldn’t help thinking.

There wasn’t really too much else they had to do and no other place they needed to be, but he shrugged it off. Civilities. They had probably forgotten about these things out there.

Deanna introduced Rick to her husband Reg and once more Rick was surprised how little detailed his vision had obviously been. He couldn’t remember this man, had no idea which role he was about to play or what his fate was going to be. There were major gaps in that vision, and the fact that he was probably lacking knowledge on important details wasn’t helping to ease Rick’s worries.

“You’re a pretty remarkable guy”, Reg’s voice derailed his trail of thought. “I know what your people said when they talked to my wife. About the things you did for them, about you.”

“You built that wall”, Rick replied politely, while he sighed inwardly.

More civilities. Were they going to do a ping-pong match of compliments now to figure out who was the greater man and whose achievement weighed more?

Rick led more than a dozen people though that hell out there and brought them here, fact, but whether that was a good idea at all, time would tell. And he didn’t do it alone, either. Without the help of his people he wouldn’t be standing here today to be the remarkable guy he allegedly was.

Reg had built a wall. And although he apparently didn’t think that was half as important, that wall had kept dozens of people safe so far and gave Rick and his family a refuge for the time being.
Bottomline was, they both did the best they could to save the lives of people they cared for. How they had done that didn’t matter, they just had.

“Here, take a glass”, Reg just offered a drink to the younger man, which Rick declined in the first impulse.

He had to stay alert, needed to be ready to … His eyes fell on Abraham and Rosita a few feet away from him, both with beer bottles in their hands and taking a large swig right now. They obviously trusted Reg’s wall and threw all caution to the wind.

Tara and Noah were in the kitchen, munching the offered goodies there as though they had just entered the land of Cockaigne and Rick noticed Michonne in the back of the room, sipping a glass of wine and chatting with a young man Deanna would later introduce to him as her son Spencer. Maybe they were right. When was the last time Rick had thrown caution to the wind and had just enjoyed life? The night back at the CDC when Dr. Jenner had brought out those bottles of wine and the entire group had ended up totally shit-faced?

A smile spread over Rick’s face when he remembered a much louder Daryl Dixon coaxing an already lit Glenn to drink even more, because he wanted to see ‘how red his face could get’. The memory pulled at Rick’s heartstrings. Lori, Shane, Dale, Andrea, T-Dog, Jacqui – they were all gone.

With an appreciative smile Rick accepted the glass that Reg was still holding out to him.

“To you”, he sent a silent toast to all the friends and loved ones they had already left behind.

God, there were so many. An endless row of faces that came and went, while the survivors still kept on struggling.

Rick took a sip of the whiskey and indulged in the burning sensation it left when it ran down his throat and settled in his stomach.

Each of the wonderful people still alive with him here today had totally been worth the struggle, but Rick was well aware of the fact that they kept looking at each other, secretly wondering whom they’d lose next. No one still believed to make it to retirement age, no one made plans anymore for the future and only very few dared even think about having a baby.

He took another swig from his drink when the memory of Maggie and her beautiful baby bump flashed through his mind. She and Glenn would take the risk, would dare hope and dream of a family, but if their fate remained unaltered, Glenn would die long before Maggie’s pregnancy even showed and the little one would never be born.

Rick felt bile rise in his throat suddenly, when he couldn’t help wondering if unborn babies who died before birth turned, too.

Quickly he took another sip and swallowed thickly. Just the imagination what that would do to the misfortunate mother made him sick to the stomach.

This world was insane now. Maybe Lori had been right back then – why keep up the fight? What for?

He saw Abraham and Rosita open two more bottles and Michonne getting a refill of her glass and before he knew what he was doing he accepted another round for himself, too. Why not? Nothing bad was going to happen tonight as far as he could tell, so why not do what everybody around here did – enjoy life for a few precious hours.

When he was half way into his third glass he noticed Carol getting ready to sneak out for her raid on the armory. Olivia had just entered the room, so the coast was clear. Good, sticking to that plan wouldn’t hurt – they’d need guns sooner or later – but the rest of the night would most certainly be altered as far as Rick was concerned. He was fairly certain that originally he hadn’t got plastered, but he was totally planning to have a couple of drinks too many tonight.
“When you’re back”, he said quietly to Carol before she left, “take care of Judy for me, please.”

She cast him a kind of suspicious glance, but then just nodded her okay.
Fine. Judith was taken care of, Carl was old enough to look after himself and as for the rest of the group … the ones here seemed to have similar plans as Rick.
And maybe they were right. Maybe all of those people here were right. They lived life to the fullest for as long as they could, enjoyed the food and drink as long as they had them, listened to music, laughed and loved and didn’t worry every single second about tomorrow. Maybe there would be no tomorrow, but when the end came they had had a couple of great last days, weeks, months.
Whatever.
Maybe Rick had best stop worrying about tomorrow, too. Why not ignore the Wolves, the walkers and the Saviors? They’d come, no doubt, but when they did his people would have spent their last days on Earth in a civilized place with no hunger, four walls and a roof and their loved ones close by.
If they left here, they’d be out on the road again with no supplies, exposed to the elements and having to fight the dangers out there on a daily basis. And for what? To see another day of hardship? To watch more of the people they loved die? To go on fighting day in, day out with no hope of deliverance?
Rick had gotten hold of one of the whiskey bottles and filled his glass to the brim. Carol had better hurry up and take care of Judith as long as he could still stand upright. He took another swig when an immense frustration washed over him suddenly.
All the great things his people had said he’d done for them – hadn’t they been totally in vain? Wasn’t everything everybody did these days just a fight against windmills?
There was no cure and probably no one was even still looking for one. It would go on and on and on just like this, until no one was left alive. Until this planet belonged to the walkers, and even they would cease existing one day. Mankind would be wiped out in the end and nothing Rick Grimes did or didn’t do would prevent the inevitable. So he could just as well get totally wasted tonight. It made no difference.
Tomorrow he’d probably think differently about this again. Tomorrow his fighting spirit and his sense of responsibility would kick in again and prevent that he went down without a fight, without at least trying. Hope dies last, that’s what they said. And maybe his people still had a chance.
They were unlikely to survive in Alexandria and they couldn’t make it out there on the road, either, but door No. 3 might be waiting for them somewhere. An alternative. A place where they could build their own world, live another day, together. If only to share a smile, a hug or a kiss with someone they loved – wouldn’t that be worth holding on?
And maybe, just maybe, one far day someone would have the courage to try and find a solution. Someone like Eugene, who held a shitload of doctoral degrees and had an IQ as high as Mount McKinley. Someone, who was able to do much greater things than leading people or building walls, as soon as they had come out of their state of shock and got a chance to develop their true potential. Maybe the li’l peepin’ Tom or someone like him would save mankind one day.
That was a nice thought, but for now Rick just wanted to forget, to let go for a while and get lost in sweet oblivion. Stay – leave, give up – keep fighting, left – right, live – die … These constant decisions were tearing him apart and he felt like the little wheels in his head never stopped turning.
Round and round, day and night, 24/7 with no rest, not a moment of peace.
He downed the entire glass and noticed the world before his eyes start to swim and his motions to grow uncoordinated and gawky. Luckily Carol returned in that moment and lifted Judith off his arm, promising to take her back to the house to put her to bed now.
Those were the last words that even registered in Rick’s numbed mind. After that he knew nothing
anymore.
The first things Rick noticed when he opened his eyes was the wonderful smell of freshly brewed coffee and a splitting headache that felt as though Daryl had shot a couple of his crossbow bolts straight into his skull during the night.

How much longer he’d stayed at Deanna’s, drinking himself witless and, no doubt, making a spectacle of himself, he couldn’t remember. Nor how he had gotten back to the house and into his bed – at least he hoped that’s where he was, taking into consideration that he was only in his boxers and would be in deep shit with Daryl if this wasn’t their bedroom.

With an effort he lifted one of his eyelids and suppressed a moan when even the little light in the room hurt his eyes.

What time was it? Although someone had mercifully closed the shutters, it was easy to see that the sun was up already. He’d be late for work! – Did he really just think that?

“Mornin’”, a well-known deep baritone greeted him and a wave of relief washed over Rick.

Daryl. Thank God, this was their bedroom.

“Count your blessings, Grimes.”

Reluctantly Rick forced both of his eyes open and cast a glance to the man sitting on the edge of his bed with a mug of steaming coffee in hand. Was there a tinge of amusement in the narrow blue eyes? No, that was probably just Rick’s imagination.

Inch by inch he struggled to sit up, but was only moderately successful. The moment he had moved into a slightly elevated position his head felt as though it was ready to explode and with a pained groan Rick pressed his hands to either side of it.

“What size’s my head?” he mumbled.

“Gigantic compared ta what’s inside”, Daryl replied and Rick was sure now to see a grin tug on his partner’s lips.

Daryl held the mug out to the younger man and Rick accepted it like a life-saving elixir. How he was going to make it through the day without an Aspirin was beyond him. Before he had even ended that thought, Daryl pointed at two white pills on the nightstand and said:

“Yer wish’s ma command.”

“I haven’t said anything.”

“Ya don’t have ta. Ya should know that by now.” He nudged Rick’s shoulder lightly.

The leader cast the pills a longing glance.

“Is that what I hope it is?”

“Yup. I heard ya put an amount a’ alcohol into that skinny body a’ yers that would put Guns ‘n’ Roses ta shame. ‘twasn’t hard ta figure out that ya’d be needin’ a li’l help ta get yer head back to its normal size.”

He picked the pills up and held them close to Rick’s lips.

“C’mon, open up, party animal.”
“You think this is funny, right?” Rick said with a frown before he did Daryl’s bidding and opened his mouth.

“Ya bet.” He actually grinned now. “I never thought I’s ever gonna see Rick Grimes drunk as a skunk. That sure was somethin’ else.”

“Glad I was entertaining”, Rick grumbled, pulling a face.

He took a swig from the coffee and washed the pills down with it, hoping to be able to get his head through the door any time soon.

“Ya was very entertainin’”, Daryl said in a deep voice. “Thanks for the great night, by the way.”

Rick almost spat his coffee. Great night? Damn, and he didn’t remember a single thing. Maybe Reg had been right, one way or the other. Rick wouldn’t have thought that he’d been able to find his way home at all, let alone get it up to make the previous night great for Daryl. Obviously he really was a remarkable man.

He took another sip from his coffee, awkwardly searching for something to say.

“Great, huh? Glad you enjoyed it”, he made a poor attempt to say anything at all, without giving away that he had no idea what Daryl was talking about.

“Immensely. – There ain’t nothin’ like undressin’ yer man ta get him into bed ‘n’ sleep it off, while that dude’s tryin’ ta kiss ya all the damn time, reekin’ like the floor of a dive bar after happy hour ‘n’ burpin’ in yer face every other second.”

Rick felt his ears grow hot and no doubt change color.

“Best part”, Daryl continued mercilessly while he suppressed another smirk, “was when ya puked right into yer left boot.”

He pointed to Rick’s cowboy boots that sat next to the bed.

“Thought ya should know before ya put ‘em on.”

His attempt not to chuckle failed miserably now and despite being the laughing stock Rick loved to hear the sound. Daryl hadn’t laughed like that in a long time and if puking into his boots was what triggered a smile on his lover’s face again, Rick was willing to be the laughing stock every damn day.

After he had emptied his coffee, he placed the mug on the nightstand and slowly swung his legs out of bed. Sitting next to Daryl, he pulled in a couple of deep breathes until the dizziness subsided and then cast a side glance to his partner.

“Sorry. I guess this wasn’t how you planned to spend the first night in our new bedroom – with a door, a lock, shutters and drapes at the window and all.”

“Well, at least the shutters did come in handy”, Daryl replied and then placed one arm around Rick’s shoulders to give him a brotherly hug.

“Nothin’ ta be sorry for, Rick. Ya deserved some time out ‘n’ if ya got that plastered intentionally, ya probably needed it, too.”

He placed a smooch to the side of the other man’s head and then stood.
“Hell, if I’s ta apologize for each time I’s totally shit-faced, I’d be sayin’ sorry for a week straight.”
He held his hand out to Rick to pull him off the edge of the bed.
“Care for some breakfast?”

Rick’s stomach turned instantly and he retched.

“God, no. I’m just gonna take a cold shower and hope my head’s gonna shrink enough to get through the door.”

“Somethin’ else is gonna shrink if ya make it a cold shower”, Daryl teased. “Don’t expect me ta get in there with ya this time.”

“Pity.” Rick let his palm run gently over his partner’s chest.

The sun rays peeking through the shutters and falling onto his face drew his attention.

“What time is it?”

“Why? Yer afraid ta be late for work?”

This time Daryl’s teasing had a clearly derisive inflection and had Rick look at him with a frown.

“Actually, yeah. I’ve got a job, in case you forgot.”

“What job? Wearin’ that silly uniform ‘n’ playin’ Sherlock Holmes ‘cuz someone dared damage the Andersons’ stupid owl statue? ‘s ridiculous, man.”

Rick wordlessly picked up said silly uniform from a chair by the window and then looked sternly to his partner.

“It’s something, Daryl. For as long as we’re here, we all got our job to do, participate in return for food and shelter. So asking a few questions and wearing that silly uniform is what I’m gonna do. It’s what I promised to do and I like to keep my promises.”

Daryl shrugged.

“And now yer runnin’ late. Big deal. What’s she gonna do? Fire ya? She ain’t got no one else ta do that job, so I guess yer gonna get off the hook with a warnin’, Officer.”

Rick sighed.

“Daryl, whether you like it or not, this is my job right now. And I wanna do it as best as I can. Okay?”

“Yer job’s bein’ our leader.”
All amusement had vanished from the archer’s face and his expression was hard now with clear signs of anger.

“That’s what yer good at, that has a meaning, that’s you. Not lookin’ for stray cats or a jackass that damaged a dumb statue. Ya still a leader at all? Or yer jumpin’ now when Deanna tells ya to?”

Rick felt as though Daryl had punched him in the guts, but he couldn’t even blame him for his frustration. It matched Rick’s feelings entirely and he had asked himself the same question, too. Was he still a leader?
A leader of what? The group was falling apart and became part of this town bit by bit. They didn’t
need anyone to lead them any longer. The only way for him to keep his old position was by taking over the entire town – the way he had originally done. He wasn’t going to do that again. That’s what set the avalanche in motion, that’s what started the end. Not this time. But how was he to explain that to Daryl?

“What do you want me to do?”

The archer snorted frustrated.

“Dunno. ‘s just … This place is a joke, Rick. They’re playin’ pretence, ignore that the world went ta hell, but that don’t make the apocalypse undone. ‘s still out there. Same as the walkers ‘n’ a whole bunch a’ assholes, ‘n’ sooner or later either one’s gonna come through that wall. ‘s stupid ta think a few inches a’ steel would stop ’em.”

He started pacing.

“They ain’t prepared, they think if they ignore the problem long enough ‘s gonna go away by itself, but it ain’t. This town’s a tickin’ time bomb, man. What I want ya to do? Tell our people we gonna leave again or take over ta kick people’s ass round here. But we can’t sit still ‘n’ let Deanna keep runnin’ her lalaland this way. Not with Li’l Asskicker ‘n’ Carl ‘n’ all the others inside.”

Rick wanted to kiss and hug his man so badly now that not doing it hurt him physically. With each and every word Daryl had struck a chord and it was one of the moments their souls were perfectly in sync. The archer was absolutely right – leave or take over was what the Rick Grimes he used to know would do, should do. The fact that Rick didn’t and bowed to Deanna instead confused and annoyed the hell out of Daryl. Understandable. But the Rick Grimes Daryl used to know never had visions. Rick wasn’t that man anymore. He knew things now. And he had to find another way. Taking over wasn’t an option anymore. Leaving was. And maybe bowing to Deanna was, too. Wasn’t there still a chance that if they just laid low and didn’t draw attention, their fate would be a different one?

Rick pressed his hand to his temples again and sighed.

Damn, the confusing thoughts were back, along with decisions to be made and a ton of worries being emptied over his head. Screw coffee – he sure wouldn’t have minded another drink now.

“Maybe you’re right”, he tried the diplomatic approach in order to buy time. “But you know, Deanna is a great woman and she knows what she’s doing. Look at what she’s built here already. Maybe following her is not a bad idea.”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Whether ya follow her ‘cuz ya truly believe in her, look up to her, trust her. Or if ya think ya ain’t got no alternative. I ain’t followin’ no one ‘cuz it’s expected or everybody else does. I ain’t nobody’s bitch.”

Rick swallowed thickly against a lump in his throat.

“You followed me”, he croaked.

“Still do. ‘n’ always will. But not ‘cuz ya demanded it. Ta follow needs ta be a choice, not somethin’ people have ta do ‘cuz someone claims the leadin’ position. I luv ya ‘n’ respect ya. And ya
did things for me first ta earn the trust ‘n’ loyalty. Don’t see Deanna stand there with a shovel ‘n’ do her part. She ain’t buildin’ nothin’, ain’t goin’ on no runs riskin’ her life out there, ain’t diggin’ holes in the gardens ta plant ‘n’ grow things. She’s a politician, no more.”

He snorted derisively.

“I ain’t voted for her ‘n’ I ain’t doin’ shit she tells me to. ‘m listenin’ to you, no one else. But I need ya to say somethin’ again, make decisions, be at the helm. Don’t let her take that away from ya, Rick. Between the two a’ you, yer the better leader.”

“What makes you think so?”

“How many walkers have you killed?” Daryl asked unexpectedly.

“What?”

“How many walkers have you killed?” Daryl repeated sternly.

Apparently the question wasn’t a joke. Rick shrugged.

“I don’t know. Countless.”

“How many people?”

“Daryl …”

“How – many – people?”

“I … I stopped counting. Too many.”

“Why?”

Rick winced and then ran his hands through his curls.

“You know why. Because they were a threat to you, to our children, the family.”

Daryl lifted his hands slowly and placed them soothingly on Rick’s shoulders.

“There’s yer answer”, he said calmly. “Deanna ain’t done killin’ no single walker ‘n’ no people, either. She claims ta do stuff for her people, but she let’s others do the work for her ‘n’ never lifts a finger herself. Politician. Never gettin’ her hands dirty, never fightin’ at the front, but claimin’ the right ta tell people what to do. Ya really wanna be one a’ her henchmen? That ain’t you, Rick.”

Stunned Rick looked at his partner and was deeply moved. He knew about the extent of Daryl’s loyalty and the archer had proven it countless times, but he had never before said it out loud and clear why he followed Rick.

The leader had a hunch what Daryl was referring to when he said Rick had done things for him first. He still didn’t think it was such big a deal, but apparently it had meant the world to Daryl.

Merle. Offering his help to go back into the lion’s den and save his obnoxious elder brother, that had earned Rick the love and respect Daryl was talking about. Because no one had ever cared before what the archer felt, thought, needed or wanted, what was important to him. Until Rick Grimes had.

He had acknowledged Daryl’s feelings and helped him save Merle Dixon, because that was the priority to Daryl. After that Rick had been the priority.

It was kind of ironic that Merle of all people was the reason they were a couple now. And deep down inside it amused Rick immensely to think that Merle was probably turning in his grave.

With a smile tugging on his lips, Rick pulled Daryl into his arms, although he was still reeking like
the floor of a dive bar after happy hour. He had the feeling that Daryl didn’t mind. After weeks out on the street, miles away from a shower, they had long since stopped caring for things like that.

“Thanks”, he whispered into the older man’s ear. “You telling me all this … that means a lot. As soon as my head is in working mode again, I’ll give it some thought.”

Behind Rick’s back Daryl was smiling, but before he had a chance to reply Rick added:

“What did I do for you?”

“Huh?”

“You said I did things for you first to earn your trust and loyalty. What did you mean?”

There was clearly a teasing inflection in his voice now. Daryl rolled his eyes.

“Get yer mind outta the gutter, Grimes. Ain’t talkin’ ‘em blowjobs, man, although they’s pretty awesome, gotta admit that.”

They both chuckled.

“Best take that cold shower now.”

“Are you sure you don’t need one, too?” Rick sassed.

“Get lost.

Daryl gave his lover a slap on the backside and laughing Rick let go and headed into the bathroom. When he came face to face with his reflection in the mirror, he couldn’t help flinching. Jesus, some of the walkers out there looked more human than he did today. His eyes were bloodshot, there were dark circles underneath them and he was a pale as a ghost.

“Was it worth it?” Daryl asked softly from the bedroom, while he was watching Rick through the open door.

“I’m not sure.”

Somewhere in the house a door slammed shut and the loud bang exploded in Rick’s throbbing head. He winced with a pained expression.

“On second thought – no. Definitely not.”

He splashed some cold water in his face and then started rummaging for a toothbrush and toothpaste. A moment later his eyebrows went up in surprise when he found the one he’d used the previous days sitting in a glass inside the mirror cabinet. He cast Daryl a questioning glance and saw the archer shrug.

“Had nothin’ better ta do last night than movin’ our stuff in here. And kickin’ everyone outta the house who’s supposed ta live next door from now on. Not necessarily in that order.”

A smile played around the corners of Rick’s mouth, but he didn’t comment on that. Instead he asked:

“Did you enjoy your time out in the woods?”

“Yeah.” It sounded like a sigh. “’twas nice bein’ out there again, although that prob’ly sounds pretty stupid, huh?”
“Not at all.”

Rick cast his partner an empathic glance. He hated the thought that Daryl felt so uncomfortable in this town, that he preferred to leave and would rather be out there – with the walkers and those hostile groups.

“I met Aaron in the woods”, Daryl picked up in that moment. “Ain’t sure what he was doin’ there. Think he was followin’ me.”

Rick squeeze a tad of the toothpaste on his brush and then cast the archer a frown.

“Why would he do that?”

“Dunno. Maybe he meant ta talk to me b’fore he made up his mind.”

“Made up his mind? About what?”

“Offerin’ me a job.”

Rick had just started brushing, but now his hand froze in the motion.

“Aaron offered you a job?” he babbled around the toothpaste in his mouth and couldn’t help thinking that he sounded like a parrot the way he was repeating Daryl’s words.

“Uh-huh.”

Quickly the leader finished what he was doing, so he could have this conversation without foam at his mouth and spitting toothpaste all over the place.

“Okay, come on, Daryl, do I need to worm it out of you? What job? Gimme some info here.”

“He asked me ta be Alexandria’s second recruiter alongside him, ‘cuz he don’t want Eric out there no more. Says he thinks that I can tell a good from a bad person ‘n’ stuff.”

“And he’s right”, Rick cut in with a smile. “Whether you acknowledge it or not, but you’ve got a way of looking through people like no one else I’ve ever met.”

“Huh, I guess. ’s why I let ya live although ya cuffed ma brother to a roof ‘n’ left him there.” The ghost of a smile flashed over his face despite the sad memory of his late brother.

“I’s thinkin’ ‘bout acceptin’. Gives me a chance ta be out there more ‘n’ Aaron’s a good guy.”

“What makes you think that?” Rick asked curiously.

“Easy – he fed me spaghetti.”

They both grinned now.

“Oh, I get it”, Rick replied. “The way to a man’s heart …”

“Right. Food always works.”

Daryl’s smile vanished suddenly and made room for a dark expression when he added:

“And he’s ‘bout the only one in this Hicksville who ain’t done lookin’ at me like I’s a cockroach or somethin’ that needs ta be removed from their tidy town. He talked nicely ta me, gave me a chance. And he asked me ta do that job – somethin’ Deanna never does. She assigns ‘em.”

“She does ask if people accept or not, though.”
“Yeah? Did anyone dare say ‘no’ to her yet? ‘s easy to be nice as long as everyone’s doin’ as ya want ‘em to.”

Rick didn’t reply to that, but Daryl’s words sure got him to thinking.

“Sounds good to me”, the leader referred to the job offer. “If accepting that job is what you wanna do, go ahead.”

That was a lie. He did not feel good about it, not at all. He knew what was out there – the Wolves, the Saviors, maybe other groups that might be a threat. What he didn’t know was how close they already were.

But there was no stopping Daryl anyhow and if getting out of Alexandria made him a little happier, it was totally worth the risk. Rick couldn’t stand seeing the lost and sad look in Daryl’s eyes much longer.

While the archer nodded in a ‘then it’s settled’ matter, Rick decided to skip the shower and rather wash up at the sink now. He needed to hurry and get going, although Daryl was probably right – there wasn’t too much work waiting for him in this town. Still, a job was a job and he didn’t like to be thought of as unreliable and irresponsible.

“Is Michonne doing our round already?” he asked while turning the faucet back on.

“I guess. After all, ya guys still have ta solve the ruthless attack on that owl”, Daryl said sarcastically and Rick couldn’t help chuckling.

“You’ve got a malicious tongue, Mr. Dixon.”

“Yeah? Ya never complained ‘bout that tongue before, Mr. Grimes.”

“Who’s complaining?”

They grinned at each other, then Rick asked.

“So, where is everybody? Did they make it home …?” He frowned. “How did I get home, by the way?”

“Abe gave ya a fireman’s lift. Best be prepared ta never hear the end of it.”

He rolled his eyes.

“The others was still able ta walk, if ya care ta know. Guess they all doin’ their jobs now. Carol’s done makin’ some stupid casseroles again all mornin’, Carl’s hangin’ with ‘em other kids, Abe’s orderin’ that construction team around and Eugene ‘n’ some a’ the others are on a run. Peepin’ Tom needed … hell, dunno. New binoculars or somethin’.”

Rick felt all color drain from his face suddenly.

“Mirco converter?” he croaked.

“Yeah, right. How d’ya know?”

The soap dispenser Rick had just picked up slipped from his fingers and crashed onto the tiled floor where it broke into a dozen pieces.

His heart was in his throat suddenly and he found it difficult to breathe.

“Who else is out there?” he gasped.
“What? Why? What’s the matter?” Daryl replied, confused by Rick’s extreme reaction.

“Who?!” Rick almost yelled. “Glenn, Tara and Noah?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“And Aiden and Nicholas went with them, right?”

Daryl knitted his brow.

“Yer givin’ me the creeps, ya know that? Yeah, Deanna sent ‘em two douchebags with …”

Before he was able to end the sentence, Rick had darted through the room and was frantically gathering his clothes to get dressed.

“God, no. Damn, damn, damn!” he cursed, while he fumbled nervously with the buttons of his shirt.

“What the heck’s goin’ on, man?”

“No time to explain. We need to find them.”

He cast a glance at his boots, then made a dismissive gesture and ran to the door barefoot. Daryl grabbed the shoes and hurried after him.

“Ya plannin’ ta search for ‘em with no shoes on or what?” he called after Rick while they both ran down the stairs.

“If I have to’, Rick retorted over his shoulder. “I puked into one of them, remember?”

“Yeah, ‘n’ ya think I just left it like that all night, huh? ‘s long since cleaned up, ya idiot, so put ‘em damn boots on.”

Rick stopped at the front door long enough to accept the boots, peck Daryl’s mouth with a breathless “Thanks” and then run out onto the front porch. The next moment a hand grabbing his shirt from behind stopped him.

“Ya gonna tell me right now what the hell’s goin’ on here.”

“Not now, Daryl. Please. Trust me on this. We need to find them – they’re in danger.”

“Oh, I thought ya done lookin’ deep into yer whiskey glass last night, not a crystal ball.”

“I’ll explain later. But we gotta hurry now. – Please!”

Without any further hesitation Daryl just nodded and then gave Rick a quick slap on the shoulder to signal him that he was ready to go with him, as always.

When they ran towards the gate side by side, looking around for a car they could borrow, Rick asked breathlessly:

“Do you know where they went?”

“Nope. Wouldn’t be of much help anyway, since we don’t know the area.”

Rick stopped dead in his tracks.
We need Aaron. He’s got a car and might know …"

Before he was able to end the sentence, the sentry at the gate called:

“They’re back! Open up!”

Rick’s heart started pounding painfully hard against the inside of his ribs as he hurried towards the gate with Daryl by his side. Too late. God, he was too late. Maybe he’d been able to alter things. He made so many minor changes that maybe this had some effect on a major one. Please. This couldn’t be happening. He told them to stay away from Aiden and Nicholas. Why had they been out there after all? All six of them – the same group as in his vision. Please, no.

The gate opened torturously slow and despite the protest of the woman on guard, Rick took over after a second and pulled the iron bars aside in one rough jerk. His heart sank instantly – it was the same white van with Glenn behind the wheel and Eugene in the passenger seat. Hoping against hope he locked eyes with the Korean and knew all he had to know when he saw the devastated look in them.

“NO!”

The moment the car had passed the gate Glenn stopped and got out, running a hand through his hair and obviously searching for words to break the news to Rick.

“Noah is dead, isn’t he?” Rick asked with a quivering voice, not caring that he must have appeared like a psychic right now.

He saw Glenn’s eyes widen in surprise and that was all the answer he needed. In that moment Eugene and Nicholas got out of the car as well and before anyone could stop him, Rick had taken a few large steps in Nicholas’ direction and punched him square in the face.

“That was you!” Rick yelled at the Alexandrian, who had stumbled backwards and just touched his split and bleeding lip. “You fucking coward. You got him killed.”

His yelling drew attention and people started gathering around them the same way they had the other day when pretty much the same group had been engaged in a fight at the gate, too. Only this time Noah was missing. And Aiden.

“Rick”, Glenn placed his hand on the leader’s arm when he noticed Deanna hurry towards them. “Aiden … He’s dead, too.”

With teary eyes he nodded into Deanna’s direction.

“We need to tell her.”

The lump in his throat was almost choking Rick now. It was his duty to inform the poor woman that her firstborn was dead. What made this an even harder task was the fact that this death could have been prevented. Same as Noah’s.

If Rick hadn’t been drinking last night, if he’d been up that morning and had been there before that particular group had left, he could have stopped them, could have altered things once more. Another car, another destination, another constellation of people to go. Either way, he could have done something and did not. These were two more deaths on his conscience. He wondered how many more he was able to take before all this guilt would break him. Or was it possible to get used to
failing and causing people’s death?

“Where is Tara?” he asked in a choked voice. As if he didn’t know.

“She’s in back of the van. She’s injured and unconscious. I … I don’t know …”

Rick nodded with tears pooling in his eyes that he desperately tried to swallow down.

“Could someone …” He tried to address the people around, but his voice was too weak and hoarse to carry his request, so he fell quiet and cleared it.

Before he could try again, Daryl’s deep baritone addressed a chubby blond woman who was standing close by.

“What’s yer name?”

“De … Denise.”

“Fine, De-Denise. Go alert the doctor ‘n’ tell the dude that we got an injured woman here. We’re gonna be there in a few, so he best gets his butt in gear.”

“You got it”, she said and hurried away quickly to carry out the order.

Rick almost expected her to say “Yes, Sir” and salute to Daryl. If the situation wasn’t as sad and serious as it was, he would have laughed.

Deanna had almost reached them now and the leader braced himself to deliver the devastating news. He pulled Daryl and Glenn to the side and took a couple of deep breaths to compose himself. Then he said softly:

“Find the others and have everyone meet me at the house. There is something you all need to know.”
Daryl sat on the window sill with Judith on his lap and coaxed her to eat another spoonful of the applesauce Aaron had given him. Unlike their friendly neighbor, the little girl loved applesauce and was eager to open her mouth for more.

It was a peaceful picture, but the tension in the room was palpable. Every other second Daryl’s eyes flicked to his partner, who was standing next to the dining room table and leaned on it heavily, apparently trying to find the right words to say what he had to say. And whatever that was, it was anything but pleasant, so much was obviously. Daryl had sensed for quite a while now that something was up. Ever since that night in the barn Rick had been on edge, had been brooding when he thought no one was watching and cast nervous glances towards the gate way too often. He paced the house to gather weapons and got drunk last night – that appeared to be contradicting behavior, but it sure showed that something had pushed Rick off balance.

When Judy had finished her snack, Daryl used the bib to wipe the remains of the applesauce off the girl’s mouth and then placed a loving kiss on her head.

He cast Rick another glance and tried to ignore the questions that were nagging in the back of his mind.

If something was upsetting Rick to such an extent, why hadn’t he come talk to Daryl? Why hadn’t he shared the load with him? What happened anyway? What could be so unspeakable that Rick decided to keep a lid on it?

Although a dozen people were gathered, it was deadly quiet in the room. Even Judith was silent, as though she could feel the tension around her. By now the entire group knew what happened, knew about Noah and Tara. And Aiden.

Telling Deanna about her son had been the hardest thing Rick ever had to say. It hadn’t been the first death message he had to deliver – in his years as a cop there’d been several – but those other people had been complete strangers. This woman had opened the gate for them, had welcomed them to this town with the intent to give them a home. He liked and respected Deanna, and the last thing he had meant to do was inflict pain on her and her family or cause any harm to this community. And yet he had.

He could have prevented this. He should have prevented it, but he failed.

No one should bury their own child. That was probably why Aiden’s death shocked Rick as much as it did, although he hadn’t really known the man, nor liked him.

But he was Deanna and Reg’s firstborn, their pride and joy, one of the reasons they had built this town and kept going. Everybody tried to build a new world for their children, and now one of Alexandria’s sons was gone.

Rick couldn’t help glancing in Carl’s direction time and again and for a moment he had to fight tears. He knew the feeling, had lived it during that horrible dream he’d had. Losing a child was probably the worst thing that could happen to any parent and his heart went out to Deanna and Reg.

It wouldn’t happen to him. And Daryl. He couldn’t keep quiet any longer, couldn’t wait and hope for their fate to change. Noah’s death and Tara’s injury today proved that it wouldn’t, and there was no way Rick was going to wait until Fate took Carl and Judith and the rest of his family away from him.

He cleared his voice and tried to compose himself before he locked eyes with Daryl for a moment. The picture of his lover sitting calmly by the window with their baby girl on his lap and giving him a small, reassuring nod, instantly soothed the turmoil of emotions that had been raging inside of Rick.
With new confidence he turned to his people.

“I had a dream”, he started, his voice not quite as steady as he had hoped.

This opening sentence sounded odd even to his own ears and reminded him of Martin Luther King’s famous speech for a second. Damn, he should have picked his words before calling in this meeting, should have given it some thorough thought what exactly he was going to tell his people. He couldn’t mess this up. They had to believe him or he would never get them to leave Alexandria – all of them.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Abraham open his mouth to drop a comment, but a bib hitting him to the side of his head made him reconsider. That and Daryl’s killer scowl.

Rick pulled in a deep breath and looked to his man once again. He hoped Daryl was able to see what he meant to tell him:

“What have I ever done to deserve you?”

After he’d audibly cleared his throat, Rick started over.

“I know how that sounds, but gimme a moment to explain. Back at the barn, the night after the storm, I had a dream – or something like that. I saw places I’ve never been before, people I didn’t know, many tiny details that made no sense at the time – and I saw horrible things happening.”

“Like what?” Carl asked curiously.

“War. People dying.” He swallowed thickly. “When I woke up I shrugged it off. Thought it was no more than a nightmare, but …”

How was he to tell them that they were the people he had watched dying, next to countless others? How could he possibly say a thing like “I know the future”, without them thinking him insane or at best doubt his words? Who would believe a thing like that?

Unfortunately there was no easy, no believable way to tell the truth.

“But?” Maggie probed cautiously.

“But it was more than just an ordinary nightmare. When Aaron came through the door that day, I knew who he was, knew what he’d say, because I had seen the exact same scene in that dream. And that was just one of many things that have come true ever since.”

He took a deep breath and watched several eyebrows rise or eyes widen around him. Naturally no one went ‘Oh, so you’re having visions. Sure. Cool.’

For a second Rick thought this sounded a lot like Tara, and actually she may even have said a thing like that, if she was here now.

Tara.

He wasn’t too worried for her, although she suffered a severe injury. But if their fate was still on track, she’d survive and regain her cheerful, humorous disposition. At least until Denise’s death. A death that would cause the same pain and bitterness in her that it would in Daryl, and with regret Rick remembered how he had watched both of them grow dark and colder than their current selves. If the group left Alexandria … when the group left Alexandria – there was no if – Tara’s chance on a love relationship with the chubby, blond doctor would be shot down. Did he, Rick, even have the right to make that decision and deny Tara the happiness she was going to find here, if only for a while?

He looked into the faces around him and knew the answer – yes. She’d find someone else, and
maybe she wouldn’t. Either way, he couldn’t risk the lives of a dozen people for the sake of one love relationship, however sad that was.

Glenn clearing his throat ended Rick’s train of thought.

“So, what you’re telling us is that you had a foresight or something?”

He spoke just as cautious as Maggie before, as though they both felt like they were talking to a somewhat unstable person.

“Yes. Maybe. I don’t know what it was.” He sighed audibly. “Look, like I said – I know how this sounds, but it’s true. And I’ve got no explanation for it. And no proof, either. All I know is that I’ve seen Alexandria before we came here and I knew some of the people living here before we met them. Like Aaron. And that Nicholas dude.”

Glenn caught on first.

“Wait. In that dream or whatever it was, you’ve seen Nicholas?”

Rick nodded with a painfully throbbing heart.

“And the other day”, Glenn continued, “after we had that fight with him and Aiden at the gate, you warned us to stay away from them …”

His eyes widened.

“Did you know what would happen on that run?”

There was a terrible stinging sensation in the leader’s eyes all of a sudden as he nodded slowly.

“You knew this and didn’t say anything?” Carol commented from where she was sitting next to Maggie and Glenn on the couch.

This time Rick was strangely reminded of a scene from the past, when Carol had questioned him in quite similar ways, blaming him for not telling everyone sooner about the information he had gotten from Dr. Jenner at the CDC. That they were all infected. That whoever died would turn, even if they had not been bitten by a walker.

Back then he had figured that it would just burden his people more and he was willing to carry that load alone for as long as possible. They had all been scared, exposed to danger day and night and desperately looking for a place to stay.

Would it have helped anyone to frighten them some more? To tell them that they carried the danger with them wherever they went and could never escape? Whether they knew or not – there was nothing anyone could have done to change matters, so keeping it a secret for a while hadn’t made a difference.

Rick had so hoped things would be different this time.

“I tried to prevent it”, he started defending his decision. “All of it. I altered many of the little details I knew of, hoping that it would stir fate into a new direction. And it worked to some extent, too. When we came here, we traveled on a different route and at a different time – Eric originally broke his ankle out there and Nicholas was at the gate. Both had changed.”

But, damn, then why had that opossum been there after all?

His eyes looked pleadingly to Carol and Glenn, before they moved over the assembled group.

“What more could I have done to prevent what happened to Noah and the others? If I had told you not to go, because I knew someone was going to die out there, you would have looked at me
exactly the way you do now. – As if I lost my mind.”

He ran a hand through his curls in a frustrated gesture.

“Going on runs was your job”, he said to Glenn. “You and Tara and Noah’s. I couldn’t very well tell you not to go without giving a reason why. And this damn vision or whatever you may call it didn’t give me a detailed schedule. I don’t know when exactly things will happen, I just know that they will – probably. That run could have been tomorrow or next months for all I know.”

He locked eyes with the Asian and saw the inner struggle in them – the respect and trust that urged Glenn to believe Rick, and on the other hand the inability to accept that anyone could know the future.

“It was the revolving door, right?” Rick asked.

“What?”

There was total incomprehension in Glenn’s eyes.

“You, Noah and Nicholas were stuck in a revolving door, but Nicholas wouldn’t wait till you broke the glass. He pushed his side open and exposed you and Noah to the walkers. That’s when they grabbed him.”

Glenn’s eyebrows rose to his hairline.

“No. Gosh, what … ? No. The walkers were closing in on us and we were looking for a way out. And that douchebag Nicholas pulled the door to a staircase open without checking first what was behind. About a dozen walkers piled in suddenly and he more or less pushed Noah in the way to get a headstart.”

Rick felt as though someone had emptied a bucket of ice water over his head. This was worse than he had thought. Apparently the minor changes he had made did have an effect after all – it caused other minor changes. It had altered the way of Noah’s death, but wasn’t able to prevent it. Just like their arrival in Alexandria at a different time may have saved Eric from getting injured, but it hadn’t prevented the opossum’s death.

Fear suddenly choked Rick when he continued that thought. If a person’s predestined death could merely be altered, but not prevented, there was nothing he could do at all to keep these people here alive. But then maybe their fate was linked to a place. The opossum died by the gate, just like Noah and Aiden died on that run, in the very same building as before. If Noah had never gone on that run, would he still be alive now? Would changing their location and avoiding what originally killed them, save their lives? Or was this Final Destination? Where they all doomed and meant to die, so running was entirely senseless?

Rick pulled out a chair and sank heavily onto it, burying his face in his hands. How was he to make them understand? This sounded insane even to his own ears.

“Hey”, Daryl said in that moment. “I know ya’ll think he’s had a couple a’ drinks too many last night, ‘n’ that’s a fact, but if all he’s sayin’ was jus’ a bunch a’ crap, then tell me why he knew who’s on that run b’fore anyone told him? He ran outta our house as if his pants was on fire ta find ya guys out there. And, Glenn, didn’t he asked ya if Noah was dead the moment ya got outta the car? B’fore ya told him?”

The Asian frowned for a moment and then nodded.
“True.”

“So the way a’ his death changed, but bottomline is that Rick knew it was gonna happen. Guess ya best stop splittin’ hairs now ‘n’ listen ta what else the man’s gotta tell us.”

Slowly Rick lifted his head again and cast a thankful look into Daryl’s direction. The expression on the other’s faces had barely changed though. He saw their willingness to believe all he was telling them, but there was still lots of doubt there as well.

“You said you saw horrible things happening?” Michonne asked, trying to keep her skepticism at bay.

All this talk about a vision was very hard to believe and she was too reasonable a woman to buy a story like that easily.

Rick had been very reluctant to come here in the first place – maybe that was due to a bad gut-feeling about this place, fine. Or it had another reason. Fact was that Daryl hated Alexandria. From the second they arrived, until this very moment he had never tried to hide his aversion against this place and it was more than obvious. And Rick was a born leader, someone who had the hardest time submitting to someone else and following orders instead of giving them. Yet Deanna ran this place and Rick couldn’t be happy with that.

Michonne couldn’t help the feeling that all this talk about a vision and bad things coming their way was a charade those two were playing.

Alexandria was a wonderful place – at least to most of the group. Why would they leave here again? They all respected and loved Rick, but was that enough to turn their backs on this place and hit the road again? To trade shelter and food for the dangers and hardship out there?

Rick had voiced second thoughts about Alexandria from the very start, and someone else being at the helm in addition to his partner’s visible discomfort might have led to him making a decision. He wanted the group to leave, but couldn’t be sure that anyone save for Daryl and his children would follow. So the two of them came up with this weird idea.

There was no proof that Rick had really seen any of the places or people here in a dream before. Just like Eric originally breaking his ankle could be part of the story – there was no way to verify any of this. Daryl was the only one who had allegedly seen Rick run as though his pants were on fire. And had he really known that Noah was dead before Glenn had said anything? Just like witnesses of an accident were highly unreliable, Glenn had been traumatized and shaken and might confuse things. They manipulated him, said Rick mentioned Noah first, but did it really go down that way?

Michonne hated that she was mistrusting Rick’s word and thought him and Daryl capable of such a plot, but she couldn’t dismiss it, either. It made sense.

“What else did you see?” she asked, interested now what else Rick would tell them.

“You don’t want to know”, he said, pale as a ghost.

If this was really just an act, he sure was one hell of an actor.

“Yes, I do”, the black woman insisted. “And it’s not just curiosity. If what you saw concerns all of us, I think we’ve got the right to know.”

He pressed his lips together for a moment, secretly agreeing with her and yet being more than reluctant to tell them all the horrible details. Especially when Carl was present. He had best find a way to bring the facts across without going into detail.

“This place is gonna fall”, he cut to the chase instantly. “There is no whitewashing it – unlike what Aaron said, Alexandria’s wall is not going to keep anyone or anything out that wants in. And
there are hostile groups out there that will find this place sooner or later. It’s too big to go unnoticed forever and they have too much in here that other people would want.”

Michonne furrowed her brow. Speculations. All this was so vague that anybody could come to that conclusion.

“What groups?” she probed.

“If things go down the way I’ve seen them, the Wolves are gonna attack first. They’re probably close already and they are a sick, crazy bunch, killing for the fun of it without…”

“Do they have a W on their foreheads?” Daryl tossed in suddenly.

Rick cast him a surprised glance.

“Yes. How did you …?”

“I had the same dream.”

Murmur filled the room on that revelation and the expressions on people’s faces varied from surprised to unbelieving to downright shocked. Michonne was the only one who was getting annoyed. They had got to be kidding. One having a vision was unlikely and ridiculous enough, but now both of them? And how convenient that it was just Rick and Daryl who happened to have the same obscure dream. Did they think the rest of the group a bunch of fools?

“You had the same dream?”

Her inflection clearly carried a tinge of suspicion.

“Dunno”, Daryl admitted. ‘Hard ta say ‘cuz I don’t know what Rick’s done seein’, but I know ‘bout ‘em Wolves. Know they’re a sick, merciless bunch who do weird stuff. They kill people for fun, carve W’s in their foreheads. I sure don’t care ta be here when ‘em assholes show up.”

Smart. Michonne’s eyes flicked from Daryl to Rick and then over the assembled group. They backed each other’s story up to make it more believable and from the looks on people’s faces it seemed to work for some of them.

“It’s not just them”, Rick picked up. “We gonna fight them and win, but that conflict is gonna cost lots of lives nevertheless. At the same time a horde of walkers is gonna overrun Alexandria, but we’ll be able to fight them, too. We’ll come across other communities – Hilltop and the Kingdom – and we gonna form an alliance with them, do trade, build a good world for our children. Until the Saviors destroy it all.”

“Saviors?”

At that point Michonne was the only one still asking questions or dropping comments. The rest of the group sat frozen in their spots, torn between fear, incomprehension, doubt and confusion. They didn’t know what to believe and what to think anymore and the entire situation had them go mute.

“The Saviors are many, way more than we thought, way more than we could deal with”, Rick croaked. “They are being led by a man called Negan – a bastard with a baseball bat, wrapped in barbed wire. He likes bashing people’s heads in with it.”

Rick swallowed hard and tried to avoid looking at Glenn and Abraham.
Maybe he shouldn’t have mentioned this at all, especially with Carl sitting on the floor in front of him, looking at him with eyes as large as saucers. But if he didn’t give them any details, they couldn’t understand the severity of the threat. He had the feeling not to come across at all and Michonne’s most obvious doubts didn’t help matters.

“They force people to work for them, produce, supply, so the communities were no more than slaves. The alliance was unwilling to take that.”
“We weren’t”, he added after a moment of hesitation. “I wasn’t.”

He pulled in a deep breath.

“We talked the others into going to war against the Saviors to free the communities, but … it ended in a disaster. We underestimated their strength and numbers – and maybe it was just bad luck. We’ll never know. But what I do know is that the casualties will be sickeningly high and Alexandria will go up in flames.”

He was well aware that he kept switching between past and future, confused about whether to refer to his vision or the events to come. It didn’t matter. This wasn’t about grammar – it was about the truth.

From one second to the next Rick got up and stood before his people straight as a pole, as though new determination, new strength flooded through his veins all of a sudden.

“I tried to change things, but Noah, Aiden and Tara’s fate shows that I can’t. I’m not sure there is a way to alter things at all, but it’s highly unlikely if we stay here. I’m not gonna wait like a sitting duck until one disaster after the other strikes. And I’m not gonna lose any more of you!”

“So more of us are gonna die?” Rosita dared ask.

Rick swallowed against the lump in his throat, wondering for a moment whether or not to tell them the truth. But what sense was there in holding back now?

“Yes”, he said in a choked voice. “All of us.”

There were several gasps throughout the room, while Michonne was gritting her teeth. That was about enough. Now they were trying to scare people witless so everyone would agree to the new plan?

She still didn’t believe any of this. Dreams, vision of the future – there was no such thing. They all designed their own future, were all master of their own fate, painted their own picture. She refused to believe their path was laid out for them from the womb to the tomb. That would mean they had no choices, no way to make a single decision. Puppets on strings, that’s what this would make them and she’d be damned to dance to anyone else’s music.

“Rick”, she said sternly, while she stood, “with all due respect, but this place is the best that has happened to us in quite a while. We need a home, we need a wall and other people. We cannot just leave here again and turn our back on a somewhat normal life due to a dream.”

“I can”, Daryl growled and she cast him a meaningful look.

“No one’s surprised.”

“What’s that supposed ta mean?”

With Judith on his arm the archer stood, too, and instantly he and Michonne were engaged in a sparring match of angry scowls.
“It means that you’d plunge off the deep end and follow Rick no matter what. And you never liked it here in the first place. But some of us want to give this town a chance and, sorry, as much as I’d like to believe in visions, we don’t have the slightest proof that any of this is actually gonna happen. Maybe we’re gonna pack up and run for nothing.”

“So ya wanna wait till the Wolves invade this place ‘n’ kill people? Ya gonna believe it when ya end up with a W carved into yer forehead?”

“Daryl”, Rick’s tired voice interrupted the heated argument and both Michonne and Daryl fell quiet and looked a him.

“I can understand that all this is hard to believe. I just don’t know what to do so you’d believe it anyway.”

It was quiet in the room for a long moment, then Maggie rose from the couch and said calmly:

“You said there were other communities out there. If Alexandria was doing trade with them, they can’t be too far away. And if the Saviors are as many as you say, then there have to be traces of them. I’ll go with you.”

Rick was confused for a moment.

“Go where?”

“Looking for proof.”

She noticed the reaction in his eyes and hurried to add:

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that I need it, but you know … Michonne does have a point. This town seems to be the answer to our prayers and it is hard to give it up again. And you said yourself that some things of your vision changed, so there is the slight chance that others have changed, too. All I’m saying is, that we do have our doubts and you have to understand that, Rick.”

He nodded. It sure was a tough pill to swallow and he himself hadn’t believed it at first, either.

“Seeing is believing”, he muttered under his breath, although he never quite understood that saying.

It made no sense, because seeing meant having proof. And that was entirely the opposite of his definition of ‘belief’. To believe in something meant having faith and acknowledging its existence without any proof.

But, yes, no more splitting hairs. That’s what Daryl had said and he was right.

If Michonne and some of the others needed proof, they were going to get it. If that was the only way to convince them, the only way to get the entire group out of this town, then so be it.

“Ohkay”, he said, his voice firm now. “I get that one or the other of you needs more than my word.”

Was there a bitter tinge in his inflection?

“First thing tomorrow we’re gonna head out there – me, Daryl, Michonne and Glenn.”

He looked at Maggie and saw her open her mouth to protest, visibly hurt by his decision, but before she could say anything he added:

“I’ve got my reasons, Maggie. Trust me – I need you to be here.”
“Why is Daryl going?” she couldn’t help asking. “He doesn’t need proof.”

“But he’s the best tracker we’ve got and I don’t know in which direction those communities are”, Rick replied determinedly.

“I know the names, know what they look like, but I don’t have directions or timelines. Visions don’t come with a map and a schedule.”

There was most definitely a bitter tinge in his inflection now. Was anyone still trusting his word and his calls without questioning them?

“First thing tomorrow morning at sunrise”, he repeated. Me, Daryl, Michonne and Glenn. Period. And I need everyone else to stay alert. Try to take over sentry duty on the wall and at the gate – you know what to look out for now. And we need our weapons back, secure the houses and, Carol, I need you to watch out for Judith and not let her out of your sight. Please.”

“Sure”, Carol nodded, surprised to be assigned as Judith’s babysitter although she’d been the first to voice doubt in Rick. Again.

But unlike Michonne she didn’t question the things he’d told them. Just the fact that he had kept them to himself for so long. Again.

*There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your Philosophy.*

Carol believed in Heaven. And she believed that there were many, many things that existed despite there being no proof or explanation for them. So why not visions of the future? How would she have survived Sophia’s death, if she didn’t believe in Heaven and God? How was it possible that she had been able to hear her little girl’s voice in her head and feel her presence for days after Sophia’s disappearance, until the moment that Rick had put her down? Ghosts – why shouldn’t they exist? Why shouldn’t spirits be trapped in the world in between, until they moved on? How was it possible that two people could communicate through looks alone, know what the other one felt even over the distance, if there wasn’t such a thing as telepathy or a bond between souls? One only had to watch Rick and Daryl and their interaction closely to be a believer.

Carol was more than willing to accept that visions, dreams of the future, déjà-vus did exist. And if Rick entrusted his baby girl to her care, she may have done things in the past or in his vision that made him trust her, let him see her true colors.

That thought instilled Carol with hope, pride and confidence. Hopefully she was going to do something right in the future Rick saw, would be able to stand her ground. Whether the group was going to stay or leave and even if that future would be altered, she decided right there and then that the strong, trustworthy Carol would be a part in the new future, too.

One by one everyone acknowledged Rick’s closing instructions with a nod and then they wordlessly left the room. There was a lot to digest, lots of things to give some thought to and most definitely the need to discuss matters among themselves. No doubt, Daryl thought with anger darkening his eyes, there’d be vicious gossip about Rick behind his back, too.

The last ones to leave were Maggie and Glenn and just when they stepped out onto the front porch, Rick caught up to them.

“Maggie, can I have a word with you in private for a moment?”

He pulled the front door closed behind himself and after exchanging a short glance with his wife, Glenn just shrugged and headed down to the sidewalk without her.

“I just wanted you to know why I didn’t choose you for that mission.”
“Rick, I’m sure you had your reasons. It’s okay. I’m not too sure I believe in foresight and the likes, but I believe in you.”

He was visibly touched by these words, even more so as he knew what kind of woman she’d be one day. She *would have been*, if they stayed. That was another part of someone’s future he may not have the right to alter, but when he thought of how she’d end, there really wasn’t another option.

“My decision has nothing to do with you personally”, Rick said with a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. “But there’s something you might wanna know.”
He leaned in and whispered in her ear:
“You’re pregnant.”

Her eyes widened two sizes and she looked at him totally stunned.

“What? But … How do you …? Are you sure?”

“Well, you were in my dream and I remember that not too long after our arrival here you let everyone know. So, yeah, I’m pretty sure. In a few weeks you should know, too. It’s up to you whether you wait to tell Glenn or not.”

A wide smile spread over Maggie’s pretty face and the next second she threw her arms around Rick’s neck and hugged him. Without saying another word she placed a kiss on his cheek before pulling back and hurrying down the steps to her husband.
She grabbed Glenn by the hand and pulled him along, grinning from ear to ear. They disappeared in the gap between the two neighboring houses and Rick thought he heard her say “I got news for you” to Glenn. A moment later he heard the Asian’s enthusiastic squeal from around the corner and a wide smile spread over Rick’s face.
He still recalled when Lori had told him that she was pregnant with Carl. That must have been one of the happiest moments of his life.
Deep in thought, Rick entered the house again and found Daryl waiting for him, little Judith asleep on his shoulder now. Wordlessly Rick walked up to his partner and gently lifted the baby off his arm to hold her for a while.

He had never stopped feeling guilty about the way he had felt for this girl in the beginning – before she was born and even the first days after her birth. Without any way to be certain he had rejected, almost hated her, because he thought she was the visible proof of Lori and Shane’s betrayal, a symbol of how they had made a fool of him. Damn male ego.

Whether she was Shane’s baby or his – what difference did it make? The love triangle and conflict between Lori, Shane and Rick was entirely not that poor baby’s fault. How could he blame her? Hate an innocent, beautiful, wonderful being like this?

Thank God, Hershel had brought him to his senses. And Daryl. Daryl, who was most definitely not Judith’s biological father, but who had loved that tiny creature from the moment he had first seen her. And that love was mutual. Those two had a very special bond and no one was able to soothe Judy the way Daryl could. Whether she was a Grimes or a Walsh, Daryl Dixon would always be more of a father to her than anyone else.

Rick ran his hand softly over the fine, blond hair and pressed a kiss to his daughter’s head. He closed his eyes for a moment and inhaled the wonderful, unique baby smell before he asked:

“They all think I’ve lost my mind, huh?”

“No more than usual”, Daryl teased, but then wrapped his arms around his partner and their daughter and kissed Rick tenderly.

“No one’s thinkin’ that. Ya can’t blame ‘em for doubtin’ yer story – ‘s like when people tell ya they’ve seen dead people walkin’ or somethin’. Don’t mean they’re crazy or wrong – ‘s just somethin’ ya have ta wrap yer mind ‘round first.”

Rick’s lips curved into a smile for a second, while he leaned his forehead against Daryl’s. He let the words sink in for a moment, secretly wondering if he really wanted to ask the question that was on the tip of his tongue. Maybe he didn’t really wanted to know, but in the end he asked nevertheless.

“Did you really have the same dream?”

Daryl pulled back and looked Rick deep in the eyes.

“Yes ‘n’ no. If ya wanna know if I done dreamin’ bout some dude with a baseball bat, then – no. Ain’t seen no people ‘n’ places of this Hicksville b’fore, either. But I always had the same dream as you – for our people ta have a home, place we can live, our kids ta be safe. So, yeah, I’s havin’ the same dream.”

A smile spread over Rick’s face.

“You made them believe you had the same vision I had.”

“So? Didn’t say I had that dream, right? If they was jumpin’ to conclusions, that ain’t ma fault. But if it helps any – yer right bout ‘em Wolves. When Aaron ‘n’ I was out in the woods yesterday, we found a walker with a W carved into her forehead. Some cruel bastard tied the poor woman to a tree when she’s still alive ‘n’ left her for the walkers. If that’s the kind a’ people we’re gonna be up against, then we best get outta here asap.”
“The Saviors are worse.”

“Ya don’t need ta convince me. I got our stuff packed already. We just need ta find that proof, so the others gonna believe it, too.”

“We will.” Rick rocked Judith gently while he started pacing the room. “We’re gonna need a car, but I don’t want to bother Deanna with this. Do you think Aaron would let us borrow his?”

Daryl gave this a moment’s thought and then nodded.

“I guess. I can head over there ‘n’ ask him, if ya want me to.”

Rick stopped his pacing and cast his lover a surprised glance. This was the first and probably only time Daryl had ever offered freely to go and talk to someone.

“Wow, that must have been some awesome spaghetti you got over there.”

“Jackass.”

Rick couldn’t help chuckling.

“Love you, too. And, yeah, thanks – I’d appreciate it, if you talked to Aaron.”

“’kay, ya got it.” Daryl chewed his lower lip for a moment and then added: “If we’re goin’ by car, whadda ya need a tracker for?”

“I just said you were the best tracker we have and that’s not a lie. But that’s not the reason why I want you to come.”

A smile played around the older man’s lips.

“Ya implied ma trackin’ skills was the reason ya chose me.”

Rick came to stand in front of the archer and lifted a hand to comb his fingers gently through Daryl’s long hair, before he tucked it behind his ear.

“Uh-huh. Guess they jumped to conclusions there, too.”

They both grinned for a moment before their lips found each other once again. The kiss was instantly deepened with both of their tongues flicking out and meeting eagerly, but Judy giving a tiny whining sound in between of them broke them apart.

Daryl cast a look at the baby on his partner’s arm and found her fast asleep.

“The little stinker is jealous even in her sleep.”

“You or me?”

“Yer right – stupid theory. She just wanted a smooch, too.”

That said he placed a kiss on the baby’s chubby cheek, before he looked Rick deep in the eyes, serious now.

“So, why d’ya want me ta come? There somethin’ in that dream I should know ‘bout?”

“No. It’s just … We’re a team. I feel better when you’re there. And I need you by my side, especially since I don’t really see Michonne on my side anymore.”
“She’s just bein’ skeptical. ‘chonne’s a very down-to-Earth kinda person ‘n’ don’t easily buy esoteric stuff like visions. But if there’s danger out there, she’s gonna have yer back, ya know that.”

“Is she gonna have yours, too?”

Daryl frowned. He understood where this was coming from – the incident in the bedroom the previous day. He hadn’t even given it much thought anymore, but apparently Rick had.

“‘course. Get a grip, man. I don’t know what exactly happened in that dream a’ yours, but the group’s always gonna be the group. ‘m sure a’ that. We gonna stick together – all of us. Michonne, too. I may have ta stomp P.T.’s ass, but other than that …”

“P.T.?”

“Peepin’ Tom.”

Rick broke out laughing, which woke the sleeping baby on his shoulder.

“Nice goin’, Grimes. Ya know the rule – ya wake it, ‘s yer problem, too.”
He nodded towards the door.
“I need a smoke ‘n’ then ‘m gonna head over ta Aaron’s.”

The moment the door had fallen shut behind the archer, the silence in the house was almost eerie. Although she’d been woken from her slumber, Judith didn’t whine or stir at all. She just looked at Rick, considered being on her father’s arm a good enough reason to relax and was fast asleep again a heartbeat later.

Now that all distraction was out the door, Rick became aware of the headache that was still pounding in his temples and with a sigh he headed to his and Daryl’s bedroom to look for more Aspirin. He wished there was a pill to take his stomach cramps and worries away, too.

They were going to go looking for the Wolves, the Saviors or those other communities tomorrow! Dear God, all Rick really wanted to do was take his family and run into the opposite direction as quickly as only possible. But that’s where the problem started – if he didn’t know where the enemy even was, there was no running into the opposite direction.

The headache grew worse as he climbed the stairs, racking his brains for the tiniest little detail hidden in that vision that could at least give him a clue. East, west – where? They could end up looking for days, weeks even, if they headed into the completely wrong direction. And time was something they didn’t have. The longer they stayed, the more the enemy was closing in on them. If Daryl said he had seen walkers marked with a W, the Wolves were way too close already. But finding that one group might not be proof enough to convince even the most skeptical of his people. So they had to find at least one of the other communities or the Saviors, or both.

Rick wasn’t sure what he feared more – finding them or not finding them. Or even worse – for the Saviors to find them first.

Heading out there in search of those people was like diving head first into a tank full of sharks. The roads weren’t safe and driving a car drew attention, but there was no other option. Heading into the woods and doing their search on foot would have been an option, if they had a fixed destination, but without that they would never get far enough in the little time they had.

Rick placed Judith in her bed so she could take her nap, and then rummaged the nightstands of the master bedroom and the cabinets of the adjoining bathroom in search of more painkillers, taking a silent oath to never, never, never get that drunk again.
He was lucky. Apparently Daryl knew about hangovers and the unlikeliness of two Aspirins being nearly enough. Wherever he had found them, he had taken the entire box. Or maybe he had unleashed his Dixon charm on Dr. Anderson and persuaded him to give him the entire box. The imagination had a grin appear on Rick’s face despite the pain. He would have loved to see that.

After he had swallowed two more of the white pills, Rick pulled the door of the bedroom closet open and peeked inside.

All the closets in each of the bedrooms were filled with various clothes for men and women alike, but it sure was an adventure to find something suitable in there despite the vast assortment. It appeared as though someone had raided a Walmart or the clothing banks in the area and had taken everything they could get their hands on without drawing up a shortlist first. Some of the colors and designs as well as the quality of those clothes were gruesome. And it was a clutter of every style and size imaginable, as though that someone had expected the cast of *Lord of the Rings* to show up on their doorstep. The first shirt Rick pulled out would have fit a Troll, while the t-shirt he looked at next was most definitely made for a Dwarf.

Fashion, matching colors and clothes that fit 100% were totally not important in an apocalypse and when people ‘dressed to kill’ these days that was literal, but if they were going on a mission out there, Rick would have liked a pair of pants that weren’t going to fall off his hips every other step (although Daryl sure wouldn’t have minded and maybe Michonne, either). And the shirt with the colorful, bright Hawaiian flower print, that almost screamed at him from the depths of that closet, was as subtle as waving a red flag. Somehow Rick had hoped to find some camouflage gear in there. Anything to go invisible with.

Someone knocking at the front door and his name being called drew his attention and let him dismiss the search for a new outfit for the time being.

When he hurried down the steps, he saw Glenn standing in the living room, waiting for him.

“Did you just knock?” Rick asked with a frown. “This is your house, too.”

“I’m not sure Daryl would agree with you there”, Glenn said, cautiously glancing around to see if the archer was in earshot.

“He’s at Aaron’s”, Rick said when he noticed the nervous glances. He suppressed a smirk.

“What happened?”

“Let’s just say he made it quite clear last night that not everybody is still welcome in this house.”

The leader visibly struggled not to laugh. He could quite vividly picture Daryl kicking the “wrong” half of the group out of his house.

“I’m pretty sure that was aiming at Abraham and Eugene, not you”, Rick tried to mediate.

“Was there something you wanted?”

Instantly the expression on Glenn’s face grew serious.

“Maggie told me about the baby.”

Confused Rick cocked his head.

“You don’t look too happy.”

“No”, Glenn hurried to explain, “no, don’t get me wrong. This is great. I mean, we talked about this before and … we wanted a child. It’s just …”
He pulled in a deep breath.

“Say I believe that you really saw our future in that dream of yours and that you’re right about Maggie’s pregnancy … You said nobody is gonna survive that war against the Saviors. Right?”

Rick closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers, while he swallowed thickly. Oh, God.

“Yes”, he answered almost inaudibly.

“Will I live to see my son or daughter?”

There was an irritating stinging sensation in Rick’s eyes suddenly when he saw the pain on Glenn’s face. He knew the answer even before Rick slowly shook his head.

“Who’s gonna kill me?”

“Glenn …”

Where they really having this conversation? Did the Korean really want to hear all the horrible details on what was going to happen to him and his little family? Why was that even important? Would it make a difference to know the when, how and who?

“Just tell me”, he urged Rick, his voice strong and determined.

He did want to know.

“Negan”, Rick croaked, praying that Glenn didn’t want to know how he was going to die.

“That’s the maniac with the baseball bat, right?”

“Yes.”

“And Maggie?”

Rick’s heart beat faster and faster, the memory of the line-up at the Kingdom’s wall making him sick to the stomach.

“Negan.”

Glenn’s face was a stony façade now and for a moment he pressed his lips together so hard that they were a thin, white line.

“Will our baby even be born?”

Despite himself a tear slid down Rick’s cheek suddenly, but he didn’t bother to wipe it away while he slowly shook his head again.

“Negan”, Glenn said in a pressed voice and the expression in his eyes stirred a very bad feeling inside the leader.

“See you in the morning”, was all the Asian said before he abruptly turned on his heels and left the house.

Rick breathed in deep several times to compose himself and to still his racing heartbeat. Maybe he should have kept his mouth shut – about the baby and most certainly about Negan. He knew what that man was going to do, what he was capable of and Rick would have loved to kill
him and end it all before it even started. But he also knew that more than one of his people, including himself, were going to have the perfect opportunity during the war to end that bastard’s life – and all of them would fail. Glenn was probably no exception.

Whatever was going through his mind right now, he had better forget about it right away. Even if they found the Saviors – and Negan – out there, they would avoid doing *anything*, anything at all that could give their presence away and draw attention to the group and Alexandria prematurely. Maybe Rick had best changed the plan and pick someone else to go on that mission. Maybe Glenn best stayed behind, so he wasn’t tempted. But then there was no telling what he would do secretly as soon as Rick turned his back.

Damn, the last thing he needed right now was half of the away team either doubting him or being on a vendetta. Good thing Daryl was going to be there, otherwise going on that mission with Michonne and Glenn would have made Rick feel like driving around with a crate of nitroglycerine.
Chapter 13

Evening came way sooner than Rick had expected, which may have had something to do with the fact that he hadn’t been out of bed before noon. The search for camouflage clothing had been futile and so he had chosen black jeans and a khaki shirt to wear on their mission the next day. If they had to go invisible out in the woods at some point, dark colors and earth tones should do just as well. They had for years now.

Shortly before dinner the leader meant to ask Carol to take care of Judith for a little while, so he could go check on Tara in the infirmary, when Carl came down the stairs and met his father in the kitchen. Rick was more than surprised to find his son home. Hadn’t the boy left after the meeting to head over to the Anderson house? When did he come back? The look on Carl’s face showed quite clearly though that the ‘when’ wasn’t half as important as the ‘why’.

“Hey”, Rick addressed the teenager, “everything okay?”

What a stupid question. Save for the fact that they were living in a zombie apocalypse, one of their people died today, another one was injured and the three people Carl cared most for in this world, next to his sister, were about to go on a dangerous mission. Of course, everything was not okay. The boy cocked his head in a very Grimes-like way and cast his father a look that confirmed Rick’s thoughts – he was not okay.

“I thought you were over at the Andersons’.”

“I was, but I can’t stand Ron’s stupid jokes today. Doesn’t seem right to have fun with your friends anyway, if someone of your family just died.”

Rick placed his hand on Carl’s shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. He didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t stop thinking that he might have been able to prevent Noah’s death, if only he’d been there. If he hadn’t been drinking last night, hadn’t slept in, he may have been able to stop his people from going on that mission. And somehow he had the feeling that Carl felt the same way about this. They had had a hard time with each other after the prison fell – something the teenager blamed entirely on his father. It hadn’t been easy to reestablish a relationship of love and trust between them and it was still fragile. Were they back to square one now?

“You think it’s my fault, don’t you?” Rick asked, deciding to grab the bull by the horns.

“Do you?” Carl gave the question right back.

“Yes. Maybe. I mean, it’s like I said – I don’t know exactly when things are gonna happen, but …”

“You really believe in that dream thing, huh?”

Rick looked at his son with wide eyes.

“I take it you don’t?”

“No. Neither does Michonne.”

The man’s expression darkened. So, that’s the way the wind blew.
“Did you get to that conclusion on your own or is that Michonne I hear talking there?”


Rick pressed his lips together for a moment while he prepared a strong Espresso to help wake up his still numbed brains. If anything made from instant powder could possibly pass as Espresso, even in an apocalypse.

“It’s not a gift”, he replied in a pressed voice. “It’s a curse, believe me. You wouldn’t want to see what I saw and although it sounds unbelievable, I cannot simply ignore it. What if it’s all true? I have to do something, don’t you understand?”

Urging, he looked into his son’s eyes. Eyes. Plural. He had to make sure it stayed that way.

“I’m not losing anyone else.”

That wasn’t a wish, that was the plan. The alternative was unacceptable.

Carl gave this a moment of thought and then nodded.

“Still don’t think I believe it, but maybe you’re right. Won’t hurt to make sure. Anything I can do?”

Rick felt an immense weight drop off his chest and pride for this boy instilled him instead. Carl would be a remarkable man one day, too, he would make sure of that. This boy was the future and he could totally picture him following in his footsteps, become the leader of this group. One day. In the future. The new future. The future that would see all of them alive and far away from the Saviors.

“You could take care of Judith until I’m back”, Rick said with a smile. “I was gonna go check on Tara. And, think you could make some spaghetti for dinner? Daryl seems to have a soft spot for spaghetti.”

The way to a man’s heart ...

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

Rick dared run his hand shortly over Carl’s hair – a gesture, he was sure, was still considered entirely so not cool even among teenagers in an apocalypse. After downing his so-called Espresso he turned to head to the door.

“Dad?”

Carl’s voice stopped him.

“I … I was up in my … our … my room for a while, reading comics, but … with Noah gone now that room feels … empty. I keep expecting him to come through the door any moment.”

Rick swallowed thickly when his mouth parched suddenly. Now what?

“Would you mind, if I stayed next door tonight?”

“Next door?”

“Yes, with Michonne.”
The leader looked at his son silently for a moment. Michonne. She and Carl had formed a close friendship over the months and especially out on the road, after the prison was lost, she had become more than just another member of the group. She was … what? A confidante? A kindred spirit? The closest thing to a mother Carl would ever have again? Now, with Rick being in a relationship with a man, the boy had two fathers, but what he probably needed more was a mom. And Michonne was doing a good job being that for him.

“Carl, she’s going on that mission tomorrow and …”

“I know.”

Actually Rick had tried to point out that Michonne may have needed some rest, time to prepare for the mission, but the panicky tinge in Carl’s voice had him reconsider.

“You and Daryl and Michonne … you all gonna be out there.”

Rick grew pale. He hadn’t even thought of that. The three people that Carl and Judith would refer to as their parents were going on the same dangerous mission – and if anything happened, they’d be complete orphans from one moment to the next.

Maybe Daryl had best stay behind after all. It was selfish to take him along, because Rick needed him by his side. He should have thought of their children first. But then – maybe there would be the need for a tracker or hunter after all.

There was no telling how long they’d be out there and what they were up against. Perhaps they had to find their way through the woods at one point or hunt for food.

Rick needed Daryl. They did.

And leaving Michonne behind was senseless – she was the one who had to be persuaded first of all. There was no way out.

“I’m sorry, Carl. I wish I could leave her or Daryl with you and your sister, but I’ll need them both out there.”

“I get that. It’s okay, dad. But right now I need to be over there with Michonne. Okay?”

“Sure. As soon as I’m back from the infirmary, you can go.”

He headed to the door and opened it with a heart as heavy as lead. Casting a glance over his shoulder, he said:

“I love you, Carl.”

“I love you, too, dad”, the boy replied after a moment, but the door had already fallen shut behind Rick.

There was no telling if he had still heard Carl or not.

The conversation with his son was still on his mind when Rick walked down the street, headed to the infirmary.

It was so easy to forget that a teenager wasn’t a little child anymore, and that especially in these times children grew up way faster than before. Rick had deluded himself, had figured as long as Carl had friends his age and a pile of comics to read, he’d be carefree; the worries of the world on the adults’ shoulders where they belonged.

But things didn’t work that way. Not anymore.
Rick sighed while he picked up his pace. He would have liked to spare Carl the new fear and sorrow, but both would probably be constant companions in their lives now and never go away again.

As usual when he felt out of sorts, Rick’s thoughts instantly reached out to Daryl. He wasn’t sure if he believed in telepathy and the likes, despite his current extraordinary experience, but he did believe in a bond between souls. There were too many times in the past that his heart, his thoughts and his soul had called for his partner when they’d been apart, and he had felt an echo, an answer, Daryl’s soul silently communicating with his. That had kept him going and sane after the loss of the prison, when their home had been destroyed and his family scattered to the four winds. Despite the distance, Rick had felt his lover out there, had known that Daryl was alive. He had never lost confidence that one day, somehow, somewhere they were going to find each other.

He would have loved to see him now. Where was he anyway? Didn’t he say he was just going to ask Aaron for his car? That was hours ago. Surely borrowing a car wasn’t asking so much that it required hours for Aaron to weigh his answer. So what was taking so long? Rick couldn’t see their friendly neighbor declining the request. So Daryl still being over there, trying to stare Aaron into submission was unlikely. Unless more spaghetti had been offered, Daryl should have been back by now.

“Get a grip, Grimes”, Rick chided himself.

The entire surreal situation and the fear that vision instilled in him, had him become irrational. And Noah’s death, another part of his dream coming true, had apparently pushed him off balance. He was seeing dangers in every corner suddenly, worried every second of the day, felt the urge to know where exactly the members of his family were at any time to make sure they were okay. Daryl and his children first of all.

For a moment he thought about stopping at Aaron’s to see if Daryl was still there, but he reconsidered instantly. How would that look?

“Tara”, Rick reminded himself.

Checking on Tara was the task now, nothing else. When he entered the infirmary, a smile instantly spread over the leader’s face and drove some of the lines of worry and distress away. Tara had visitors.

Rosita, Abraham and Eugene were sitting by her bedside and kept vigil over the unconscious woman. It was a heartwarming picture to see even the sassy Abraham sit there quiet and almost solemn, while Rosita had her hand resting on Eugene’s shoulder to soothe the clearly agitated man. Deanna was right – it was amazing that people who were so different could grow so close and become a family. They may have their clashing opinions and be in each other’s hair at times, but when the shit hit the fan, they stood together unconditionally.

Before the outbreak they would have been unlikely to even talk to each other, let alone form a unit like that. Not all about the apocalypse was bad. Sometimes it seemed to bring out the best in people, too.

“How is she?” Rick whispered when he approached the bed.

“Stable”, Rosita replied.

“Where’s the doctor?” the leader asked and frowned when the other three just shrugged.

Doctor Anderson was nowhere in sight. Typical. For a reason unknown to him, Rick did neither
like, nor trust the man. He had felt uncomfortable in his presence right from the start and felt this weird tingling sensation in his fingers each time Pete was near, as though a part of him wanted to punch the guy’s face. And maybe he should, simply for not being here when his only patient might need him.

“She’s got a concussion”, Rosita picked up. “She’s probably gonna have hell of a headache when she wakes up and should rest a few days, but after that she should be okay.”

“Did Anderson say that?”

“Nope. Eugene.”

Rick cocked his head, but before he could say anything, Eugene beat him to it.

“No, I do not have a degree in medicine, so naturally my diagnosis may appear speculative. However, I can assure you that I have read a sufficient amount of pertinent literature to come to the obvious conclusion that …

“Alright already”, Abraham cut in with an eye-roll. “What Dr. Mullet’s trying to say is – she bumped her head and she’s been out cold, so it’s safe to assume she’s got a concussion and bitch of a headache. Don’t need to be a genius to put one and one together.”

Rick noticed the hurt expression on Eugene’s face and remembered how being treated like that would make the smartest member of the group turn his back on them one day and side with the enemy.

Wasn’t there a saying that ran ‘Nip it in the bud’? Maybe it was time Eugene was being appreciated for what he was able to do, not teased for what he was not able to do.

“Glenn said you saved Tara’s life”, Rick said gently to the tall, corpulent man, who kept staring into the patient’s pale, unmoving face.

“Hardly”, Eugene croaked.

“You stayed with her in the office and protected her, right? And it was you who carried her out of the building and put her in back of the truck before you picked up the others, didn’t you?”

It was quiet for a moment, then Eugene nodded slowly, still not daring to look up.

“That appears to be correct.”

“Well, then you did save her life. And you found the micro converters the town needed and just made a diagnosis while that good-for-nothing doctor doesn’t even have the decency to be here. – Good job.”

He patted Eugene’s shoulder and smiled when the chubby face turned his way, joy and pride written all over it.

Now, was that really so hard? He noticed Abraham and Rosita exchange a surprised look and then nod in a ‘Damn, he’s right’ kind of way.

The next second Abraham’s hip flask was extended to Eugene, while the red-haired man gave his companion a hearty slap on the back.

“To our hero of the day. – Here, take a swig, buddy.”

There was no teasing in his inflection. He really meant it.
“You guys are gonna keep an eye on Tara while we’re gone, right?” Rick asked, hoping to find the young woman up and about by the time they returned.

“Affirmative”, Eugene replied, a smile still tugging on the corners of his mouth.

“Thanks.”

Rick ran one hand through his hair and then turned to leave.

“Good luck”, Rosita said behind his back, shortly before Abe added:

“Don’t let anyone kick your ass out there. If they try, tell them there’s others where you came from and they had best run like a bunch of scared rabbits.”

“Thanks for the advice”, Rick said, his expression a toss-up between amused and panicked.

He liked the Sergeant’s self-confident and sassy attitude, but if Abraham knew what exactly was out there to kick their ass, he’d suggest for them to run like scared rabbits. And when the situation required it, that was exactly what Rick would urge his people to do. Sometimes being a coward was the smarter move. Heroes had the tendency to die young.
Chapter 14

When Rick came back into the house, he found Daryl sitting at the dinner table, audibly slurping spaghetti, while Carol sat at the far end of the table in safe distance, Judith on her lap and watching the show in fascination.

“Sorry”, Daryl muttered, while he moved a heap of pasta around in his mouth in between words, “started without ya.”

He washed the food down with a large swig of wine, gave a content belch and then dug in once more.

“I’s starvin’”, he exaggerated, pointing his folk at the pile of pasta on his plate. “This ’s great, man. Have some.”

“Sure you’ve got enough on that plate there?” Rick teased.

“Well”, Daryl replied totally unimpressed before he sucked in the next round of spaghetti.

Carol suppressed a giggle while she exchanged a look with Rick.

“This is better than TV”, she said with a shrug.

“Yeah, especially since there’s never anything new on lately”, the leader winked at her.

He placed a kiss on Judith’s hair and then headed into the kitchen to get himself a plate and a helping of their dinner, too. When he lowered himself onto a chair, he cast Carol a questioning glance, but she waved the unspoken question off.

“I’m not hungry. I made a couple of casseroles again today and tried each and every one. That stuff is gonna come out of my ears any day now.”

That alone was a good enough reason to leave this place again, she couldn’t help thinking.

Rick put some of the spaghetti in his mouth and could understand why Daryl was stuffing his face the way he did. They were really good and once more he cast a questioning glance in Carol’s direction.

“Don’t look at me”, she said, instantly catching on. “I’m the casserole and cookie queen in this town. Your son made those spaghetti.”

“Hidden talent”, Daryl commented, still busy shoving food into his mouth as though he hadn’t eaten in days. “Boy’s gonna go far.”

“Yes, he will”, Rick thought, secretly gritting his teeth for a moment.

“Unfortunately”, Daryl added, “he ain’t gone far enough today. Just next door ta visit with the Addams family.”

The younger man almost spat his spaghetti when he broke out laughing. First the Psycho house and now the Addams family – he was curious what Daryl would come up with next. Abraham and Eugene had really, really pissed him off.

“Yeah, I know”, Rick smiled after he had regained his composure. “He wanted to spend some time with Michonne.”
“That okay with you?” he added cautiously.

“Sure, why not?”

The archer had just lifted his glass to take another swig from the wine, but when he noticed the look in his partner’s eyes he just set it back down.

“Rick, she talked ta me. We’re good”, he said without going into detail.

With Carol present he was reluctant to dig too deep into personal matters that only concerned him, Rick and Michonne.

“B’ sides, the boy already got a father – don’t need no second one. But it might be good if he had someone comin’ close to a mom. Whether that’s ‘chonne or Carol, Maggie or any a’ ‘em other girls – don’t matter. Kids need a momma.”

He lowered his eyes, choked by emotions for a moment.

Over the years he had wondered more than once how his life would have been, if his mother hadn’t died when he was just five. Maybe things would have been different. At least a little. Maybe he wouldn’t have to wait more than forty years for someone to give him a hug and a kiss. Whether his mom had ever done that, he couldn’t remember, but she might have. Mothers did those kind of things.

Unwilling to let sad memories pull him under, he lifted his chin determinedly all of a sudden and reached for his glass again.

“Yer gonna be glad the kids have ‘em girls ta talk to one day, mark ma words. Ain’t gonna be me explainin’ ‘em damn tampons to our daughter ten years from now.”

That comment had both Rick and Carol chuckle to the pure imagination of a teenager Judith confronting Daryl with that kind of topic. It might have been the wine, but they both thought the archer was blushing already.

Still giggling, Carol stood with Judith on her arm and headed to the kitchen to get a glass of milk for the little girl. The moment she was out of earshot, Rick leaned over the table and whispered:

“What did you mean – Carl doesn’t need a second father?”

Daryl shrugged.

“Meant what I said. He’s yer son, Rick. He’s acceptin’ me as yer partner, but I ain’t never gonna be no dad to him.”

“Yes, you are”, the younger man protested.

“Maybe – whatever. Know the boy luvs me ‘n’ that’s mutual, don’t matter what ya call it. But two male role models ’s a bit strong ‘n’ sometimes what it takes ‘s the female touch. So I ain’t got no problem with him headin’ over there ‘stead a’ talkin’ ta me. ‘s all I’m sayin’.”

This had Rick thinking for a moment, wondering if Daryl was right.

Did Carl really not see another father in the archer? And if not, why would that bother him when Daryl seemed to be perfectly okay with “just” being … what? An uncle? A friend?

Carl had loved and respected Shane as his father’s best friend, so if he felt the same way about Daryl, wasn’t that enough? The archer was Rick’s best friend now, too, next to being his life companion. And just because Rick’s feelings for Daryl exceeded the ones he had felt for Shane, that didn’t automatically have to apply to Carl, too.
Daryl was right – it didn’t matter. His relationship to Carl didn’t need a label – what it needed was the kind of emotions that were already there. Love, trust and respect. What more was there to ask?

“So, what did Aaron say about the car?” Rick chose to change the subject.

It didn’t go unnoticed and Daryl was glad the father-son-topic was off the table. He had meant what he said – it wasn’t really important. He knew how Carl felt for him and he had never expected a teenage boy to accept him as a father. Carl already had one and Rick was doing a damn fine job, so there sure was no need for a Dixon to cut in.

It didn’t matter that Daryl for his part had adopted that boy in his heart a long time ago. Carl was the only son he’d ever have and he was a remarkable young man already. Not even twenty years old, but way more mature than Merle had been with his fifty plus until the day he died.

It wasn’t Carl’s fault that he would rather turn to Rick and Michonne if he needed parental advice. If he ever needed a friend, someone to confide in if a parent wasn’t the right person to talk to, Daryl would be there for him. Always.

He emptied his glass of wine and shook his head ‘no’ when Rick silently offered him a refill, before he answered the question.

“No big deal. We can have his car.”

“Is he gonna be okay without it, even if our mission takes a few days?”

“Yup. He said he ain’t plannin’ on goin’ out the next couple a’ days anyway. Like I said – he don’t want Eric out there no more ‘n’ with his new recruiter on a mission, he’s reluctant ta head out alone. B’sides, even if he found new peeps ta bring back – Deanna’s in no condition ta deal with people at the moment.”

Rick nodded with an empathic air on his face.

“Maybe we should tell her what we’re planning and why.”

“Not yet. When we’re back ‘s still early enough.”

Rick froze in the motion and after a long silent moment set the fork, that had been halfway to his mouth, back onto his plate.

“Do you need proof, too?” Rick croaked.

“No. I believe ya, if that’s what yer askin’. But ya said some things changed. Might jus’ as well be that ‘em assholes ain’t out there no more or harass people in other places now. Dunno. ‘s why we need ta go take a look b’fore we scare peeps ‘round here witless.”

“Good point”, Carol tossed in, while she lowered herself back into her seat and placed Judith on her lap again.

The little girl had an adorable little milksop.

“Hey, Jude”, Daryl addressed his daughter with a smile. “Can ya do this?”

He wiped his sleeve over his mouth, affectively smearing tomato sauce all over it, and started chuckling when the little girl mimicked the gesture and used her own sleeve to wipe her mouth. A moment later Daryl noticed the two stern glances that lingered on him and the chidingly raised eyebrows of both Rick and Carol.
“Ah, c’mon, guys, ya gotta be kiddin’ me. ‘s the fuckin’ apocalypse ‘n’ ya worryin’ ‘bout table manners? Gimme a break.”

Rick and Carol exchanged a look and then shrugged with a suppressed smirk. The man had a point.

“Okay”, Rick picked the previous topic back up, “I’m glad the problem with the car is settled.” There was a short pause, then he added: “What took you so long?”

“Missed me?” Daryl teased.

“Like crazy”, Rick played along, grinning when he noticed Carol roll her eyes.

He almost expected her to go “Pleeeease” any moment now, but she didn’t.

“Aaron’s got parts for a bike in his garage”, Daryl said, regret clearly peppering his inflection. “He offered ‘em ta me. Said I could build ma own bike if I liked. – I woulda. If we stayed.”

Rick noticed the sad look in his partner’s eyes. When it came to motorcycles, Daryl was like a little boy with his favorite toy. Ever since the day they first met, Rick had known Daryl to ride bikes and he barely ever saw him happier, more at ease, relaxed. Ride like the wind. That song title flashed through his mind suddenly and after Daryl had taken him for a ride a few times, Rick knew the feeling.

He would have loved to give Daryl the chance on having a new toy. His old one was lost when the prison fell and it was as though a part of Daryl had been missing ever since.

“How long do you need to put it together?” Rick asked.

“Dunno. Couple a’ weeks prob’ly.”

The leader cringed, which didn’t go unnoticed.

“I know”, Daryl said with new regret. “We ain’t got no couple a’ weeks. ‘s okay. There’s other bikes out there.”

“Poor Pookie”, Carol teased with a tiny smile playing around her lips. “Care for a cookie?”

“Keep it up, woman”, Daryl growled, “jus’ keep it up ‘n’ ya gonna be left behind, together with Dr. Frankenstein ‘n’ his monster over there.”

Again Rick broke out laughing and a moment later both Carol and Daryl joined in. Eugene and Abraham were definitely on Daryl’s shitlist for the time being, but as long as that was reason for laughter even the night before a dangerous mission, Rick wouldn’t do anything to change that.

After Rick had put Judith to bed for the night, he headed back downstairs and found Carol and Daryl sitting side by side on the couch, watching TV. It was a totally normal picture and at the same time appeared odd. Moments like this could easily make people forget that most of mankind had died outside the wall and was roaming the world as undead corpses now. They shouldn’t be sitting here on sofas watching TV and yet they did. Rick couldn’t blame anyone who’d rather stay here and take it up with ages old DVDs and bad entertainment, instead of zombies and hostile living people out there.

From the look on Daryl’s face Rick could tell that his partner was the exception. Whatever he was forced to watch on that screen, he most obviously would have opted for fighting against a horde of
walkers single-handedly than having to bear this another minute.
Carol however was smiling happily and looked at the TV with shining eyes.

“Rick, come on, sit down. It’s only been on for a little bit.”

The leader saw Daryl shrink into himself when he realized what that meant. There was more of this. A lot more. Barely noticeable he shook his head ‘no’, which apparently meant “Run, man. Run as fast as ya can.”

Rick was getting curious now.

“Eugene got the old DVD player running, huh?” he commented while he approached the couch.

“Eugene’s a dead man”, Daryl grumbled, but fell quiet when Carol shushed him with a nudge of her elbow.

When Rick stood next to the sofa and cast a glance at the screen, he felt the color drain from his face. Oh, gosh, no – not that.

“Dirty Dancing?” he croaked. “Has she carried that stupid watermelon yet?”

“Yeah”, Daryl growled, apparently tortured half to tears by that damn romance novel. “Wish someone was gonna come in here with one, too, ‘n’ would hit me unconscious with it.”

Carol cast him a chiding side glance, but she was barely able to hide her amusement.

“Fair is fair, Daryl. We played rock-paper-scissors and you lost. So – my choice.”

“What was the alternative?” Rick asked.

“Alien vs. Predator”, Daryl replied, which had Rick chuckle once again.

“You guys are trying to torture each other with the worst crap that has ever been filmed, huh?”

“Excuse me?” Carol was seriously cross now. “My movie is epic.”

“Yeah, ‘s an epic failure. I mean, jeez, ‘s ‘bout some douchebags dancin’ ‘n’ carryin’ watermelons. Gimme a break.”

“Nope”, she sassd, “you lost.”

And with that things were settled for Carol.
Rick suppressed a smirk and gently nudged Daryl’s shoulder to have him scoot over, so he could sit, too. He didn’t mind watching that movie – again.
Lori had tortured him with it at least three times. It would forever be beyond Rick why women loved it so much that they watched it over and over and over. Apparently one had to be female to understand that mystery – being gay or bi was definitely not sufficient. Not even Patrick Swayze was a good enough reason to watch people dancing and a sappy teenage romance develop for one and a half hours straight.
Daryl was sinking lower in his seat by the minute.

“Man”, he grumbled, “I sure ain’t havin’ the time of ma life.”

“How did she get you to watch TV with her?” Rick whispered back. “You knew what was at
stake.

“She threatened ta cut ma hair in ma sleep.”

Carol heard them despite their poor attempt to whisper, and laughed out loud.

“I did not. But it’s a good idea.”

“Don’t worry”, Rick patted Daryl’s thigh reassuringly, “the bedroom doors have locks.”

“Locks can be picked”, Carol fluted sweetly.

The two men cast her a scrutinizing look and then locked eyes for a moment, coming to a silent agreement. *Pick locks …*

“Best jus’ watch that damn movie”, Daryl murmured to his partner, “b’fore she shows Eugene how.”

A minute passed in silence, then two. Halfway into the third Rick whispered:

“Come on, tell me. How did she get you to watch that movie with her?”

“She said ’please’”, Daryl replied softly.

And that was all he said. Maybe that was all he needed to say, too. This wasn’t about watching TV, just like Carl heading over to the other house wasn’t really about not wanting to be alone in his room. Michonne, Glenn, Daryl and Rick – they were going on a dangerous mission in the morning and after what Rick had told his people, they were all of them rattled and scared of what might happen. Maybe there was nothing out there at all. And maybe there was. There was no telling whether the away team would ever return – that threat was always there, but with the hostile groups that allegedly were out there in addition to countless walkers, the situation appeared twice as serious now.

Spending time together for as long as possible – that’s what this was. They were saying goodbye, just in case. Carl needed to see Michonne and the others, just like Carol wanted Daryl near for a little while longer.

And the archer got that, which was exactly why he was here and endured Carol’s choice of movie although it made him sick to the stomach.

Ten minutes into the movie Rick felt his headache return. God, this was bad, even for 80’s standards. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against Daryl’s shoulder, trying to concentrate on the feel of the familiar body close by, the warmth that radiated off his lover, the soft movement as Daryl breathed and the touch of his hand when the archer gently interlaced their fingers.

They were both blinding out the sounds from the screen now, leaned into each other and tried to escape to a secluded, wonderful place together. A place without walkers or maniacs with baseball bats. And most definitely without people dancing mambo and carrying watermelons.

Rick hadn’t even realized that he had fallen asleep, when Daryl gently nudging his shoulder brought him back around.

“Much as I’d love ta see what’s gonna happen to that watermelon”, he said to Carol, “I think I best bring the officer here ta bed now.”

Carol leaned forward to cast a glance to the other end of the couch and was met by red-rimmed and tired blue eyes.

“Uh-huh, guess so”, she agreed. “I can stop the movie and we pick up where we left off as
soon as you guys are back from your mission.”

“Man, that’s a good enough reason not to come back. Yer aware a’ that, ain’t ya?”

She giggled.

“You’re not getting off the hook that easily, Mr. Dixon. – Go ahead and tuck your man in now. Have fun. Er, I mean, good night.”

She cast him a meaningful smile, while Daryl just shook his head and then got up. Happy to be able to flee the torture chamber he pulled Rick to his feet and wrapped one arm around his waist to steady the drowsy leader. Together they more or less stumbled up the stairs to their bedroom and a moment later the door fell shut behind them – and was locked audibly.
 Chapter 15

Daryl let go of Rick the moment they were inside the room and Rick sank heavily onto the edge of the bed.

“Good act”, the archer commended, “Ya even look like shit.”

“Thanks”, Rick replied dryly, while he pressed his hands to his temples the same way he had done that morning. “Probably because I feel like shit, too. That damn headache is back.”

“Oh.” Daryl crouched before him instantly and placed his hands gently on Rick’s knees. “Sorry, I thought ya was just puttin’ on a show to get us outta there b’fore ‘em spaghetti make a reappearance.”

That comment made a smile tug on the corners of Rick’s mouth despite the pain.

“It was nice of you to bear that movie. You know why she asked you to watch TV with her, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I know. Ain’t very encouraging if people start treatin’ ya as though ya ain’t comin’ back.”

Rick pulled in a deep breath, before he said in a choked voice:

“Could just as well be that we’re not gonna have anything to come back to.”

He saw Daryl’s pupils blow up in shock when he caught on.

“Think ‘em Wolves or that walker horde is that close already?”

“I don’t know.”

The archer gave a curt nod.

“Huh. Ain’t nothin’ more we can do than what we’ve already planned. Guess we best cross each bridge when we get there.”

He gave Rick’s thighs a reassuring squeeze and then stood again.

“Want some more Aspirin?”

“No.” Rick massaged his temples. “I already had four.”

“’Kay. Maybe I can think a’ somethin’ else that’ll help.”

“Yeah? Wonder what you have in mind.”

Amusement sparkled in Rick’s cerulean eyes for a moment, before a sharp pain flashing through his brain made it disappear abruptly again.

Wordlessly Daryl crouched down before him once again and nonchalantly started opening the buttons of Rick’s shirt. He pushed it off the leader’s shoulders a moment later, before he got hold of the cowboy boots and pulled one by one off his partner’s feet.

Rick watched him silently. There was nothing sexual or seductive about what Daryl did – he undressed him in slow, gentle motions the same way he would undress Judith to put her to bed. It made Rick feel warm and at ease how the archer was almost pampering him. Apparently accidental
Daryl’s fingers grazed his partner’s skin every now and then – brushed against his arm or across his stomach, touched his hand just for a heartbeat – while piece by piece Rick’s clothing was removed. The socks followed the boots, then the jeans and at last the boxers, too.

When Rick sat naked on the edge of the bed, Daryl lifted the covers in a silent prompt for his man to slip under them. A moment later the leader was tucked in as though he was a little boy.

“Want me ta put yer clothes in the hamper?”

“We have a hamper?”

“Yup. Without Google it took me a while ta figure out what that thing over there in the corner is. Sure ain’t never had nothin’ like that crap around the house where I grew up. Coulda been Dr. Who’s Tardis for all I know.”

Rick chuckled to another typical Dixon comment.

“It’s a tad too small for that, don’t you think?”

“Pff, prob’ly belongs to that dwarf who left his damn t-shirts in our closet.”

That had Rick laugh out loud once again, but instantly a new stabbing pain pierced his skull.

“Be right back”, Daryl said softly, before he placed a kiss on the other man’s head and then disappeared into the bathroom.

Rick couldn’t help raising his eyebrows. He never thought to see the day that Daryl Dixon would wash up for the night, while he did not. Looking-glass world.

Only seconds later Daryl came back out, in his birthday suit, too, now, and instantly noticed the look on Rick’s face.

“What? Hadda take a piss. Somethin’ wrong with that?”

A smile tugged on Rick’s lips while he shook his head. The world had just gone back to normal.

Daryl crawled under the covers and instantly wrapped one arm over Rick’s side, pulling him close. They lay facing each other, drowning in the other one’s eyes while they savored the peace and quiet in the room, the closeness they could share without several pairs of eyes on them and ears overhearing each of their words.

“We’re alone”, Rick whispered, as though he was afraid to break the magic by speaking too loud.

“The door is locked and the shutters closed. We’re finally alone.”

“Did ya check the closet?”

“Why? Are you afraid that dwarf is still in there?” Rick teased.

“Nah, that giant troll from next door.”

Rick inched closer to Daryl until their faces were only an inch apart.

“I’m not gonna get up again to check”, he said quietly. “Guess we’ll have to take our chances.”

That said his lips touched Daryl’s and smothered any answer the archer was about to give. They kissed softly at first, tenderly, a mere brushing of lips in feather-light touches. But soon the contact
grew more ardent, longing, passionate as their lips pressed harder to the other one’s mouth and tongues were added eagerly.

Rick tried to stay in the moment, tried to indulge in Daryl’s touches and kisses, but the throbbing pain behind his forehead as well as the horrible memories that still tortured him, made it impossible to relax. Each time Daryl’s warm and strong hands ran over Rick’s skin, the leader couldn’t help thinking of how they had desperately tried to reach out to the cold and dead fingers of walker-Rick at Negan’s wall. Each time Daryl’s soft, sensual lips touched his, he was reminded that he never got to kiss his lover goodbye before Daryl was left behind all by himself.

“Stop thinkin’”, Daryl whispered to him, while he ran a hand through Rick’s hair. He could feel that Rick was not in the here and now, that his mind was going into overdrive again. Every other moment the leader would shudder, cringe and furrow his brow, which was a clear indication that the pictures in his mind didn’t leave him alone for one single second. Not even now.

“I’m trying”, Rick croaked, embarrassed that Daryl noticed his distraction.

Just when he leaned in to kiss the archer again, a strong yet gentle hand placed flat on his chest stopped him and determinedly pushed him back into his pillow. Daryl propped himself up on one elbow and his long hair tickled Rick’s face when he leaned over him.

“Stop thinkin’”, Daryl repeated.

He started combing his fingers through Rick’s hair again, while he kept whispering in his lover’s ear.

“Nothin’ bad ’s gonna happen tonight.”

A kiss was placed softly on Rick’s lips.

“We’re all safe for now.”

Daryl’s lips started traveling along Rick’s jawline to his neck, where they left a volley of small kisses.

“’s jus’ you ‘n’ me in here. Whatever’s outside the wall don’t matter now.”

Warm hands ran over Rick’s chest and stomach, caressing him tenderly.

“Let go. Stay in the moment ‘n’ jus’ feel, Rick. Feel me.”

Daryl continued to whisper reassuring words in his partner’s ear until they became a mantra that echoed in Rick’s tortured mind and wouldn’t leave him alone with the horrors there any longer. The archer’s deep baritone resounded in his ears, reached all the way into Rick’s soul and vibrated in every fibre of his being. It soothed him, engulfed him like a lullaby and drowned out the screams and cries of his memories.

Feel me.

And Rick felt. He closed his eyes and concentrated on each caress, each passionate touch, each loving kiss. Daryl was taking the lead, allowed his partner to forget and give up control. With each word and each touch Daryl was weaving a protective cocoon around them, where Rick could feel safe, loved, untroubled by the past or the future. All that mattered was the here and now. The world out there retracted until the only thing that still registered was Daryl. Rick felt each kiss
and the warmth of the archer’s hands twice as intense suddenly and when he shuddered again, it was a sign of pleasure, not pain.

Daryl’s was stroking his lover’s cock now, closing his fingers around the growing length while he never stopped leaving kisses on the other man’s skin wherever he could reach it.

Rick kept his eyes shut and just felt, concentrated on how Daryl’s fingers closed around his boner and ran teasingly over the leaking head, before the first one slipped into him to prepare him for more.

A deep moan escaped him and when a second finger was added, the world out there faded into insignificance.

The whispers into his ear continued, but the words didn’t register any longer. The sound of Daryl’s voice took Rick to a haven of tranquility, where no enemy, no walkers, no fears could possibly reach the two of them.

Rick’s entire world consisted of sound, of taste and touch and he was craving for the moment when his and Daryl’s bodies would melt together. And when they did, when the two halves of a whole were reunited, it was pure magic like each time it happened.

It had never been like that with Lori.

Rick had loved his wife and he had enjoyed sleeping with her, but that had been sex, the need to satisfy a physical need. Making love with Daryl was so much more. Daryl was so much more.

The archer always knew exactly what Rick needed, matched the way of his love making to his partner’s mood and desire. Rage and frustration was met with harder, faster thrusts than sadness and fear, as though Daryl’s motions were a mirror of Rick’s emotions. He was passionate yet gentle today, mixed desire with tenderness in just the right way and when Rick reached his climax the world out there stopped existing for a moment.

When Rick opened his eyes again, Daryl was still partially lying on top of him like a protection cover, shielding him against every danger, all the worries and the fear. Yet right in that moment Rick didn’t feel threatened or worried or scared. He looked into the shining, blue eyes of his lover and felt bliss, peace and an immense amount of love, nothing else.

“How’s yer headache?” Daryl asked softly.

A smile spread over the younger man’s face after he thought about that question for a second.

“It’s gone.”

“Knew we’d find a better way than Aspirin ta cure that. If it comes back, just lemme know …”

“You bet.”

With a chuckle Rick pulled Daryl’s head down and kissed him ardently. God, he loved that man so much. No one would ever take him away. No one would ever get a chance to harm him. No one.

“Yer thinkin’ again?”

Daryl lay down next to his lover and pulled him into his arms. The moment Rick’s head came to rest on his shoulder, gentle fingers started combing through his curls again in the attempt to drive the new tension away.

“Sorry”, Rick said almost inaudibly, “just happens.”

“Well, we jus’ found a way ta stop ‘em dark thoughts, right? Like I said – jus’ gimme a signal.”

With a smile the leader wrapped his arm tightly across Daryl’s chest and hugged him close, but he
didn’t reply. If only it was that simple. If the dark thoughts and the horrible memories being forgotten would make them undone, would simply erase their future fate and leave a void for them to fill with new, brighter memories, then Rick would make sure to stay in this room with Daryl forever. He wouldn’t mind that. There was no one else in this world who had such a wonderful way of making Rick forget and taking all the pain away. If only that was the way to save their family.

But it wasn’t. Negan, the Saviors, the Wolves, the walkers and God only knew what else, they were still out there. Lurking, waiting, getting ready to attack. Forgetting or ignoring them, wouldn’t make them go away.

“Wanna talk ‘bout it?” Daryl muttered into Rick’s hair while he placed a kiss on his lover’s curls.

“About what?”

“What exactly ‘s gonna happen. Ta Carl, Judy ‘n’ me.”

“God, no”, Rick gasped, pulling Daryl closer if that was even possible.

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse than you can imagine.”

It was quiet for a moment, while the two men lay in each other’s arms. They pressed close to their lover and tried not to think of the possibility that this could be the last time they held each other like this, that they had made love and were able to forget the entire apocalypse for a while. Tomorrow morning, at the break of dawn, reality would catch up to them again.

“Ain’t gonna happen”, Daryl said determinedly. “Whatever ya been seein’ – it ain’t gonna happen.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Easy. Did we have this room all to ourselves in yer vision? Did we get ta have sex without P.T. anywhere near or Abe interruptin’?”

A smile tugged on Rick’s lips and his heart grew lighter. He had a feeling where this was headed and he was grateful for Daryl’s new attempt to take his mind off that damn vision.

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

“See. Things changed – the new reality ‘s better already.”

“Yeah? I don’t think we had to watch Dirty Dancing in my vision.”

Daryl pulled a face.

“Damn, guess that theory was just blown outta the water. Then we gonna stick to the plan – find that Negan jackass so ‘chonne gets her proof, ‘n’ then we gonna leave with the whole kit and caboodle. Simple as that.”

“Simple as that”, Rick repeated absentmindedly.

Nothing was ever simple anymore. Just to find that Negan jackass would be much harder than it sounded without even knowing in which direction to look.
“I don’t even know where to start looking”, he admitted. “And I don’t know in which direction to turn from here.”

“So? One ‘s as good as the other ‘n’ each road leads somewhere. Don’t matter. We gonna play it by ear, same as all ‘em other peeps we met over the years.” He mused quietly for a moment before he added: “Ya ever wonder what became a’ them?”

“Well?”

“’em peeps we met on the way, people we knew ‘n’ then lost outta sight. Like the Morales back at the quarry, or that other Mexican family Merle and I saved while we stayed at the prison. They had a baby – should be ‘bout Judy’s age now. And that Morgan dude ya was tryin’ ta contact for a while …”

He fell quiet when he felt Rick tense up suddenly.

“Yer alright?”

“Morgan!” Rick gasped as suddenly pictures from his vision he had totally forgotten reappeared in his mind’s eye.

“What ‘bout him?”

“He’s alive.” Rick sat up and looked at Daryl with wide eyes, very excited all of a sudden. “I remember him. He and I – we were looking for Carol. She … she ran away to avoid more fighting and …”

“Carol? Our Carol? The pretty lady downstairs, who’s viciously torturin’ friends with sappy movies ‘n’ blew up Terminus single-handedly ta save all our asses? That Carol?”

“She’s not always gonna be like that”, Rick said sadly. “But I remember Morgan sayin’ that she went east – the opposite direction to where the Saviors are.”

He let himself drop to Daryl’s side again and gave him an enthusiastic kiss.

“We’ve got our direction now. West is where we gotta go.”

“West. Fine. But I’m warnin’ ya, Grimes, if anyone thinks ‘bout singin’ that stupid ‘Go west’ song, there’s gonna be hell ta pay.”

Rick chuckled.

“Pity, but I’ll keep that in mind.”

Relieved to have one problem solved, he placed his head back on his lover’s chest and breathed in deep a couple of times.

One problem down, a felt 8783 left to go. But at least they stood a chance now to find the Saviors or one of the other communities before the next disaster would hit Alexandria.

“Hey”, Daryl tugged on one of his partner’s ears lightly to get his attention. “Didn’t I tell ya ta stop thinkin’?”

“Too late.” Rick lifted his head off Daryl’s chest again and looked at him with a mischievous sparkle in his eyes suddenly.
“And the headache is back.”

“That so?” Daryl suppressed a smirk. “Good thing I know what ta do ‘bout it, huh?”

With that said he pressed his lips firmly to his lover’s again and together they sank back into the pillows.
Michonne sat in back of the car next to Glenn and stared silently out of the window, her face a stony façade.
The away team had left Alexandria two hours ago and no one had said but a single word ever since.

They had all been there, down to the last person. The entire group had gathered to see them off despite the early morning hours and saying goodbye had never been harder. This was a dangerous world, always has been, but to acknowledge that or having been given a glimpse into the future were two entirely different things. Even those who were skeptical had this very bad feeling in the pit of their stomach – the feeling of approaching calamity.

Glenn had kissed and hugged Maggie time and again, before he had placed his hand on her belly for a moment in silent greeting to a child he had no proof was even there. It was hard to watch him say goodbye to his son or daughter before he had a chance to even welcome his child. His conversation with Rick weighed heavily on Glenn’s soul and he hadn’t mustered the courage to tell Maggie what he’d been told – that neither of them would ever look into their baby’s eyes. That the poor innocent being would never even see the light of day. Whatever it took, whatever he had to do, he would prevent that from happening. Glenn was on a mission and it wasn’t just finding Negan.

Michonne had hugged Carl, well aware of the side glances she had gotten from both Rick and Daryl. There was no telling whether they approved of her close relationship to the boy or not. Neither had said anything and she was grateful for that. She loved that boy. He was mature beyond his age, strong and brave and would one day be a leader, just like his father. Sometimes she couldn’t help wondering if her own son Andre would have been a bit like him.

When little Andre died he’d been too young to develop a nature of his own yet. He’d been a toddler, a sweet, innocent, adorable toddler. Like Judith. It had taken lots of time until Michonne had been able to even look at Judy without her heart breaking all over again. Each time she saw the girl, she couldn’t help thinking that her own child would have been about that age now, yet Andre would never grow up, would never become a teenager or reach adulthood. He was dead. She would make sure that Carl and Judith would be spared that fate.

Michonne still couldn’t bring herself to believe in Rick’s story about a vision, but if anything, anything at all was out here to threaten her family, it would have to get past her first. She was not ready to lose another child, whether it was biologically hers or not. It had overjoyed and surprised her alike that Carl had come to see her the previous night, instead of staying over at the other house with his father, Daryl and his sister. She wondered how Daryl felt about it.

Rick and Judith, they had a fixed place in Carl’s life, they were blood. Both she and Daryl however, they had to earn their corner in the boy’s heart and Daryl might figure that Michonne was winning by a nose. Again this could develop into a situation that would drive a wedge between her and the archer, which was not her intention. And he might get hurt again, too, which was most definitely not her intention, either. But that friendship between her and Carl, that was special. Too special to back off. She just couldn’t do that.

Rick clutched the steering wheel in a vice-like grip, while his eyes were riveted on the road ahead. Judith had been crying when they had left and he couldn’t get the picture of her sad, fear-filled eyes out of his head. Judy hardly ever cried and he couldn’t help seeing her tears as a bad omen. Another one.
They had to hurry. Had to find those other groups quickly – friend or foe – so he could go back to Alexandria with proof, gather his people and leave as fast as only possible.

Something deep inside of him kept yelling at him to just screw that damn proof and turn back this very minute, but he didn’t. What his mind told him to do was to confront his people with his decision, call them out on their lack of trust and support and then leave regardless of how many of them would follow. His heart however wouldn’t let him do that. If he left but one person behind, knowing what fate was probably in store for them, he would never find another moment of peace for the rest of his life.

So here they were – headed into terra incognita, trying to find something they had best stay away from as though it was the plague. And in a way it was.

Daryl kept his eyes on the woods to either side of the road, while the silence in the car was giving him the shivers. The tension and dark brooding made the air difficult to breathe, and the way everyone was lost in their own thoughts and plans made Daryl feel as though they weren’t out here together. Him and Rick, they still had the same goal, were headed into the same direction, but somehow it felt as though the other two were on their own missions.

Even after several hours of driving west they hadn’t seen but a single trace of living people having been here lately.

The cars that were parked by the roadside occasionally were all dirty and dusty, some of them rusting already. Apparently none had been moved ever since the outbreak. There was no litter, no fresh spots of oil from any kind of vehicle, no markings on the trees or the pavement someone might have left for whatever reason, nothing at all that would indicate that this road was used by anyone at all. No signs gave directions to a town, there was no movement between the trees save for one or the other walker and they hadn’t met any other car, which may be a blessing.

Some time into the third hour Rick felt Michonne’s eyes burning a hole into the back of his head. He knew exactly what she was thinking.

If he was wrong and nothing was out here, they would be driving forever. How far would he go until he admitted his mistake? Was there even a point at which going back without the proof was an option? If he acknowledged that his vision had in fact been no more than a bad dream, then he would risk for people to lose faith in him, maybe think he was losing his mind after all. And some might not follow him any longer; would rather stay in Alexandria than taking their chances out on the road again. And who could blame them? So there was no turning back before they had found what may not even exist.

How long would it take for Michonne to voice her doubts openly and urge them to head back? How long until she called a spade a spade and tell Rick to the face that she thought this entire foresight story was crazy?

In fact, Michonne’s thoughts went even beyond that. Her eyes kept flicking to both Rick and Daryl suspiciously.

If they were still playing their charade, they were most definitely taking matters way too far now. A prophetical dream that allegedly both of them had? Please. How did they plan to ever get out of this again? If they made this up, there was nothing out here at all and they’d been driving for hours already just to enjoy the lovely sight, risking their lives in vain. The car might break down or they might run into a walker horde unexpectedly – a gazillion things could go wrong, just because they had to have their way? Couldn’t be. They wouldn’t do that. Not with Carl, Judith, Maggie and all the others waiting at home, fearing for them. They wouldn’t dare. Right?

“Are you sure west is the right direction?” Michonne asked shortly before the fourth hour of their journey.
Rick suppressed a sigh. Here we go.

“Yes, west is correct. But that doesn’t mean this road will take us straight to their doorstep.”

“Whose?”

“Whoever. Maybe the other communities are a tad to the north or south, maybe we need to take a different route west, take a look into the side streets at intersections …”

“This might take forever”, she cut in.

Rick stepped on the brakes forcefully and turned around with anger clouding his eyes.

“What did you expect? That driving for an hour on the first road we try will be a success? If it was that easy, those people out there would have found Alexandria by now. Without knowing exactly where to go, it takes a lot of luck.”

“Unfortunately we’re a little out of that lately.”

Rick’s eyes were blazing now.

“Can I have a word with you in private, please? Outside.”

He left the car and walked a few yards down the street. A moment later she joined him.

“Why are you here, Michonne?” Rick asked the moment the woman stood in front of him.

“To find proof – or to see me fail?”

“I want the truth, Rick.”

The cerulean eyes darkened when he caught her meaning.

“Truth”, the croaked. “So you think I’ve been lying? That I made all that up?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore. I just know that this prophecy or whatever you might call it sounds totally unbelievable to me. And both you and Daryl never wanted to stay in Alexandria, so …”

“Daryl, too, huh?” Rick grew pale with anger and hurt alike. “Did you ever, ever hear him lie? Do you really think he would go through with such a charade and not only risk his and my life, but yours and Glenn’s, too? Do you even hear yourself?”

She shrugged, visibly confused now.

“You can’t blame anyone for doubting that vision.”

“I’m not. I’m blaming you for doubting me. And Daryl. After all we’ve been through together, you should know better than that.”

He turned on his heels and headed back to the car with large, energetic strides, while Michonne stood on the road a moment longer.

“How much further are we gonna go?”

“As far as necessary to find the proof you wanted. And now get in.”
Rick dropped into the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut louder than he had intended, louder than was smart without knowing who or what might be in earshot.

“Damn”, he cursed under his breath, venting his frustration about both his carelessness and Michonne’s mistrust.

He couldn’t believe she really thought him and Daryl capable of putting on such a show, of downright lying to the entire group. So this was how it felt to be stabbed in the back – Rick had no idea it would hurt so bad. Hopefully neither Daryl nor Glenn had overheard what had been said. No one needed to know about this, not even Daryl. Especially not Daryl.

“Want me ta drive for a while?” the archer asked softly.

He wasn’t going to ask what Rick and Michonne had been talking about – if Rick felt that he had to know about it, he would share the information freely. If he didn’t, it wasn’t any of his or Glenn’s business. Daryl respected that.

Rick pulled in a couple of deep breaths to compose himself, while he reached for Daryl’s hand and held on for a moment. He needed the contact, drew new confidence and strength from it. Then he nodded ‘yes’ to Daryl’s question.

The archer’s fingers gave a reassuring squeeze to Rick’s, before they simultaneously let go again. Both men left the car and walked around it to switch sides just as Michonne returned to get back in.

Shadow blue eyes locked with dark brown ones for a moment and both Michonne and Daryl gave each other a scrutiny, trying to find out what was going on. But just like they were both good at seeing through people, they were both good at hiding their own thoughts and emotions, too. Either one failed on the other’s deadpan, but there were things not settled, that much they could tell.

By noon they had gone straight into the same direction for several hours without finding anything and even Rick started to doubt that this was the right approach. If this was the wrong road they would end up at the Pacific one of these days without finding what they had come out here for. They needed to enlarge the radius, but turning to the left or right at intersections would just take them into another random and likely wrong direction.

This was like trying to find a needle in a haystack. And that was exactly what Glenn said when they took a break for lunch by the roadside.

“Nah”, Daryl grumbled instantly. “We’re tryin’ ta find entire towns ‘n’ a whole bunch a’ needles – and we gonna find ‘em, too. Stop naggin’.”

He was getting tired of hearing complaints and doubts and watching people look at Rick as though he was a nutcase. Rick deserved better than that.

“Okay, look”, Rick placed a map of the area on the ground before them and pointed to a spot on it.

“Alexandria’s here. We headed down this road”, his finger traced the line on the map, “and should be about here now.”

Daryl’s hand came forward, got a gentle hold of that finger and wordlessly pushed it to another spot on the map. Rick cast his partner a questioning side glance and it was answered by one of Daryl’s barely visible nods.

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

The ghost of a smile flashed over Rick’s face.

Of course Daryl was sure. He had probably counted the crossroads or had noticed landmarks no one else had paid attention to. Or he just went by gut feeling and still was probably right.
“And here you wondered what we’d need a tracker for”, Rick whispered to him with a wink. Then he said louder:
“I think we’ve headed out far enough. Those other communities are unlikely to be any further than this, so now we need to check to the left and right of this road.”

“Zig-zaggin’ all over the place, huh? ‘s gonna be yer way a’ drivin’, Glenn”, Daryl teased.

The tense lines on the Asian’s face eased and melted into a grin when Glenn recognized the joke.

“Still a good one”, he admitted.

Rick smiled, too, remembering the happy moment when their group had found each other again after Hershel’s farm was overrun. He didn’t dare to think further. Tried to blind out the fact that ‘the group’ had consisted of entirely different people back then. He and Daryl, Carl, Carol, Glenn and Maggie were the only survivors of the group that had happily hugged on a highway back in Georgia what felt like a lifetime ago.

Michonne watched the three men grin at each other, lost in a happy moment they shared, amused by a joke she couldn’t understand. For a moment she felt entirely out of place.

When the sun started to set and the light faded from the tree-lined road, the four people had to face the fact that they would be spending the night out here. And maybe this wouldn’t be the only one. They parked the car by the roadside between some of the old dusty vehicles there and camouflaged it with dirt and leaves. It blended in perfectly. The trunk was full with supplies, so food, water or fuel wouldn’t be their problem for a while. They had others.

Although they had zig-zagged from northwest to southwest and back, crossing the road they had originally traveled a few times, they still hadn’t found a single trace of what they were looking for. Rick didn’t let it show, but he had started to worry a while ago. This mission couldn’t fail. There was no way they would return empty-handed. What was he going to do, if … ?

“Hey”, Daryl nudged his shoulder with his own where they were sitting on the ground in between the cars. “Stop that.”

“How did you know …??”

“'I can hear ‘em li’l wheels in there turn. Makes too much fuckin’ noise out here”, he teased. “So stop.”

With a smile Rick accepted a strip of beef jerky Daryl held out to him and started chewing it, although it was as tough as an old boot. He didn’t even pay attention. One thing people living in an apocalypse stopped early on was being picky.

When darkness started creeping in between the trees surrounding them and the creatures of the night woke up, Glenn and Michonne called it a night and disappeared into the safe interior of the car. Sitting in their seats in the cramped space they didn’t expect to find much rest, but it still was better than being out there in total darkness.

Daryl didn’t mind. He loved the woods at any time – day or night alike. Even in total darkness and with the sounds of countless animals rustling in the scrub and calling in their various voices, this felt more like home to him than Alexandria ever would.

He and Rick stood shoulder to shoulder with their backs against the car and looked up to the black sky where one by one the stars lit up.

“'s beautiful, huh?”
Rick was amazed how calm and at ease Daryl was, although it was impossible to see the hand in front of their face. Anything could be lurking in those trees and it made Rick feel helpless and exposed to be practically blind.

“Damn, it’s dark out here”, he slipped before he realized what he had said.

“Huh, pretty ingenious observation”, Daryl commented dryly.

The tu-whit tu-whoo sound of an owl nearby made Rick jump, but an arm snaking around his waist and pulling him close made him relax instantly again.

“’s jus’ an owl, Rick. Trust me, there ain’t nothin’ near that’s dangerous.”

“Sure?”

“Huh, I hear a pair a’ squirrels in that tree over there, a ‘possum in the bushes on the other roadside and that owl, but ya never know these days if they ain’t gonna turn into bloodthirsty predators suddenly.”

Rick pulled a face.

“You’re making fun of me, huh?”

“Jus’ a li’l.” He leaned in and placed a kiss on the other man’s cheek. “Why don’t ya get in the car ‘n’ get some rest. ’m gonna keep watch.”

“Think that’s necessary?”

“Dunno. If we wake up tomorrow mornin’ surrounded by a hostile group or a horde a’ walkers, we know.”

Rick sighed.

“You’re right. I just don’t like you being out here.”

“Stop worryin’, mom. Ain’t the first night ‘m spendin’ in the woods ‘n’ it ain’t gonna be the last.”

“Let’s hope so”, Rick couldn’t help thinking.

He pulled Daryl into a tight hug and then kissed him good-night tenderly.

“Be careful.”

“Will do. If ‘em squirrels attack ‘m gonna holler.”

“Jackass.”

“That’s ma line.”

Chuckling they pecked each other’s lips once more and then Rick reluctantly climbed into the car to get some sleep. He doubted that he’d be able to shut his eyes.

Half an hour later Rick had lost the battle against fatigue and his and Glenn’s soft snoring filled the narrow interior of the car. Michonne however was wide awake and stared through the window out into the night.
There was too much on her mind for her to find any rest and it wasn’t the men’s snoring that kept her awake. Surprisingly.

Why did guys always have to snore? Her boyfriend, the father of her baby, had kept her awake at night more often than not. And the one before him and the one she had dated before that one were no exceptions. From the looks of it Rick Grimes wouldn’t have been an improvement, either, so maybe it was a good thing he and Daryl tortured each other with that sound, while Michonne had a quiet, peaceful room with a calmly sleeping female roommate. If Sasha slept at all.
There was a soft sound above her head as Daryl sat down on the roof of the car to take up post for the night. For a moment Michonne just stared at the ceiling, trying to make up her mind. She had the feeling that she needed to talk to him, that there were definitely things not settled and others he should know about. Sooner or later this conversation was inevitable and there was no time like the present.

She opened the door and got out, cautiously drawing her katana, just in case.

“Coast is clear”, she heard Daryl’s deep voice whisper from above and a moment later she could make him out by the light of a lit cigarette.

“That seat up there taken?” she joked.

If he replied anything or made a gesture, she wasn’t able to hear or see it and the silence irritated her for a moment.

“Mind if I come up?”

“’s still a free country. I guess.”

With a shrug she climbed up on the roof, too, and sat down next to the archer. The man took another drag from his cigarette and the tip lit up momentarily.

“You’re giving your position away, you know.”

“Yeah? To whom? Thought ya ain’t believin’ there’s anyone out here.”

His inflection clearly carried an unspoken accusation that didn’t go unnoticed.

“I’ve got a right to have my doubts.”

“Yeah, guess ya do.”

He exhaled audibly and for a moment the grey smoke veiled the clear starlit sky above them. “But I told ya b’fore that ya hadda make up yer mind. If we ain’t gonna find no proof, ya still gonna follow Rick? Or are ya gonna sell him out for parties ‘n’ dresses ‘n’ crap like that?”

“You know damn well it’s not about parties and dresses and crap like that.”

“If ya say so.”

It was deadly quiet suddenly. Even the creatures of the wood apparently didn’t dare move or make a sound for a moment, as though they all felt the tension between the two people sitting on the car top.

“’s Carl okay?” Daryl asked unexpectedly and he felt rather than saw Michonne casting him a surprised side glance.

“Yes. Sure. Why …? – Is this about last night?”
“Jus’ wanna know if the boy’s okay, ‘s all.”

“He was just a bit shaken because of Noah. And worried – like the rest of us. I mean, Rick practically predicted everybody’s death, including Carl’s. What do you expect?”

“Ain’t expectin’ nothin’.

Daryl took one last drag from his smoke, before he put the butt out on the car top and let it drop to the ground.

“Carl’s a tough kid ‘n’ Rick’s vision concerns him, too. He has a right ta know the truth. All I’m sayin’ is … parents don’t need ta know everythin’ and if Carl got things on his mind he rather talks to you ‘bout, fine. But if there’s anythin’ Rick should know ‘bout, I trust ya gonna tell him.”

Michonne turned her head and dark eyes rested on the archer for a moment, although she wasn’t able to make out his face any longer.

“Parents don’t need ta know everythin’ … If there’s anythin’ Rick should know ‘bout …”

Obviously Daryl thought that the term ‘parents’ didn’t include him. He was trying to hide it, maybe tried to delude himself, but Michonne could hear the pain underneath the layer of mock indifference. Daryl had known Carl right from the beginning. Had been part of team family from the very start and ever since he and Rick had become a couple, back at Hershel’s farm, he had taken care of, loved and protected that boy as though Carl was his own – long before Michonne had appeared on the scene. How could it not hurt for Carl to apparently favor her over him?

“Don’t worry”, she said softly, “there’s nothing Rick should know about. But I think there’s something you should know.”

She registered the movement beside her when he sat up straighter, bracing himself for whatever she had to say.

“Shoot.”

“The reason Carl came over last night wasn’t just Noah’s death. That, too, sure, but …”

She stopped when she noticed that she hadn’t thought it well enough through what she was going to say and this was the wrong approach, so she started over.

“Carl likes to talk to me. Tells me things.”

Damn, that wasn’t very helpful, either, and probably came off totally wrong. An assumption she saw clearly proven when Daryl lit another smoke and grumbled:

“So?”

“Know what he talks about a lot?”

The question was rhetorical, so Michonne added after a short pause:

“You.”

Daryl’s hand stopped halfway to his mouth and he let the smoke sink without paying further attention to it.

“What’s ta talk ‘bout?”

“You’d be surprised. He told me about how you went out of your way to look for Carol’s
daughter Sophia back then. How you were shot and stabbed by your own arrow … sorry, *bolt* in the process. But you never stopped.”

She pulled in a deep breath and then continued.

“He talked about his mom’s death. How you were there to take care of Judith and him before anybody else, including Rick. He says you saved Judy’s life.”

“Nah”, Daryl waved off, “I just got her formula.”

“Like I said”, Michonne picked up with a smile in her voice, “you saved her life. Everybody says that. And Carl … he said no one helped him more after he lost his mom. You told him about your own mother, didn’t you?”

Daryl took a deep drag from the new smoke and exhaled audibly.

“Yeah. She died when I’s li’l.”

“Uh-huh. I know. It helped Carl a lot that you told him that, that you understood how he felt. You were there for him like no one else.”

“Why are ya tellin’ me all this?”

Daryl’s voice sounded choked with emotion.

“Daryl, don’t you get it? He keeps telling me these things – all the time. Do you have any idea how often he starts a conversation with ‘Do you know what Daryl did?’ or ‘Guess what Daryl said’? That boy adores you and it’s a crime that you apparently have no idea how much.”

The archer was quiet for a long moment and just took another drag from his cigarette.

“Nah”, he replied in the end after he had given Michonne’s words some thinking. “What I did – ‘twas nothin’. Anyone woulda done that.”

“But *you* did. Stop selling yourself short.”

“Ain’t. Jus’ don’t get it. If he feels that way ‘bout me, why’s he never talkin’ ta me ‘bout things?”

“Easy, Mr. Dixon, because it’s *sappy emotional crap.*”

Daryl looked at the woman next to him and thought he saw the white of her teeth shine in the darkness as she grinned.

“You keep dropping remarks like that, you know.”

“’s how I grew up. ’s what I ‘s taught.”

“I know that. Just like I know that deep down in there”, she poked her finger to his chest, “is a real softie.”

She chuckled when he gave a grunt in mock annoyance.

“Around you, Carl tries to be … tough, cool, manly. You know – so you don’t think him a kid.”
“He is a kid.”

“We’re all lots of things we can’t change – doesn’t mean we have to like it.”

“True”, Daryl thought, “like bein’ a Dixon.”

Michonne’s words touched him deeply and made him see things in a different light suddenly. Only that morning, when they had said their goodbyes, Carl had given both Michonne and Rick a hug, before he had turned to Daryl and extended his hand for a bro fist. Daryl was aware of the fact that he wasn’t a man who hugged easily, but in that moment it had stung to be left out. What more could he possibly do for Carl to see how much he cared for him? Daryl had so much to give and that boy and his sister would be the only children in his life to ever give it to. That those feelings apparently weren’t mutual had left a dull ache in the center of the archer’s chest – until Michonne had opened his eyes right now.

“Thanks”, he croaked at a lack for word. “For tellin’ me.”

Wordlessly she nudged his shoulder with her own and then started climbing off the car roof.

“Wanna know why he was over at our house last night?”

“Why?”

“So you and Rick would have some time to yourselves without a teenager in the bedroom next door.”

She heard Daryl suck in the air before he grumbled:

‘Yer makin’ that up now.”

That comment and the imagination how he was awkwardly squirming on that roof up there made her chuckle.

“No, I swear – that’s what he said. And did you know his ears turn the same shade of red as Rick’s when he blushes?”

She giggled, before she suddenly sobered up again and then added:

“He told me some time ago that he thought you were good for his dad. That he could tell Rick is happier with you than he’d been with Lori in the end.”

“He’s too young ta know ‘bout these things.”

“He’s young, not stupid, Daryl. – Looks like you did a lot for Rick’s kids. What you need to do now is learn to live with the love. G’night.”

That said she disappeared back into the car and closed the door as quietly as only possible behind her.

When the stillness and darkness of the night engulfed the archer again and gave him the peace and time to digest what Michonne had just told him, a sudden wave of joy washed over him and made him smile widely. New energy whooshed through his veins and left him wide awake. He sat up straight with new determination.

Tomorrow they would find what they were looking for, so they could go home.

No, not home – Alexandria was not home and never would be. Rick and he, they would find them another place, a place that would truly be a home – for Carl and Judith and the rest of their group. Daryl began to understand what drove Rick, what made him go out of his way to try and build a new world. Being a father made the difference.
For the first time ever Daryl felt sorry for Will Dixon – for that violent, pathetic, poor excuse for a father. The damn fool never knew what he had missed out on, how incredible it felt to have a son who loved and respected you. And without the apocalypse, Daryl would never have known, either.

“Hey, J.C.”, he muttered into the night, “ya prob’ly ain’t hearin’ that a lot lately, but – thanks, man.”
Engine noise somewhere in the distance woke Rick at the break of dawn and azure blue eyes flew open instantly. Some time during the night he must have tipped over in the driver’s seat and had ended up laying across the front seat in a terribly crooked position. His back was killing him and he moaned when he tried to sit up.

The same second the passenger side door was pulled open and Daryl’s whisper “Stay down” kept him in place.
The archer reached a hand to the backseat and gave the knees of both Glenn and Michonne a nudge to wake them.

“There’s cars approachin’. Get down.”

Instantly the two passengers in the backseat scooted down and made themselves invisible. A second before the first car came into sight, Daryl had quietly pushed the passenger side door closed again and had crawled underneath the car for cover.
From there he watched motionless as a truck noisily rolled by, followed by two pick-ups and three regular cars. They headed down the road to the nearest intersection and made a left turn there. A moment later they were out of sight. As soon as the noise had died down in the distance, the four members of the away team left their car and stood on the road side by side, looking into the direction the convoy had headed although there was nothing left to see.

“Come on, we gotta follow them”, Glenn said excitedly into the breathless silence. “Hurry up.”

“Whoa!” Daryl stopped him with a hand on his shoulder when the Asian turned to head back to their car. “We gonna wait a couple a’ minutes ta give ‘em a good headstart.”

“But then we’re gonna lose them.”

“Hey, yer talkin’ to the guy who followed Shane ‘n’ that Randall dude in the woods, at night. Remember? Think I ain’t able ta track six cars in broad daylight, man?”

“On a paved road?” Michonne asked with a frown.

“Ya really are a doubtin’ Thomas, ain’t ya?” Daryl cast her a dark side glance.

“Six cars leave skidmarks, oil stains, whirled up leaves ‘n’ dirt and they stink ta high heaven. Piece a’ cake.”

Rick stood frozen on the road and said nothing.
They found them! This had got to be them. The number of cars and people riding in them suggested this to be the Saviors, not people from Hilltop or the Kingdom. They were really out here.

“Isn’t this proof enough?” he croaked. “They’re here.”

“We haven’t really seen them, Rick”, Michonne protested. “This could be a bunch of people just like us – just passing through in search of a home. Who knows. Let’s follow them and see if they were headed some place. And if they were, what kind of place we’re talking about.”

“I agree”, Glenn cut in. “We need to be sure.”

Rick squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and breathed in deep. He was sure. If the merciless pounding of his heart was any indication, he was very, very sure. But then, he’d been certain about
his vision even before they made this trip, so it was senseless to discuss this. They had come out here
to convince the doubting Thomas. Michonne – and Glenn – wouldn’t leave before they had seen
them with their own eyes.
Relenting, Rick nodded.

They waited ten minutes until they were sure that the convoy was far away gone and then Rick
started the motor of their car. He steered it back onto the road and then slowly followed it down to
the intersection. There he stopped once again.

“Left”, Glenn prompted from the backseat and found himself at the receiving end of a warning
glance Rick cast him in the rearview mirror.

He knew the way. The reason he had stopped was a sign by the roadside, half covered by branches
and ivy, that had caught his attention just now.

*Barrington House – 3 miles*

“Barrington House”, he read out loud, pointing at what he had discovered. “I remember that
name. They built Hilltop around it. It’s the center of that community.”

“Good”, Daryl made a sweeping gesture in that direction. “Step on it. But jus’ for two miles –
we gonna head through the woods the rest a’ the way. Wouldn’t want ‘em ta see us comin’.”

And so they did. When they saw the roof of the large building in the distance, they parked their car
among others by the roadside again and camouflaged it like the night before.

“Let’s hope they can’t count”, Glenn commented dryly, saying out loud what they had all
been thinking.

That hopefully none of the people in that convoy had paid attention and would notice that this car
hadn’t been here before.

Hilltop, like the name suggested, was situated on top of a hill, surrounded by the woods on three
sides. Only the front with the gate opened to a wide meadow, which was precisely the side Rick and
his companions needed to stay clear of.

Daryl took the lead and they approached the wall of the community in a wide arc from the side,
keeping their eyes and ears open in all directions in case that town had people patrol the perimeters.
But they saw no one.

When they were only few yards away from the wall Daryl stopped and cast Rick a questioning
glance.

“‘s there another way in than the gate?”

“I wouldn’t know”, Rick answered honestly. “Doesn’t matter. We’re not goin’ in.”

Daryl shrugged.

“‘kay. ‘s a pretty wall, but we ain’t gonna find nothin’ out on this side of it. Jus’ sayin’.”

Rick pulled a face, but before he could retort to that comment, Michonne tossed in:

“We need to climb a tree, so we can see what’s going on in there.”

She looked around herself and inspected the nearby trees, before picking a sixty-foot pine tree,
whose branches started not too high above the ground.
“You’re kidding, right?” Glenn asked when he cast a glance up.

Michonne ignored the comment, approached the tree determinedly and started climbing.

“I guess that answers your question”, Rick said on passing him, while he gave the Asian a slap on the shoulder.

A moment later he was on the lowest branch and followed Michonne.

“Man, ‘s the circus in town?” Daryl growled after his partner. “Trapeze acts ain’t in ma job description.”

“You don’t have a job”, Rick teased while he reached for the next branch.

“Yeah, I do”, Daryl thought with a sigh, “’m yer wingman, ya idiot.”

And with that he hauled himself up the tree, Glenn right behind him. A minute later all four of them were higher than Hilltop’s wall and had a good view on the town beyond.

Did those people down there even realize that any enemy could easily surround them and attack from up here, if they didn’t guard the woods and the wall better? Probably not. And giving this any thought was senseless, if one let the trouble walk in right through the front gate – like the people of Hilltop had apparently just done.

The six cars of the convoy were parked right in front of the Barrington House now and approximately thirty heavily armed men and women were strolling around as though they owned the place.

The inhabitants of the large building and the six trailers that sat against the far side of the wall, stood frozen in front of their homes as though they didn’t even dare breathe. Even over the distance their fear was palpable.

“Don’t look like no courtesy call”, Daryl whispered, although it was unlikely for him to be heard down there.

Everyone’s attention was focused on one man, who had just emerged from the front of the truck. A tall, handsome guy in his early 50’s in a leather jacket, carrying a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire over his shoulder.

Rick’s heart picked up its pace and for a moment he was afraid the frantic throbbing would give them away. He grew dizzy and grabbed the branch he was holding onto a bit tighter.

“That’s Negan, isn’t it?” Glenn said darkly, his eyes growing as cold as glacier ice.

With a lump in his throat Rick just gave an affirmative nod.

All four of them watched breathlessly as Negan started walking around, up and down the rows of bystanders, slow and yet confident in a way that let anyone know that he was the boss. He was running his mouth non-stop, but the hidden witnesses up the tree couldn’t understand what was being said. Now and then the man stopped, pointed his baseball bat at one or the other person, laughed as though he had said something hilarious and kept leaning backwards in a way that had people get a backache just from watching. What the heck was wrong with that dude?

The mood shifted suddenly and the grin faded from Negan’s face. His voice grew louder and few words reached the ears of Rick, Daryl, Glenn and Michonne who watched with wide eyes.

“Pissing … pants …? … provide! The rules … Lucille hates if … obeyed! Teach … lesson. – Simon!”
Negan gave a signal to one of his group and instantly another tall man with a mustache followed suit. He started pulling people out of the crowd by random and forced them onto their knees, until half a dozen men and women were on the ground in a line-up.

Rick started to tremble and every fibre of his being urged him to run, to get out of here as fast as only possible, but he wasn’t even able to move a muscle. All he could do was stare, helplessly trying to blind out the memory of that night in the woods.

“Rick?” Daryl’s concerned voice next to him reached him from far away. “Rick!” Cerulean eyes met shadow blue ones and they locked for a moment.

“Yer alright?”

“We need to get out of here”, the younger man croaked. “Now.”

“Why?” Glenn cut in. “What’s gonna happen?”

“He’s gonna kill one of them. Bash someone’s head in with that baseball bat.”

He heard the other three gasp in horror, before Michonne dared ask:

“Have you seen this before?”

“Not this right here, but a line-up very similar to this.”

“Eenie, meenie, miney, mo”, Negan’s voice sounded to them and Rick felt bile rise in his throat.

“My God, he’s playing with them”, Michonne said with wide eyes. “He’s actually enjoying this.”

The three men stayed quiet and looked at the scenario down in Hilltop. It was like watching a train wreck. Something terrible was about to happen, something no one would want to see and yet they were unable to look away.

“… you!” Negan’s final word just reached them and despite herself Michonne had to fight tears suddenly.

“That’s a boy.” Her voice sounded choked. “He’s only about Carl’s age.”

The moment she had finished the sentence the baseball bat was raised and came crashing down on the poor teenager’s head.

“NO!!!!”

A woman a few feet away from him screamed and then collapsed, helplessly reaching a hand out to the boy as though she was able to do anything to save him.

“My son!!”

Tears were pooling in Rick’s eyes now and when he dared a side glance to his companions, he saw a stray tear run down Michonne’s cheek as well, while both Daryl and Glenn stared ahead of themselves with stony expressions, pale as ghosts.

“I’m sorry, Rick”, Michonne said in a choked voice. “Sorry I couldn’t just believe you. Sorry we had to come here first to see this.”
Rick just opened his mouth to reply, when Michonne’s hand shot forward and got hold of Glenn’s wrist.

“No!” she hissed at him in shock, staring at the gun in his hand. “Are you crazy? Whadda you doing?!

“That bastard down there”, Glenn tried to defend himself, “just killed a teenage boy. And according to Rick, he’s gonna kill my wife, my unborn baby and me, too. I’m gonna end this right here and now.”

“You can’t hit someone with a gun over that distance”, Michonne berated him. “It would take a sniper rifle and a damn good shot.”

“It’s worth a try”, Glenn protested, while he tried to free his wrist.

“No, it’s not”, Rick cut in with blazing eyes and an urgency peppering his voice that had Glenn listen despite his agitation.

“I know exactly how you feel. I’ve watched each and every one of our group die and Negan will kill more than just you and Maggie personally. That man is the devil and he deserves to die, but what you’re trying to do here will fail. Even if you hit him, there’s others. They’re many. His right-hand man there is probably gonna take over and nothing will change.”

“Somethin’ will change”, Daryl tossed in. “Ya gonna let ‘em know we’re here. The shot’s gonna alert ‘em, whether ya hit or not. We never gonna make it off this damn tree fast enough ta run. Ya wanna die right here ‘n’ now? Never see Maggie again ‘n’ yer kid? – I sure as hell wanna see ma kids again, so cut the crap, man.”

“Even if they let us live”, Rick added, “we may not be able to convince them that we’re from Hilltop. That’ll make them come to the conclusion that there’s a community out there they don’t know about yet. – They gonna go look for it and they gonna find it, too. We might set the avalanche in motion that will destroy Alexandria in the end, just like I’ve seen it. We cannot let that happen, Glenn!

Rick watched the young man being torn between the urge to kill Negan and the awareness that the other three were right.

“But we gotta do something”, the Asian croaked helplessly.

“We will”, Michonne reassured him. “We gonna head back to Alexandria, warn the people there of the threat out here and then we gonna gather the group and leave this place.” She locked eyes with Rick and gave an affirmative nod.

“We will. All of us.”

“Yeah, but this ain’t the ride into the sunset yet.” Daryl pointed to the Saviors. “Duck!”

“Duck?” Glenn asked with a frown.

“Yeah, genius, if we can see ‘em, they can see us, too. Soon as the show’s over it takes just one a’ ‘em ta look up ‘n’ we’re in deep shit.”

The four people in the tree tried to hide behind the large trunk and big branches that blocked the view. To be on the safe side the three men even averted their faces, since their fair skins were too much of a contrast between the dark green needles of the pine tree, while Michonne kept watching the events in Hilltop.
“Your nice tan sure comes in handy now,” Rick whispered in the weak attempt to ease the
tension.

It failed. The humor never reached his eyes and the stony expressions on his companions’ faces
didn’t crumble a single bit.

“Bein’ dirty would come in handy, too”, Daryl grumbled. “Ya people ‘n’ yer stupid showers.”

Glenn rolled his eyes.

“I guess that’s what they call gallows humor, huh?”

“Nah, ‘s what they call a fuckin’ fact.”

While the men trusted their ears to make out what was happening down in the town, Michonne
quietly gave them short reports.

When he had bashed on the poor kid’s head long enough, Negan held another rather long
monologue, although barely anyone was listening after what they just had to witness. A young, long-
haired man who, according to Michonne, looked like Jesus, was consulting the crying mother of the
victim, while one by one the Saviors got back into their cars.

Finally, after what had felt like hours, the cars rolled through the gate back onto the street and left the
way they came. When they were out of sight, Michonne whispered way more quietly than necessary:

“They’re gone.”

The four companions looked at each other for a long silent moment and sat motionless in the tree a
couple of minutes longer. Their knees seemed to be made of jelly and they needed a little while to
compose themselves, but then Michonne pulled in a deep breath and started to shin down first,
shortly followed by Glenn.

Before Rick could follow their example, Daryl got hold of his wrist and held on in a vice-like grip.

“That asshole with the bat – did he do that to Carl?” the archer asked, his jaw muscles visibly
working while he waited for Rick’s answer.

“No.”

“Judy? – Or you?” he almost choked on the words.

“No.”

Daryl acknowledged that with a curt nod and let go of Rick’s wrist, but in turn the leader’s hand got
hold of his partner’s.

“Would it make a difference if he had?”

“Yeah”, Daryl growled.

He left it at that and after giving Rick’s hand a squeeze, started climbing down the tree as well.

Sitting motionless on his branch, the leader’s eyes followed Daryl for a moment, while he tried to
figure out what exactly the archer had tried to imply.

Maybe he didn’t even want to know. Would his partner have gone after Negan to seek revenge for
something the man hadn’t done yet? Just like Glenn had planned to do? Despite knowing what
drawing that much attention could cause, would Daryl have tried to kill Negan anyway?

Rick couldn’t even answer that question. The darker, vengeful Daryl in the future may have, but this
one here – his Daryl? And then maybe he was asking the wrong question. Instead of wondering
about the *if*, he should be asking about the *why*. The answer touched Rick deeply. Because Carl, Judy and he were important enough to take the risk. Because Daryl’s family was the priority, and if there was but the slightest chance that a gruesome fate like this might still be in store for them, Daryl would have tried to prevent it. Whatever it took.

When Rick reached the bottom, the other three were already waiting for him and quickly they flitted through the woods back to their car, quietly as a shadow. Before they reached it, Rick got hold of Daryl’s sleeve and pulled him behind a tree.

“I get it”, he said with his hands to either side of the archer’s head, while Daryl leaned with his back against the trunk.

“Would have been a stupid plan, just so you know, but I get it.”

He touched his lips to his partner’s and Daryl responded instantly. He slipped his arms around Rick’s waist and pulled him close while their tongues flicked out to deepen the kiss. There was clearly a tinge of desperation and separation anxiety in that kiss neither man was able to hide any longer.

Michonne harrumphing right behind Rick’s back broke them apart.

“Hey”, she said softly, “you boys got a room back home. – Let’s go.”

She turned on her heels and headed to the car.

“Ain’t home”, Daryl muttered almost inaudibly, while he followed Michonne with Rick by his side.

“Jus’ so *you* know”, he added after a short pause. “Don’t give a damn if that plan woulda been stupid. Ain’t no one gonna hurt ya or the kids.”

Rick swallowed thickly and pressed his lips together. The vengeful Daryl was already in there somewhere, still buried underneath a thick layer of humanity, mercy and the will to give people the benefit of a doubt. He must never know how Rick would have died or Negan was going to destroy this wonderful man after all.

“No one will hurt us”, Rick answered determinedly. “Tonight we’re gonna tell the others about what we’ve found. And tomorrow we’re gonna leave Alexandria.”
Chapter 18

When the gate came into sight, a smile spread over Rick’s face and he gently nudged Daryl’s shoulder to wake him.

After not having slept at all the previous night, the archer had dozed off on their ride back, but now was instantly wide awake as though a switch had been turned. Rick had observed that ability ever since he had first met Daryl, but he could never quite make up his mind if he envied him for it. It sure came in handy these days, but Rick knew why and when Daryl had learned to sleep with one eye and ear open. No, envy or even admiration would probably be highly inappropriate.

“We there?” Daryl muttered while he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“Yup. – Look.”

Rick pointed out the windshield and in the backseat Michonne and Glenn leaned forward, too, to see what caught the leader’s attention. A moment later all four of them were smiling.

Sasha’s hand waved to them from out of the watch tower, while Rosita up on the wall gave a signal to the sentry by the gate. The next second a shock of red hair came into sight as Abraham pulled the gate open.

“Looks like they listened to you”, Michonne said to Rick. “They took over sentry duty on the wall and at the gate.”

“They prob’ly took over the entire damn town by now”, Daryl said, not without a tinge of amusement.

It wasn’t mirrored on Rick’s face. Taking over the town was what had started the trouble and that was the last thing Rick had wanted them to do, but it didn’t matter anymore now. Whatever the status quo was here, plans would have changed by the end of the day. This town was history as far as this group was concerned.

As soon as the gate had closed behind the car, Rick stopped and got out. He cast an appreciative smile in Abraham’s direction and then approached the man for a quick briefing.

“Anything?” he asked, nodding to what was lying beyond the wall.

“Nope. Everything’s quiet as a graveyard out there.”

“Wish it was”, Rick said sternly and Abraham’s good mood faded instantly.

“Someone tried to kick your asses out there?”

“Not ours. But … Never mind. I’ll fill everyone in later.”

He looked up to the wall and the watch tower and waved to Rosita and Sasha.

“How’s Tara?” he addressed the Latina.

“Better. She’s awake, but still needs a few days to recover probably.”

Rick pressed his lips together and cursed under his breath. A few days. Maybe they didn’t have a few days. They were sitting on a powder keg and he wanted to leave as soon as only possible, but no one would be left behind.
He pulled in a deep breath. Later. One problem at a time.

“By the way”, Abraham picked up. “Eugene’s been sitting with her ever since you guys left. Hasn’t left her side. And he’s still grinning like an idiot. What you said to him there sure made his day.”

“It’s the truth. He does his share and we need someone like him. We all got different skills and it’s about time we acknowledged his.”

“Huh. Just don’t tell him that too often or it’s gonna go straight to that silly mullet.

The ghost of a smile flashed shortly over the leader’s face before he turned to head back to the car. He stopped once again though when a thought crossed his mind.

“How did you convince Deanna to let the three of you be on sentry duty together?”

“Who’s Deanna?” Abraham joked. “Truth to be told, we didn’t bother asking. Sasha set up camp in the watch tower anyway and Rosita and I just sort of convinced the two peeps on duty to take a break.”

He pointed with his thumb over his shoulder and only now Rick noticed Nicholas and a young woman with long red hair standing a few yards away, watching them silently. Nicholas had his arms crossed before his chest and looked highly annoyed about the way he’d been dismissed, but he knew better than to risk another confrontation with that group. Abraham alone would be able to hold him up in the air with one arm only, but now that Daryl, Rick, Glenn and Michonne were there, too, he seriously considered a hasty retreat.

Rick cast the man a killer scowl.

“Any trouble?” he asked Abraham.

“From whom? – Ariel and Sebastian over there? Come on.”

The tall red-haired man grinned, but it faded as soon as he saw the lines of stress on the leader’s face.

“We’ve got things under control here, Rick”, he reassured the other man.

“Good. Give us an hour or so to wash up and grab a bite to eat and then let everyone know to meet us at the house. There’s something I need to tell you.”

Rick stopped the car before Aaron’s house and honked once to announce their arrival. As though they’d been waiting behind the door, both Aaron and Eric emerged almost immediately and came down the steps to greet them.

When the four passengers had left the car, Rick walked to the curly-haired man and pushed the keys into his hand.

“Thanks a lot.”

Wordlessly Aaron stared at his car for a moment, before wide blue eyes were turned Rick’s way.

“Mind telling me what you did out there? Have you been on an off road rally or something?”

With a frown Rick turned to the car and only now noticed that it was still covered in the dirt and dust they used to disguise it, while several small twigs and leaves stuck to the windshield wipers.
Before Rick could say anything, Glenn had given Aaron a friendly slap on the shoulder and said:

“We just met Nicholas at the gate and he’s out of work and bored to tears. I’m sure he’d love to wash your car. – We’ll let him know.”

That said Rick, Daryl, Glenn and Michonne walked down the street, headed to the two houses the group occupied. They cast each other glances out of the corner of their eye and saw a suppressed grin on all four faces.

“That was a good one”, Daryl commented to Glenn.

When they came into sight, Carl jumped out of the chair he’d been sitting in on the front porch and called into the house:

“They’re back!”

While Maggie and Carol came outside, Carol carrying little Judith on her arm, Carl hurried down the stairs and came running towards the little group with a wide smile on his face.

He stopped a few steps away from them, visibly torn. Some of the neighbors were watching, including Ron Anderson and his friend Mickey, and teenage boys in an apocalypse weren’t so unlike from those before – hugging their parents in front of everybody was most definitely so not cool. Rick and Michonne decided in the same moment to make that decision for him and simultaneously pulled the boy into a hug. Carl decided to screw being cool and returned it instantly.

What did Ron and Mickey know, growing up in this town reading comics? Carl was way tougher than the two of them together and he didn’t need their approval anyhow. According to Merle Dixon “That Grimes boy’s killed more walkers than he’s got hair on his balls”. Not that Carl had counted …

While Maggie flew into Glenn’s arms and kissed him ardently, Carol hurried towards Daryl with a happy smile and was pulled into a hug a moment later.

“I’m glad you’re back”, Carol said when she pulled back.

Daryl would have loved to reply that he was glad to be back, but that would be a lie. He was glad seeing his people again, but he still hated this place to no end and wouldn’t have minded to wait outside the gate until they had packed up and were ready to leave.

He placed a loving kiss on Judith’s head and was just about to lift her off Carol’s arm, when he saw Carl approaching him.

Carol Peletier had very fine senses when it came to situations that did not require her presence. Just like Daryl she had learned early on to disappear and go invisible when the circumstances called for it and right now she was most definitely in the way here.

She moved the little girl onto her other hip and gave Daryl’s hand a short squeeze.

“Come inside when you’re hungry”, she said. “Dinner’s ready.”

“Man, if that’s casserole again, I rather take ma chances ‘n’ go lookin’ for a McDonald’s out there.”

She couldn’t help giggling.

“If you find one, bring me some fries and a double cheeseburger.”

“Me too”, Carl tossed in.

“I look like a caterin’ service to ya? If ya want food delivery, go talk to the pizza boy over
there”, he gestured to Glenn.

“Fat chance”, the Asian retorted while he wrapped an arm around his wife’s waist and pulled her towards the front porch of the house where Rick and Michonne were waiting for the others.

Still giggling Carol followed the Rhees, while Daryl sighed audibly.

“She didn’t really make some damn casserole again, right?” he asked Carl.

The boy suppressed a smirk.

“I dunno. She might have.”

“Yeah”, Daryl growled. “Figures.”

Damn, he hated this place.

“Did you run into trouble out there?” Carl derailed Daryl’s train of thought and casseroles were completely forgotten suddenly.

“We saw trouble, but ain’t done runnin’ into it. Yer dad’s gonna fill everyone in tonight.”

Carl nodded slowly.

“Are we gonna leave?”

“Guess so.”

“So you did see that Negan dude then?” Carl probed again.

“Man, what did I jus’ tell ya? Yer dad’s gonna fill everyone in.”

The teenager shrugged.

“You can tell me. Doesn’t make a difference to me.”

Daryl held his breath for a moment as his heart skipped a beat. Did Carl mean it the way it sounded? Didn’t it make a difference to him, because both Rick and Daryl qualified as dad? Or was that just wishful thinking right now and all Carl had meant to say was that anyone breaking the news to him would be fine.

“Did Jude take her naps ‘n’ eat well?” Daryl chose to change the subject, which didn’t go unnoticed.

Carl pulled an annoyed face.

“Dunno”, he sassed. “Wasn’t my job. Carol took care of her.”

It was a childish reaction of ‘if you don’t tell me anything, I won’t tell you anything, either’. And the way Daryl’s eyes rested on him and seemed to drill holes in his head made Carl understand that he wouldn’t get out of this one so easily.

“Fine, yeah”, he grumbled. “She did.”

“Carol ain’t done torturin’ the poor girl with more casserole, right?”

“No.” Carl was still sulking. “She personally shot a couple of squirrels for squirrel pap.”
It was meant to be a cocky comeback, but Daryl just shrugged.

“Sounds good ta me.”

He walked past the teenager to head to the house, too, when Carl’s voice behind him stopped him.

“I’m glad you didn’t run into trouble.”

Daryl pulled in a deep breath, while he turned back around to look at the boy.

“Yeah, he’s out there”, he said almost inaudibly and then fell quiet.

Obviously this was the only piece of information he was willing to spill at this point. They held each other’s gaze motionless for a moment, then Carl gave a curt nod.

“Thanks for telling me.”

This time the teenager started walking first and passed Daryl to catch up with the others, who had disappeared into the house by now. A few steps short of the porch Daryl’s voice behind him let Carl stop dead in his tracks.

“Carl?”

When the boy turned back to him with a questioning glance, he said:

“Ya don’t have ta try so hard ta be tough – ya’ve been ever since I got ta know ya. But … Remember Merle?”

Wondering where this was headed, the boy nodded.

“Merle was tough, too”, Daryl picked up. “Toughest asshole I ever met. But that’s pretty much all he was – a tough asshole. Never loved no one in all his life – not really.”

His eyes clouded over and he had to swallow against a lump in his throat.

“And he died alone. Ain’t no one done sheddin’ a single tear for him.”

“Except me”, he added mentally.

“Jus’ want ya ta understand – the emotional crap … ‘s important. ’s what counts, what makes the difference. If I ever said somethin’ else, I’s wrong.”

Carl just stared at the archer flabbergasted for a moment, trying to process what he’d just heard. Calmly Daryl held the boy’s gaze and tried to silently communicate with him, the same way he did with Rick. They were father and son – maybe it worked with both of them?

When Carl still stood rooted to his spot, Daryl decided to dare give him a little hint and spread his arms just that tiny little bit.

The next moment the boy was in them and they closed around him instantly, while Carl wrapped his own arms around Daryl’s middle. They stood like that quietly for a moment, unmoving and at a lack for words. Just when the situation threatened to grow awkward, Daryl said:

“Some a’ that squirrel pap left? In case there’s really jus’ that damn casserole.”

Carl broke out laughing and let go of the archer, grateful that Daryl was giving him a way out.

“Let’s go check”, he prompted and together they walked back to the house.

There was a smile tugging on the corners of Carl’s mouth. When he cast a look around he found Ron and Mickey gone. But even if they’d still been there, no doubt preparing a good dose of teasing for
the sappy hugging, Carl couldn’t have cared less. There was nothing embarrassing about hugging someone you love, someone you truly admire and look up to. Someone who wasn’t blood, but was still family. The only embarrassing thing was that he had waited so long for this.

Unseen to either Daryl or Carl Michonne stood at a window by the front door, smiling to herself.
At sundown the entire group was gathered in the infirmary, much to the dismay of Dr. Anderson.

When one by one had showed up in house No. 1, the same way they had two nights ago, Rosita had commented that someone should get Tara and Eugene for this meeting. It concerned all of them and if there was a decision to be made, everyone should be present.

With a shrug Abraham had headed over to the infirmary, only to return five minutes later – alone.

“Abe”, Rosita had cast him her infamous ‘what the fuck’ look, “where’s Tara and Eugene?”

“Tara’s not supposed to get up yet”, Abraham had commented dryly. “I offered to carry her.”

“So?” Rick had prompted when the redhead wouldn’t say anymore.

Slowly Abraham had lifted his hand and given him the finger.

“This was her answer.”

Several chuckles and laughs could be heard throughout the room.

“She said no one would carry her around town like a sack of flour. Frankly”, he added, “after all the cookies she’s had lately I’m not complaining.”

“Abraham!”

Not for the first time ever since she met that man, Rosita had wondered why the heck she was dating him. He was simply obnoxious at times. But the sex, dear God, that sure was awesome.

“Okay”, Maggie had said nonchalantly, “if the mountain won’t come to Muhammad, Muhammad must go to the mountain.”

“The hell’s Muhammad?” Daryl had tossed in, but had been ignored.

In the end the entire group, Muhammad or no Muhammad, had headed over to the infirmary and piled into it despite Dr. Anderson’s protest.

“Private party”, Daryl had growled at him, before he had grabbed him by the collar and shoved him out onto the front porch, slamming the door shut behind him with a loud bang.

Tara looked at the assembly with large eyes, before a grin spread over her face.

“No balloons and flowers?”

“Believe me”, Carol said dryly, “you wouldn’t want to look at the flowers. Trust me on this.”

The friendly teasing and joking continued and Rick watched the group quietly from where he stood by the window. It was a light, carefree moment with all of them together and he hated to destroy the mood. It was one of these very rare moments when no one had a worry on their mind and just enjoyed being alive and with the people they cared for.

It would only last a minute, maybe two or three even, but every second someone had a reason to smile was invaluable these days.
Little Judith giving a whiny sound on Carl’s arm brought the serious matters at hand back to everyone’s attention and the merry mood was gone in an instant. There were decisions to be made, problems they had to deal with and that called for solutions to be found. Now. That’s what they were here for.

“Everyone”, Rick addressed his people, “there’s something you all need to know.”

It was deadly quiet in the room suddenly and all eyes were on the leader.

“We found the proof. Daryl, Glenn, Michonne and I – we saw Negan and the Saviors today. They are really out there.”

The silence remained. For a moment people were exchanging looks with others or visibly trying to digest the news, before Carol spoke first.

“So, are they the kind of group you saw in your dream?”

Rick nodded.

“We found one of the other communities and that town is practically enslaved. Negan and some of his henchmen were there …”

He breathed in deep.

“There is no easy or gentle way to say this, but that man is the cruel and ruthless bastard I saw in my vision. To make a point, to prove his power he has a way of introducing himself to a community. – He kills someone.”

He noticed the shocked looks on the other’s faces and had to swallow hard for a moment when his eyes came to rest on first Glenn and then Abraham.

“He uses that baseball bat to bash someone’s head in. This time it was a young boy, barely older than Carl.”

There were several gasps around him and the fear and confusion was almost palpable.

“When you’re saying he has a way of introducing himself”, Abraham cut in. “Does that mean he’s gonna do that shit around here, too?”

Rick’s eyes lingered on him that moment too long before the leader nodded and everyone got the message.

“I think I’m getting a headache”, Abraham commented sarcastically, but no one laughed.

“I know this town has a lot to offer”, Rick said with a heart as heavy as lead. “And I know we all long for something like this – a roof over our head, food, a wall that provides some safety. A home. But this is not it.”

“Rick”, Maggie said softly. “It took you two days to find them although you knew in which direction to go. They’re not even looking. I mean, what are the chances of them ever finding this place?”

“I don’t know”, Rick answered honestly. “Alexandria has managed to stay below the radar for a long time, fact. And originally it was us who drew Negan’s attention. Maybe, if we lay low this time, this town will go unnoticed.”

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Daryl, Michonne and Glenn’s heads whip around and cast
him wide-eyed looks. Before either of them had a chance to say anything though, Rick added:

“Could just as well be though, that they’ll find this place by accident tomorrow.”

Rick’s expression was hard and his voice firm. There would be no discussion.

“I will not take that chance. Not with the lives of my children. And not with yours, either. There is no telling how long Hilltop and the Kingdom can provide for the Sanctuary or when the Saviors will run out of supplies. They are many and they need lots of stuff and things. One day they will enlarge the radius to find what they need and they will discover Alexandria sooner or later. Or the Wolves will. Or another hostile group. There is too much here others will want – it’s too big to stay invisible forever.”

“Sounds like you’ve already made up your mind”, Sasha tossed in.

“I have. We will not be sitting ducks inside this death trap and wait till it’s too late to run.”

He pulled in a deep breath.

“I cannot force anyone to leave, if they would want to stay. But you asked for proof and we found it. I’ve watched you all die once, I’m not gonna stay around to watch that happening again.”

Again there was shocked silence for a moment and after a moment in which Rick breathed in deep several times, he added determinedly:

“We’re gonna leave this place tomorrow.”

That announcement brought people out of their stupor.

“Tomorrow?” Rosita pointed in Tara’s direction. “She can’t be out on the road yet. Dr. Anderson says she needs to rest a day or two more.”

“We’re not walking”, Rick said determinedly. “We’re gonna take some of Alexandria’s cars.”

“We had cars before”, Rosita dared remind him. “They either broke down or we ran out of gas. And then what? Someone who’s unable to keep up …”

“You’re not gonna leave me, right?” Tara cut in with wide eyes.

“We’re not leaving anyone.”

Rick ran a hand through his curls and cursed under his breath.

“We can’t just take these cars”, Carol said softly. “You need to talk to Deanna, Rick. Let her know what we’ve got planned and ask her for supplies, transportation, our weapons back and maybe more ammo.”

She trailed off, while she placed a hand on his arm gently.

“We can’t leave tomorrow. Running like a bunch of headless chicken is not gonna get us anywhere. Is a day or two gonna make a difference?”

“Wish I knew”, Rick croaked.

Having to wait felt like sitting on a hot stove top. He just wanted to run, get out of here, take his people to safety. There was no telling how close the Wolves were and even the Saviors could find this place by mere chance any moment. Whether they originally did or not was totally irrelevant. That detail might have changed. Maybe they’d appear on their doorstep any moment now. And then this so safe town would be a trap – there was no way out.
Had no one ever thought about a plan B? A back door? With all the time and supplies of construction material they had here, why was it even possible for any enemy to walk up straight to the gate? Why wasn’t there a second wall or a moat around this town, like the medieval castles had? People back then knew how to protect their homes, so why the heck did no one use these old knowledges? What worked hundreds of years ago would still work today. After all, in some ways they were back to the middle ages.

Rick made a mental note to do better if they ever made it out of here alive and managed to find a place of their own. He had learned his lesson.

What had made him fail time and again was arrogance. The arrogance to believe he knew better. The arrogance to underestimate an enemy’s strength.

That would never happen again.

“If we leave”, Carol said meekly into the stillness, “is that gonna change our fate? Are we safe then?”

Rick froze and could feel all color drain from his face. He had dreaded that question. And it had tortured him all this time not to know if anything he did would make a difference at all.

Before he could answer Abraham commented:

“Don’t hold your breath, sister. In Final Destination there was no escape, no matter what they did.”

“Oh, that does it!” Rosita put her hands to her slim hips and cast the Sergeant a killer scowl.

“Know what? Your final destination for tonight is the couch, Mr. Ford.”

“Look”, Rick raised his hand to stop the bickering and to have everyone’s attention again. The entire situation was tiring enough, he didn’t need trouble within the group on top of things.

“I’m not gonna lie to you – I don’t know if leaving this place is gonna save us. I don’t have all the answers. I just know that staying here despite knowing what is likely to happen, is a mistake. That vision was a warning, a chance – a chance to change our fate for the better and I’m not gonna ignore that.”

“’s like in Butch Cassidy ‘n’ the Sundance Kid”, Daryl remarked, “when they’s trapped on that ledge. Stayin’ up there woulda meant gettin’ shot for sure. So they took their chance. Jumped sixty feet down into that river. They coulda broken every bone, hit a rock, drown – but they jumped anyway. ’twas better than certain death up there. ’s what we gonna do, too. Jump. ’cuz Butch here says ’s the best way ta play it.”

It was quiet for a moment, then Tara giggled.

“Sundance is right.”

That was all she said. That was all that needed to be said.

One by one Rick saw his people give affirmative nods and bit by bit his heart grew lighter.

Judith had fallen asleep on her brother’s shoulder and with a loving smile at both of his children, Rick lifted the little girl onto his arm and ran his hand soothingly over her back.

“Oh, he concluded, “I’m gonna talk to Deanna tomorrow. We need that RV and supplies and I think it’s only fair to warn her of what’s headed this way. For now, let’s just call it a night.”

“How are you gonna talk her into giving us the RV?” Sasha asked.

“Easy”, Daryl commented dryly, “pass the word that we’s gonna stay if we ain’t gettin’ it.
Nicholas ‘s gonna be the first ta literally kiss her ass if only she’d give us that damn RV.”

Tara giggled even louder.

“That I wanna see.”

“Yeah? How hard did ya hit yer head?”

Before Tara would feel inclined to give anyone the finger again, Rick cut in and asked for volunteers to relieve Sasha, Rosita and Abe from sentry duty. Instantly Michonne, as well as Maggie and Glenn agreed to take over.

Maybe this was being paranoid now, but Rick wasn’t willing to take any chances. Only one or two more days, then they’d be out of here and on their way, headed into a brighter future with a better fate. Hopefully. He’d be damned if anyone was going to harm his people, now that they had almost made it out of here.

One by one people said good night to Tara and then left the room. When Rick headed to the door, too, the young woman called after him:

“You just keep on thinking, Butch, that’s what you’re good at.”

He cast a glance over his shoulder and looked straight into her smiling face. Just like Beth, Tara had this cheerful disposition that was able to brighten the day, bring out the sun even during a thunderstorm and it warmed his heart. He returned the smile and then left the infirmary as well.

Standing in the doorway Daryl cast her a probing glance and then commented dryly:

“Guess I best talk to that quacksalver. Yer gettin’ too much laughin’ gas or somethin’.”

Before he turned to leave Tara gave him the finger after all, but as soon as the door had fallen shut behind him the giggles were back. Maybe he was even right.
Chapter 20

Two hours later dinner – with no casserole – at house No. 1 was over and the group had split again. The assigned sentry guards had taken up their posts, the residents of house No. 2 had headed back to their own home and it had grown quiet in house No. 1.

Carl had excused himself and had gone to his room to read some comics and Rick dared hope that this hadn’t just been an alibi for more brooding, worrying or trying to be brave despite the emptiness in that room. Noah was still missed painfully.

Daryl had offered to put Judith to bed and the leader knew that his partner loved to do that. It was Daryl’s special time with the little girl, their secluded moment with each other and it warmed Rick’s heart to picture those two together. Sometimes he heard Daryl talk to their daughter in soft, soothing words, but since he would never eavesdrop, Rick had no idea what it was his partner shared with Judy.

Maybe he was telling her bedtime stories. And then maybe he was talking to her about all the things that weighed heavy on his soul and that he had never dared tell anyone else, not even Rick. She might be his confidante, the one person he shared all his secrets with, knowing that Judith would most definitely keep them. It would stop as soon as the girl was old enough to understand what he was saying, but until then these moments together were quality time, a give and take between father and daughter. Rick was happy for both of them to have these moments.

Tired and with weary steps the leader walked into the living room, headed for the kitchen, when he noticed Carol sit on the couch in front of the TV. Again. It felt like a déjà-vu.

“Hey”, he addressed her gently while he walked up to her. “Dirty Dancing again?”

Carol cast a quick glance to the stairs and when she was certain that Rick was alone, she answered:

“Don’t tell Daryl, but I hate that movie.”

Rick’s eyes widened about two sizes.

“You hate that movie? Then why did you torture the poor man with it the other day?”

The expression in her eyes changed suddenly and a dash of sadness had them shine in a darker hue of blue.

“I had to know if he would. You know, watch that stupid movie although he doesn’t like it – just because I allegedly do. Do you know how it feels when someone does something like that for you? Stand back and let you have your way, even support you in something, because they think it’s important to you?”

Rick nodded slowly, visibly touched by what she said.

“I didn’t. Till now. Ed sure as hell never gave a damn what I wanted, what was important to me, what I felt.”

“And you needed proof that Daryl does? Did you really have any doubt?”

“No, but it was nice nevertheless to actually see someone do this for me, you know? You of all people should know.”

“I of all people?”
“Sure. Merle was Daryl’s *Dirty Dancing* back then. Don’t tell me you didn’t know that saving his obnoxious brother was the reason Daryl fell in love with you.”

“Yeah, I know.” Rick nodded cautiously.

What on Earth was going on now? First Michonne had been flirting with Rick and now Carol needed proof of Daryl’s dedication to her? Hadn’t he showed her often enough in all this time that she was very special to him, a close friend, a sister – whatever? Why wasn’t that enough anymore all of a sudden? Was Carol after Daryl now? Apparently there was something in the water in this town. Good thing they were gonna leave soon.

“Rick”, Carol’s voice ended his train of thought, “relax. He’s yours, I got that a long time ago. It was just a good opportunity on a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I’ve given up hope on finding Mr. Right out there. You know, a guy who’d love and actually be nice to me. Who would watch a movie with me, although it makes his eyes bleed. That’s all.”

An empathic smile played around the leader’s lips.

“Don’t give up hope yet. That poor fool who’d let himself get tortured freely might still be out there.”

“Yeah, right. – Too bad we can’t take that DVD along, huh?”

A smile spread over her face and was mirrored on Rick’s a second later.

“You’ll think of something, I’m sure.” He winked at her. “So, whadda you watching now?”

He cast a glance on the TV screen.

“*Alien vs. Predator*?” He broke out laughing.

“Way better than *Dirty Dancing*”, she chuckled. “But don’t tell Daryl.”

Rick made a gesture of zipping his mouth and then headed to the kitchen, shaking his head to himself.

He opened the fridge and cast a glance inside, undecided whether he really wanted anything at all. Then he closed the door again and pulled in a deep breath.

It sure was nice being able to open a fridge and find food and beverages inside. For days now they had all of them had enough to eat, shelter, hot water and soft beds to sleep in – and they were going to give it all up in exchange for a life out on the road again. It didn’t seem fair to ask this of his people. If only there was a choice.

“What’s that sound?” Carol asked suddenly and tore Rick out of his dark thoughts.

She turned the TV down and listened into the silence that followed. A moment later she stood and walked to the stairs, listening to the second floor, while Rick soundlessly came to stand by her side. They both listened breathlessly for a moment, then simultaneously wide smiles spread over their faces.

“What’s that sound?” Carol asked in an unbelieving inflection.

Someone softly singing a lullaby sounded from the nursery and instantly a warm feeling spread in both Carol and Rick’s chest. The mere imagination of that unkempt, grumpy man to hold the little blond angel in his arms, singing a song to her, was the cutest thing imaginable.
“Uh-huh”, Rick nodded with a smile. “Have you never heard him before?”

“No.” Her eyes were suspiciously shiny all of a sudden. “What is this? Something about a red balloon?” She listened for a few seconds.

“I don’t know that song.”

“He made it up a while ago, back at the prison”, Rick said softly. “Judy had stomach cramps and he meant to soothe her with a lullaby and then … then came to realize he doesn’t know any. You know …”

“I know”, she replied just as softly. “This one’s the best lullaby of all. A special one just for Judith.”

Carol pulled in a deep breath, visibly fighting for her composure.

“You’ve got a very special man up there.” She gave his arm a squeeze and then turned to head back to the couch. “Good night, Rick.”

And that probably translated into ‘Get lost. That very special man is waiting for you’.

“Night, Carol.”

When Rick entered the second floor corridor, Daryl just came out of the nursery and pulled the door closed behind him, leaving it a gap open though so they would hear Judith.

“Is she asleep?”

“Uh-huh. Dunno what they done ta the poor girl, but she’s so pooped that she fell asleep right away.”

“Might have been that song.”

“Whadda ya sayin’, man? That it’s borin’ or somethin’?”

Rick pulled Daryl into a hug and just held him for a moment.

“No”, he whispered to him, “it’s the most wonderful lullaby there is. And it works, too.”

He pulled back and pecked the archer’s lips.

“Go ahead. I’m gonna check in on Carl real quick and then I’m gonna join you.”

“’kay”, Daryl just gave a curt nod.

His motions were just as tired and weary as Rick’s and they both didn’t delude themselves. The only action that was likely to take place in their bedroom that night was both of them dropping where they stood and being fast asleep in a jiffy.

That mission had been more exhausting than any of the others they’d been on before. Maybe because none of the others had ever been as disturbing as this one.

When Rick came into the bedroom five minutes later, Daryl was already snuggled up under the covers, but his eyes were still open. He lay on his side, his gaze on the door, apparently waiting for his partner to join him.

“’s Carl okay?” he asked the second Rick came through the door.
“Yes. He’s really reading comics in there.”

Rick kicked off his boots and started opening his shirt.

“He’s still a bit shaken because of Noah, but … I guess the relief about us being back outweighs that.”

He headed into the bathroom for a moment to wash up and then crawled under the covers, instantly reaching out for his man. He spooned up behind Daryl and pulled him close, while the archer scooted a few inches back until their bodies lay perfectly aligned. Not even a piece of paper would have fit in between them.

“This ‘s the only thing ‘m gonna miss out there”, Daryl muttered into the stillness, while he savored the warmth in his back and the feeling of skin on skin.

“You won’t have to. I don’t mind spooning up with the others present.”

“Butt naked?”

Rick couldn’t help chuckling.

“We allegedly screwed in the middle of everyone, remember? So this is unlikely to shock anyone.”

“Worth a try”, Daryl joked.

Then it was silent again for a while. Just when Rick thought the man in his arms had fallen asleep, Daryl unexpectedly spoke again.

“They have time ta think now.”

“So?”

“Whadda ya gonna do if one or the other reconsiders? Wants ta stay nevertheless?”

Rick audibly sucked in the air.

“Like who?”

“Eugene. He ain’t made for the world out there, ya know that. Saw the look on his face – he’s pissin’ his pants already.”

Rick tensed up and had to swallow against the bile that was rising in his throat.

“Don’t say that.”

“What?”

“The thing about people pissing their pants. That asshole with the bat says that all the time. I never wanna hear it again.”

Daryl got a hold of the hand that rested on his chest and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“Ya won’t. Sorry.”

“Me, too. Didn’t mean to snap at you.”

He placed a loving kiss on Daryl’s neck.

“Don’t worry – no one’s gonna stay behind. If I have to, I’m gonna knock them unconscious.
and lock them in the closet of the RV until we’re too far out to turn back.”

A grin appeared on Daryl’s face.

“Sounds like a plan to me. I’m in.”

“I bet.” Rick chuckled. “You just want a reason to knock Eugene unconscious, don’t you?”

“Got reasons enough, but … yeah”, Daryl grumbled, but there was clearly an amused tinge in his voice.

A few minutes passed in silence while the two lovers lay snuggled up, slowly dozing off despite the threat outside the wall. Their partner’s closeness and the feel of the familiar body made them forget the world out there, at least for a while.

Just when Rick was about to fall asleep, the drowsy voice of the archer muttered:

“Ya know we can’t leave yet, don’t ya?”

“What?” Rick was wide awake again in an instance. “Why not?”

“Ya still got an open case ta solve, Officer Grimes. Can’t let the ruthless owl attacker walk free.”

Rick rolled his eyes in a toss up between amused and annoyed.

“I hate you, Dixon.”

“Uh-huh. Hate ya, too”, Daryl slurred and a moment later he was fast asleep.
Rick’s feet were heavy as lead when he walked along the sidewalk to the Monroe house. Having to face Deanna again and the conversation that lay ahead was weighing him down, but there was no way to avoid this. Although Daryl kept telling him that Rick didn’t need to do all the heavy lifting – and he meant it – unpleasant conversations and negotiations would always be a task appointed to the leader, no one else. Sometimes Rick wondered if it was easier at the top nevertheless. He was the one who made the decisions, he set the course, things usually went down the way he wanted them to. And if he had made the right call, if a plan had worked out and his people were safe and well provided for, someone would call him a remarkable man. But the air was thin at the top, too. The weight of responsibility was on his shoulders alone and when he failed, he could only hope and pray that his people would still support him. If they let him fall, it would be a hard, painful plunge.

Walking up the steps to the Monroes’ front porch felt as though he tried to climb Mount Everest. Was it too late to turn around, just take whatever they needed and leave without a word? Who would stop them? Who would be able to stop them? It sure would be the easiest and fastest way – and the one thing Rick couldn’t do. They owed Deanna. What exactly, Rick couldn’t tell. An explanation? An apology? A warning to make amends? Make amends for what? Aiden’s death – and Noah’s – was on Nicholas and thus it was Deanna’s responsibility, her problem. Rick had enough of his own. What they owed Deanna without a doubt was a ‘thank you’. That was the least. They wouldn’t sneak out like thieves in the night as though they had done something wrong or had something to hide. Rick wouldn’t run and dodge his responsibility. That was not what remarkable men did.

He had knocked on the front door twice before it was opened and Reg appeared in the doorway. The man seemed to have aged years since Rick had last seen him. His face was ashen and showed deep lines of sorrow, while his eyes looked at his visitor red-rimmed and tired as though he hadn’t slept ever since his son died. And maybe he hadn’t. Rick’s heart went out to him. He knew what it felt like to bury their own child – he had been there, had to watch Carl die. And Judith. But unlike Reg, Rick had been able to wake from the nightmare. For Deanna and her family the nightmare would never end.

The Alexandrian pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers when he recognized Rick and made no move to ask him in.

“This is a bad moment, Rick”, he said flatly.

And no doubt ‘moment’ included the entire day, the entire week, maybe the rest of their life.

“I’m sorry to disturb”, Rick said honestly. “But I really need to talk to your wife. It’s important.”

“Nothing is important anymore”, Reg replied tiredly, but he stepped aside nevertheless and let Rick in.

When the leader stepped into the Monroes’ living room, he found a woman sitting on the couch that barely resembled the energetic, vibrant, strong Deanna who had welcomed them to this town not
even a week ago.
She didn’t move, didn’t look up as if she’d been frozen in time. Her body looked *deflated* and all she did was clutch a CD cover although no music was playing.

When Reg noticed Rick’s eyes on the item in his wife’s hands, he explained wearily:

“That was one of Aiden’s favorite CDs. His ‘run mix’. Whenever he went out there …”

The man broke off and fell quiet. What more was there to say?
Rick didn’t need any explanations. He had seen too many people who had lost loved ones, before and after the apocalypse. And ever since that vision he knew painfully well how much it hurt. The reactions of the ones left behind were all similar. They held on for as long as only possible, valued every tiny little item of the deceased as though it was their most valuable belonging, spent days in places that person used to go to. As though there was an echo of the people they lost in each of these objects and places. It helped, for a while. As long as the living knew when to let go before they were pulled under and got lost in the past, in a world where they didn’t belong.
Then again – what did Rick know? The lines between the world of the living and that of the dead had blurred since the outbreak. Maybe it didn’t exist at all anymore. And he was most definitely the last person to judge or give advice on these matters. If those boundaries still existed, he had overstepped them way too many times after Lori’s death. Luckily he had had Daryl to bring him back more than once. Rick wondered if anyone would be able to do that for the Monroes as well.

“What do you want, Rick?” Deanna said.
Her voice sounded feeble, but not without a tinge of annoyance.
“You’ve already paid your respects. Are you here to deliver more bad news?”

“Yes and no.”
That got her attention and with a frown she lifted her head.

“Very mysterious. News that is both good and bad? Or is it more than one thing you need to tell me?”

“The latter I’m afraid.”
She grew even paler than she already was.

“What happened now?”

“Nothing”, he hurried to reply. “Not yet at least.”
Her eyebrows rose to her hairline.

“Huh. And here I thought you were a cop before the apocalypse, not Houdini.”
Rick didn’t bother to point out that Houdini was an illusionist and stunt performer, not a psychic. And Rick sure as hell was neither. He was just a man who knew things and he had chosen not to question how that was possible, where that vision had come from and why it was him who’d been chosen to dream it. He didn’t question these things anymore.
Why did the dead walk? What happened all of a sudden to cause this? Who was responsible? Was there a way to cure it? Would it ever stop? Why did they keep losing loved ones? Why did it never stop hurting, regardless how many times they had to go through it?
It was senseless to ask questions no one knew the answer to, waste precious time finding solutions without really knowing what the problem was.
He had a problem at hand he could put a finger on – his family needed a home and this place wasn’t
“The day we arrived”, he started in a wide arc, “I warned you not to let people in, remember?”

“Oh yes, I remember”, she said with a bitter inflection. “And I should have listened to you, too. Ever since the outbreak we’ve been living here unbothered, without anything happening. You and your people have been here for only a few days … and … and now Aiden is dead.”

Rick felt anger boil up inside of him and breathed in a few times to keep calm. She was hurting, she was devastated and needed an outlet for all these emotions. Blaming someone and lashing out at him was a natural reaction and nothing personal.

If she was being honest, she’d know that Rick wasn’t responsible for Aiden’s death. Just like it wasn’t true that Alexandria hadn’t lost lives before. Rick had seen their memorial wall and there were dozens of names on it. So far Deanna had just been lucky and it hadn’t been anyone close to her. In time she’d understand how unfair her behavior right now was, but Rick didn’t intend to still be around when that happened. He didn’t need her absolution anyway.

“One of my group is dead, too”, he reminded her. “And another one is injured.”

For a moment he thought about telling her that is was one of the Alexandrians who was responsible for this, not his group, but he reconsidered. Putting the blame on anyone wouldn’t bring Aiden and Noah back. And it wouldn’t help with this conversation, either.

“But there’s worse”, he added matter-of-factly.

Her eyes were blazing when she looked up.

“Worse?! My son is dead – how could it possibly be worse?”

“You have another son to think of and a whole town full of people. And they are all in danger.”

Being so blunt may have been cruel, but he didn’t have time to beat around the bush and be polite and considerate. It was time to take off the gloves.

“I know that right now you think my group is the source of your problems and that it was a mistake to take us in, but we’re the good guys. There’s others out there – dangerous, ruthless people, who plunder and kill, enslave entire towns.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

“I’ve seen them!” He chose to keep the vision a secret. Revealing the source of his information wouldn’t be helpful.

“You may have been lucky here so far, but sooner or later those people are gonna find Alexandria. They are many and they are merciless – and this town is entirely unprepared. You people think the walkers are the biggest threat out there, but the living are much worse. And no wall or gate is gonna stop them.”

A frown appeared on Deanna’s face.

“Have you been drinking again?”

A wave of frustration washed over Rick when he noticed that she wouldn’t believe him. Nothing he said or did was able to make her listen, make her see that she had her anger aimed at the wrong people.
“I don’t expect you to believe me. All I can do is warn you and ask you to take precautions. Arm your people, train them to fight, make sure to have a way out in case you’re surrounded…”

He broke off when he noticed her stare at the CD in her hand and not even pay attention to what he was saying any longer. This was senseless. There was no talking to her, not any more, not now. But he couldn’t wait around until she had worked things out; until she was ready to listen.

“Warn me”, she said in a tired inflection. “Gabriel warned me, too. Of you and your group. He said you were dangerous, said one day you’d put your own lives before everyone else’s.”

She ran the tip of her finger over the cover of the CD.

“And you did. Aiden is dead.”

Rick gave up. There was nothing he could do – for her or this town alike. Maybe some of his words had registered and maybe Deanna would come to her senses in time to prevent Alexandria from falling. And maybe not. This wasn’t Rick’s responsibility – his group was. And he wouldn’t waste anymore time trying to save people who didn’t want to be saved. Who had said loud and clear time and again that they knew better and could handle themselves without anyone’s help.

They would all of them find out soon enough that they were wrong, but Rick had no intention to stick around only to see them fail and being able to say “I told you so”.

He was just grateful for that peek into the future, grateful to be taught some humbleness before it was too late.

“My people and I – we’re gonna leave.”

“Huh”, she acknowledged that with a curt nod.

It was impossible to tell if her expression showed relief, indifference or perhaps even anger. Anger about these people violating her hospitality by causing no more than trouble, only to leave again when things went south.

“Tara is injured – she can’t walk. And we have a baby.”

She lifted her head and looked him straight in the eyes, but for moment Rick had the impression that her gaze went right through him. She wasn’t focused, seemed to be someplace else, unwilling or unable to deal with Rick, the group, her own people and this town at the moment. Let alone anything beyond the wall.

Rick swallowed hard and couldn’t help feeling sorry for her, her family and everyone living here. Right now this town was without a leader, without anyone to make decisions and take the precautions he asked her to take. She didn’t have a right-hand man, a wingman, a partner who’d take over for as long as she wasn’t able to be at the helm. Reg was a good man, but he wasn’t a leader. This place was doomed and there was nothing anyone could do about it, because there was no one here even trying to do something about it.

“What is it you want, Rick?” Deanna asked, most obviously growing tired of this conversation and close to showing Rick the door.

“The RV”, Rick said point-blank. “Supplies, water, fuel, our weapons, some more ammo.”

“That all?” she said sarcastically.

“If you want us to leave, yes.”
Rick remembered Daryl’s remark about how they should threaten the Alexandrians to stay, unless their demands were met, and apparently that approach seemed to be working. Deanna nodded with her lips pressed together to a thin line, before she said:

“Fine. You’ll get what you want, as long as you and your people just leave. I don’t think we’ll need the RV anymore anyway. Like you said – letting people in is a mistake. I don’t plan to repeat it.”

It was quiet for a moment, then she added:

“Good bye, Rick.”

The conversation was most obviously over.

When the door of the Monroe house had fallen shut behind Rick’s back, the leader pulled in several deep breaths to calm his racing pulse.

This had been a highly unpleasant meeting, but it wasn’t Deanna’s unfair behavior or her baseless accusations that agitated him. It was the knowledge about what was going to happen to this town and all the people living here and his incredible powerlessness. There was nothing more he could do for them, no way to stop the storm that was gathering on the horizon. He could almost see the dark, threatening clouds in the distance, about to soil these people’s clear blue sky and hide the sun for good. Once the Saviors got here, there would never again be a day of sunshine for them.

But nothing Rick could do or say would make these people believe him. It had been hard enough to convince his own people, let alone these strangers, who still considered him and the entire group ‘outsiders’.

“Hey!”

A familiar voice addressing him from a few yards down the street drew Rick’s attention and instantly eased his agitation. Daryl.

The clouds on his own horizon dissolved and the sun broke through.

The archer came walking towards him and even over the distance noticed the lines of worry on his partner’s face.

“What’s the long face, man? D’she say no?”

Rick headed down to the sidewalk and fell into step beside the archer.

“No, we’re getting everything we want.”

Daryl cast him a side glance and noticed how the younger man’s eyes flicked from house to house or came to rest on the faces of people they passed.

“Ya can’t save ‘em all, Rick”, Daryl said gently. “She didn’t believe ya, huh?”

Rick sighed.

“No. She’s blaming us for Aiden’s death and just wants us gone. She didn’t even listen.”

“Ain’t yer fault. Maybe ‘em folks here are gonna be lucky ‘n’ those assholes ain’t gonna find
‘em. But even if they does – ain’t yer responsibility. Ya got a dozen people ta worry ‘bout – that’s enough.”

Rick nodded hesitatingly. He knew Daryl was right, but that didn’t make it any easier. They walked a few steps in silence, then Rick cast a glance to his partner and with a frown ask unexpectedly:

“Since when are you taking strolls around town, by the way? Where have you been?”

“There was somethin’ I hadda do”, Daryl said mysteriously and then fell quiet without offering any further explanation.

Rick cast a glance over his shoulder, still wondering where Daryl could have been and what that ‘something’ might be, when the archer spoke again.

“D’ya know that Nicholas really cleaned Aaron’s car last night?”
There was a smirk tugging on his lips now.
“Guess Glenn’s the dude’s own personal nightmare now.”

“Serves him right”, Rick replied in a toss up between amused and annoyed.

“So, what’s the plan for today, Officer? Ya gonna do some more investigations ta solve yer owl case?”

Despite himself Rick had to laugh.

“You can’t let that rest, huh?”

“’s intriguin’ shit, man. Only times I ever done seein’ some serious police work ‘s when the cops came to our house ta arrest Merle.”

“Intriguing, huh? You’re shitting me right now, aren’t you?”

“Yup.” Daryl bumped his shoulder to Rick’s in an uncharacteristically playful mood, and almost made the younger man stumble into someone’s front yard.

Daryl’s hand instantly reaching out to get hold of Rick’s steadied the leader.

“Did you sniff some of Tara’s laughing gas?” Rick commented with a frown.

“Nah, sorry. ‘s prob’ly inappropriate, but … ‘m just … glad.”

“Glad about what?”

After Noah’s death, the brutal killing of that poor boy they had to witness the other day and the lurking threat out there, being glad did indeed seem inappropriate.

“That we’re leavin’. Never had no good feelin’ ‘bout this place ‘n’ I know there’s somethin’ better for us out there.”

Rick gave the hand that still held his a squeeze, wishing he would feel the same confidence, the same joy.
All he felt was fear and the weight of responsibility growing by the minute, pressing heavily on his shoulders. A dozen lives who depended on him and his ability to lead and make the right calls. And, again, he didn’t even know in which direction to turn.

“Ya ain’t alone in this, ya know.” Daryl leaned in until their faces were only few inches apart.
“Our group’s strong ‘n’ they ain’t no li’l kids who can’t take care of themselves. Jus’ point ‘em into a direction – they know how ta walk.”

“And that’s the problem, Daryl. I don’t know the direction.”

“So? Roll a dice or flip a coin – whatever. No one needs ta know.”

With his heart much lighter all of a sudden, Rick touched his lips to Daryl’s and gave him a hearty kiss right there in the middle of Alexandria. And Daryl responded without giving this any thought at all.

He couldn’t care less what people around here thought – he’d seen their prejudiced and hypocritical likes before. People who smiled in your face and then stabbed you in the back, badmouthed as soon as you weren’t in earshot.

The group had been here for only few days, but Daryl had seen and heard enough already to know that these post-apocalyptic folks weren’t any better than the ones before the outbreak. Aaron was right – people were people. And Daryl had seen the glances both Aaron and Eric got out of the corner of people’s eye. He had watched the gossip on the quiet, people sticking their heads together as soon as the queers came into sight. Two men being in love and living together, that didn’t fit into their ideal world. They rather considered an abusive asshole like Dr. Anderson a respectable citizen, because he had a doctoral degree. And because he was straight.

Daryl knew what he really was and he was fairly certain that Carol did, too. They both knew the signs, had seen the spooked and frightened look in Jessie Anderson’s eyes and almost felt her tension as soon as her husband was near.

No one stepped in, no one said a single bad word about the man – after all, he was married to a woman, just the way it’s supposed to be. Decent. Honorable. Right.

Unlike Aaron and Eric. The couple probably hadn’t even realized that Daryl listened way closer than they expected, but the few times he had talked to them he’d heard more between the lines than he liked. This community was only half as open-minded as Aaron had told them, but apparently he had chosen to delude himself, so the situation was easier to bear.

If the group stayed, how long would it take for the Alexandrians to realize that they had yet another gay couple among them? How long until both Rick and Daryl were at the receiving end of their glares and scornful comments as well? How long until Carl’s friends would start making fun of him for being the son of two fags?

Daryl meant what he said – there was most definitely a better place for them out there. No one needed a place like this. No one needed people like this. And as heartless as it may have appeared, he didn’t give a damn what happened to them. Save for very few exceptions, they didn’t give a damn what happened to Rick and his people, either.

“Ya still ain’t told me what ya have planned for today”, Daryl whispered to Rick when he slowly pulled back. “Save for causin’ a scandal that is.”

Chuckling, Rick pecked his partner’s mouth one more time before he took a step back and started walking down the street again, Daryl by his side.

“Sorry if I damaged your reputation.”

“Good one, Grimes.”

The archer returned Rick’s amused glance and just for that split second all worries were forgotten. Unfortunately split seconds didn’t last very long.
“I was thinking about having everyone pack our stuff, get the weapons, the ammo and supplies Deanna promised, check the RV … You know, get set so we can leave as soon as only possible. I’m gonna take over sentry duty in the watch tower.”

“Ya got it. Go ahead – ya ain’t happy till yer in that tower anyway. ‘m gonna let everyone know what ya want ‘em ta do ‘n’ then Carl ‘n’ I are gonna join ya. The boy needs ta stop readin’ ‘em comics, anyway. If he keeps that up, he’s gonna have a speech bubble over his head soon.”

Grinning to himself about the latest Dixon comment, Rick turned to the left at the nearest crossroads, while Daryl headed a few yards further to their house.
They were both actually looking forward to doing some sentry duty. Unlike looking for owl assassins or doing nothing, guarding the wall and gate was important and gave them a sense of control.
Without even realizing it, they both walked faster than necessary, driven by an urge suddenly to be on that wall and in the watch tower to have an eye on the outside world. They didn’t dare think further.
All they would actually be doing was watching a dam, while the tide was rising bit by bit with each passing second. If it broke, nothing would save them, whether they were on guard or not.
Chapter 22

Half an hour after they had split up, Carl and Daryl arrived at the gate and didn’t even have to persuade the sentries there to get lost and let them take over. The Alexandrians almost ran as soon as Daryl climbed up the ladder.

“Your reputation precedes you”, Carl laughed and was at the receiving end of a dark scowl.

“What’s that supposed ta mean?”

Chuckling, Carl raised his hands in a defensive gesture, but opted for leaving that question unanswered. Daryl cast a glance up to the watch tower and then called:

“Hey, Rapunzel, ya up there?”

“Don’t wait for him to let down his hair. That’d be your part”, Carl grinned.

Daryl’s head whipped around.

“Ya wanna end up cleanin’ the RV’s john till we find a new home? Then jus’ keep it up, gordo.”

Carl was smart enough not to answer to that, either, and rather took up his post, but the grin never left his face. Rick stuck his head out the tower’s window and waved to the two of them, before he focused on the world outside of Alexandria again.

Daryl lit a smoke and leaned with his hip against the wall, taking a deep drag. His eyes scanned the deserted buildings, streets and woods out there and he couldn’t help feeling exposed. They were standing up here like targets on a shooting range – any sniper out there could easily take them out.

“Why don’t ya take up post down at the gate?” he addressed Carl. “Someone’s supposed ta be down there as well.”

“Why don’t you go?” the boy sassed.

“’cuz …”

Damn. Lame excuse, the truth or a typical parental line like ‘because I told you so’ – those were his options. And he didn’t like either one.

“Never mind”, he said in the end. “But at least take that hat off ‘n’ duck a li’l, will ya.”

Carl caught on and a warm feeling spread deep down inside. Ron and the others, they would have rolled their eyes now, would have called Daryl either paranoid or overprotective or annoying. Probably all of that combined.

Carl would have loved to call Daryl something entirely different, but he hadn’t found the courage to yet.

He took the hat off and placed it on the floor before he cast Daryl a side glance. The archer’s eyes kept flicking from left to right, focusing on every spot out there an enemy or walkers could possibly be lurking in.

“Can I have a drag?” Carl asked unexpectedly, pointing at the man’s cigarette.
Shadow blue eyes turned his way.

“Sure”, Daryl said after he had given the boy a long, piercing look. “Day ‘em walkers dance Mambo down there or Eugene stops peepin’ at people. Whichever comes first.”

“Ahh, come on, Daryl. You know either’s unlikely to ever happen.”

“Guess ya ain’t never gonna have no smoke then, man.”

Carl pulled a face and sulked.

“I thought you were cool.”

“I am. Jus’ saved ya from havin’ a ton a’ tar in yer lungs when ya ma age – ‘n’ I want ya ta even make it to ma age, so stop poutin’ like a three-year-old.”

He took a last drag before he tossed the butt of his cigarette over the wall.

“But tell ya what – if ya get Eugene ta stop peepin, ya got a deal.”

“Really?”

Carl’s face lit up visibly.

“Yup. Word. But no blindin’ him, even though it’s temptin’.”

Again the teenager chuckled and then bumped his fist to Daryl’s to seal their deal.

They stood quietly side by side for a few minutes, then the archer said unexpectedly:

“Yer okay with us leavin’ again?”

Carl shrugged.

“Sure. This place was okay, but … I dunno, it was okay out there, too. Or in the prison, at the farm, the quarry. Doesn’t matter as long as we’re all together.”

“Good point, kiddo. So ya don’t mind leavin’ yer new friends?”

“They weren’t friends. Just a bunch of dumb kids – at least some of them. Enid was kinda nice …”

“Oh-huh”, Daryl muttered with a teasing side glance, but Carl didn’t pay attention.

“I don’t think she likes me too much, but that’s okay – makes it easier to leave. And Ron and the others – they’re just a bunch of dickheads.”

Daryl gave an affirmative nod, but kept quiet.

“Know what, Daryl? I like that you never tell me to watch my language or something.”

“Anythin’ wrong with yer language?”

A grin tugged on the teenager’s mouth.

“Dad wouldn’t let me call people dickheads.”

“Pff, if that’s what they are, what else d’ya wanna call ‘em? Call a spade a spade ‘n’
everybody knows where ya stand. These ain’t no times for bein’ polite no more. Prob’ly never was.”

“Hey!” a female voice behind them drew their attention. “Is Rick up there with you guys?”

When Daryl and Carl turned around, they saw Tara standing at the foot of the ladder, accompanied by Eugene and a chubby blond woman.

“Whadda ya doin’ outta bed?”

“Standing here like an idiot asking questions I don’t get any answers to”, she snapped. “Is Rick up there – yes or no?”

“He’s in the tower. Whadda ya want?”

There was clearly another sassy remark on the tip of her tongue, but she chose to swallow it.

“I just wanted to let him know that we can leave any time he wants to. – I’m better.”

“Says who?”

“I do”, the blond woman cut in.

“The hell are you?” Daryl growled, but then he recognized her. “Oh, De-Denise, right?”

“You wanna keep calling me that or are you gonna grow up any time soon?”

“Whoa”, Carl muttered, his eyes flashing back and forth between Daryl and Denise, curious if this sparring match was going to continue.

This was way better than TV or comics.

“Carl, keep watch”, Daryl grumbled.

“But, dad”, Carl protested in an impulses. “Daryl”, he corrected quickly when Daryl’s eyes flicked to him and he noticed his slip.

“Earth to Daryl Dixon”, Tara’s voice drew the archer’s attention once more and reluctantly he focused on the little group at the foot of the ladder again.

“We ain’t up here ta catch some rays, Tara”, Daryl snapped. ”Bein’ on watch means yer supposed ta watch. Ya can talk ta Rick later.”

“But … There’s something else I need to tell him. It’s important.”

‘Yeah, jus’ like keepin’ our eyes open up here. So get off ma back with yer ‘but’s.”

The two women and Carl broke out laughing.

“Do you even know how that sounds?”

Tara grinned and wasn’t in the least impressed by Daryl’s killer scowl. She sobered up after a moment, but held his gaze, unwilling to back down.

Muttering something unintelligible under his breath, Daryl waved to Eugene.

“Hey, mullet man, come on up here. Got a job for ya that ya really gonna like.”
Eugene knew better than to protest against the dissing of his hair style and climbed up the ladder. As soon as he stood in front of Daryl, the archer pushed a gun in his hand and pointed to the area outside the wall.

“Since ya like watchin’ so much, this ‘s exactly what ya gonna do now. ‘m gonna talk to ‘em girls down there for a minute. Be right back.”

Eugene thought it best not to point out to Daryl that he didn’t like watching people that weren’t doing anything or any boring area with no people at all, who could possibly be doing anything. Instead the tall, sturdy man stood frozen with the gun in his hand and looked anything but happy about the new assignment.

“Hey”, Daryl gave him a nudge, “snap outta it. Got fear a’ heights or what?”

“No. But I most certainly do have fear of flying bullets and standing in this elevated position …”

“Word, man, anyone dares harm yer hair, ‘m gonna avenge it.”

He cast Carl a warning glance not to laugh. Pointing two fingers to his eyes and then to Alexandria’s surroundings he grumbled:

“Eyes out there, both a’ ya.”

That said he entrusted his post to the still anything but happy Dr. Porter and climbed down the ladder.

“’kay”, he said to Tara, “now, what’s so damn important that ya hadda come runnin’ here although yer supposed ta rest?”

“Like I said – I meant to tell Rick that we can leave. I’m well enough again.”

Daryl gave her a scrutinizing look. She did indeed look better – her cheeks had some color again and the dark circles underneath her eyes had disappeared.

“Ain’t jus’ up ta you. We still have ta gather the supplies we need ‘n’ check the RV … Anderson really let ya get up? He said ya still needed …”

“Pfff”, the blond girl interrupted and drew Daryl’s attention.

“Got somethin’ ta say?”

“Only that Dr. Anderson isn’t the man to be talking to, if you want a decent assessment of a patient’s condition.”

“Yeah, ya wanna run that by me in English? I already need a dictionary for what Dr. Mullet’s jabberin’ most a’ the time.”

Denise adjusted her glasses and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“Ohkay. Dr. Anderson’s a jackass who is shitfaced half of the day and shouldn’t even be treating goldfish, let alone people.”

An amused sparkle lit up in the archer’s eyes. There was something about that woman he really liked. She was an interesting mix of shy and confident that seemed to switch according to her mood.
Although shy for the most part, a good dose of anger obviously had her speak her mind and stand up for what she felt was right. It was a healthy balance. One Daryl respected. He didn’t appreciate people that were too self-assured, thinking they were better than the mere mortals, better than God himself even. *Pride goes before the fall*, they say, and it was these arrogant douchebags that in most cases fell first, because they never even expected a blow, never considered the possibility of making a mistake.

Denise here would stand her ground if she had to and apparently she was willing to do so not only for her own sake, but that of others just the same.

“So ya think yer assessment a’ Tara’s condition ‘s better?”

“I know it is. The concussion is only minor and although resting a while longer wouldn’t hurt, confining her to bed is not necessary.”

One of Daryl’s eyebrows went up.

“Yer a doctor?”

“Yes. No. Sort of.”

The second eyebrow followed and Denise hurried to add:

“I was in med school when … well, when things changed. I’m not a doctor yet, but I’m still a better choice than Dr. Anderson.”

“It’s actually been her who’s treated me these past days”, Tara cut in.

Something about the way her eyes were sparkling and a smile was playing around her lips rose Daryl’s suspicion.

“I want a word with ya in private”, the archer grumbled and then pulled the dark-haired woman to the side.

“Yer not here ta tell Rick that ya ready ta leave, right? Spit it out – what’s the important other thing ya was gonna talk ta him ‘bout?”

“Denise would like to come with us”, Tara replied flat out.

That caught Daryl off guard.

“Rick look like Moses to ya or what? This ain’t the Exodus.”

“It’s just one more person.”

There was a reaction in Daryl’s eyes that didn’t go unnoticed, but before she could probe deeper the archer picked up again.

“Ain’t a good idea, Tara. She …”

“I like her”, the young woman cut in, thinking this should say it all.

“Ya barely know her.”

“And that’s what I’d like to change. I’ve got a good feeling about her, Daryl. You have someone, so you wouldn’t know, but some of us are lonely. Even in a group of people.”
“Whoa, hold it. Ya jus’ met that girl ‘n’ yer thinkin’ ‘bout a relationship a’ that kind already?”

“Why not? The vibes are there, so it could be, in time. Didn’t you and Rick feel the same when you first met?”

“Yeah, sort of”, Daryl grumbled. “I tossed a bunch a’ squirrels at his head ‘n’ he pointed a gun in ma face.”

Tara broke out laughing.

“In some cultures that’s as good as being married.”
She sobered up again and pleadingly looked the archer in the eyes.

“Please, Daryl. I deserve the same chance on happiness as you.”

She knew she had won when he let out the air in one long puff.

“The hell ‘m I supposed ta say now? – ‘kay, tell ya what. ‘m gonna talk ta Rick, let him know what ya girls done cookin’ up here. But it’s his call, so no promises.”

A loud whistle from the top of the tower drew their attention and when they looked up, they saw Rick sticking his head out the window and holding his hand out, palm up, in the ‘What’s going on down there?’ gesture.

Daryl signaled ‘Hold it’, before he turned to Tara once more.

“Go back to the house and rest some more. Ya can take Doc Sweetheart there with ya for all I care. Soon as our duty here’s over we gonna meet ya girls there ‘n’ then ya best have a convincin’ story.”

“Better than the one just now? It convinced you”, she said sweetly.

“Yeah, but that was easy. I’m the romantic of this group.”

Tara started chuckling and then turned on her heels to head back to the house, Denise by her side. She never noticed Daryl following them with his eyes for a moment longer, muttering “What’s so funny?” under his breath.

From the window of the tower Rick watched Tara and a blond woman walk away, before Daryl looked up to him and signaled that he was coming up. Then the archer disappeared out of sight. A few minutes later the hatch in the middle of the floor opened and, panting, Daryl stuck his head through the opening.

“Permission ta come aboard?”

A smile tugged on Rick’s lips.

“Granted.”

Daryl climbed up and then let the lid fall shut.

“Man, they coulda built an elevator in this thing. ‘m too old for this shit.”

“Quit smoking”, Rick shrugged entirely unimpressed.

“Nah, I rather quit climbin’ stupid towers.”
He walked to the window and came to stand shoulder to shoulder with his partner. Silently he looked outside for a moment, trying to figure out how to break the news to Rick, when the leader spoke first.

“Why is Tara up? I thought she was supposed to still rest.”

“Uh-huh, she’s consulting a new doc now. Says she’s okay to be up.”

Rick pressed his lips together to a thin line and breathed in deep. Damn. Why did he have the feeling that things just got more complicated?

“Denise, huh?” he said softly.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Daryl’s head whip around, but Rick kept looking out the window, not daring to meet his partner’s eyes.

“Ya know her?”

Rick nodded slowly.

“She was in my vision. Carl …” His voice quivered, so he cleared it before he picked up. “Carl is gonna … would have been … damn. He got shot and Denise saved his life.”

“Makes her one a’ the good ones, huh?”

“Definitely.”

He turned his head to look Daryl in the eyes and could easily see that there was more. When the archer noticed the questioning expression he decided that offense was the best defense and said straight out:

“Think ‘em girls are hittin’ it off.”

He saw the reaction in Rick’s eyes and added:

“Know what ya gonna say – that they jus’ met ‘n’ we’re ‘bout ta hit the road, but …”

“Tara wants to stay, huh?” Rick cut in.

“Nope. Actually – Denise wants ta join us.”

Azure blue eyes widened and instantly Rick shook his head.

“No way. We’re more than a dozen already and you know how difficult it was last time to find water and food out there for everybody.”

“Still we made it.” Daryl looked at the leader calm and confident. “An extra pair a’ hands ‘s extra protection, too.”

“Not her hands. She’s a second Eugene – a good doctor, smart, but totally helpless out there.”

“Yeah? Funny – I heard ya told P.T. the other day that he saved Tara’s life on that run.”

When he saw Rick cock his head, which usually meant a clear warning or total confusion, Daryl added:

“Nothin’ stays a secret in this group for long. C’mon, Rick, Eugene stood his ground ‘n’ in time he might find some more courage under that stupid mullet. I dunno ‘bout Denise, but we can use a doctor ‘n’ …”
He stopped and visibly struggled for words.

*And she and Tara deserve a chance.*

Sappy emotional crap, dear God. Why did it still feel as though he had razor blades in his throat when he tried to talk about feelings … love, *romance.*

Why did those scars on his back start itching each and every time he dared think about a ‘happily ever after’ and even longed for it – for himself and others alike. Why did he flinch deep down inside when he felt the urge to hold Rick’s hand, to run his fingers through those curls, to kiss him tenderly? His father and Merle’s definition of ‘love’ took place below the waistline and if Will Dixon knew about all the times Daryl had done no more than hold his partner close at night, snuggle up with his head on Rick’s chest, listening to his heartbeat, interlace their fingers and …

“*Rot in hell, ya bastard*,” Daryl thought, shaking his head to get rid of the thoughts about his father.

Will may still be haunting him, but he couldn’t hurt him anymore. And Daryl would be damned if he still gave that man any power over his life and the way he led it.

“Tara really likes that girl, Rick. She’s even thinkin’ that step ahead already. Ya know …”

Rick sighed.

“I know. And she’s right – they will be a couple.”

A frown flashed over Daryl’s face when he processed that information.

“*Ya knew* that they’s gonna be a couple, but ya woulda jus’ left Denise behind?”

“God, Daryl, I’ve got a dozen lives to think of”, Rick defended his decision, while he ran a hand through his hair.

“We originally stayed a lot longer here and there was more than one new romance. But people are gonna die. Would you want me to hang around till Tara and Denise found each other, risking to lose lives in the meantime?”

Daryl looked at him silently for a long moment, while his thoughts tumbled over each other. Rick was right – saving lives was more important than the love between two people. But he couldn’t help wondering, couldn’t fight the sadness that washed over him all of a sudden. If he hadn’t met Rick back at the quarry, if it had been *their* fate to meet here in Alexandria instead, would Rick have turned his back and just left him behind, too? Would he have disappeared from Daryl’s life without a single glance, a single touch, a single word – never giving their love a chance? Leaving here may save their people’s lives, fact, but Tara was right – some of them were lonely, despite being in a group of people. What kind of life was it Rick meant to save? What kind of life would Daryl have led without Rick Grimes showing him what love was? He would have lived and died alone, without ever knowing what a beautiful, magical, fulfilling feeling being in love was. Just like Merle.

Daryl didn’t know if Tara had been in love before or Denise, but Tara was right – they deserved a chance on happiness. They all did.

“She gonna die?” Daryl asked flatly after that long silent moment.

He watched Rick’s jaw muscles work while the leader stared out of the window without answering.

“Rick, ‘s Denise gonna die?”
“I don’t know. The circumstances that originally led to her death are not given anymore, but that doesn’t mean …”

“Ya can do both”, Daryl cut in with a determined air. “Save lives and ‘em girls’ romance. If we take Denise along, ya got the chance on savin’ one life more.”

The ghost of a smile flashed over the leader’s face. He cast the older man a quick side glance before he resumed his observation of the outside world.

“Don’t look now, but I think I’ve just seen a romantic Dixon”, he teased.

“Ya need glasses, Grimes. All ‘m sayin’ is that we could use a doc, so savin’ Denise ‘n’ takin’ her along ‘s prob’ly a good idea.”

“Nope”, Rick said with a smile when he turned around and wrapped his arms around Daryl’s middle, pulling him close. “That’s not what you said.”

“Gimme a break, man.” Daryl struggled half-heartedly to writhe out of Rick’s embrace. “What’s the big deal?”

Something in Rick’s expression changed and he released Daryl, but they kept standing only inches apart from each other.

“So you’d take her along?” the leader asked seriously.

“Yes, it is.”

For the length of a heartbeat Daryl was stunned.

“They’re both over at the house, if ya wanna talk ta Denise.”

“I don’t have to. The decision’s been made.”

He turned back to the window and then put one arm around Daryl’s shoulders.

“Good call. I just hope we don’t have to save anyone else or that RV is gonna be bursting at the seams.”

An arm snaked around his waist and Daryl gently pulled him close, wordlessly leaning his head to the side of Rick’s. He savored this moment of closeness with his partner, happy in an almost odd way about having saved those girls’ future romance. He was truly happy for them. It was a pity that Will Dixon never knew that his youngest son wasn’t just a queer, but a romantic queer even. Maybe the old bastard would have had a stroke years ago, if he’d found out. They stood motionless wrapped in each other’s arm, listening to the other’s breathing and both indulging in the peace that had engulfed them for that one precious moment – until a sharp whistle from the wall let the rainbow bubble burst.

Simultaneously they released each other and cast an alarmed glance out of the window towards the gate.

“Hey!” Carl called out to them. “Come on, you guys, wrap it up. Eugene’s getting whiny.”

“Wrap it up?” Rick muttered with a frown. “What the heck does he think we’re doing up here?”
“Wrong question, man.” Daryl turned around to him and placed his palm flat on Rick’s chest. “Why ain’t we doin’ what he thinks we was doin’ up here?”

“Because this is a watch tower”, Rick replied, a tinge of regret clearly peppering his inflection.

“Uh-huh. Wanna hear Maggie and Glenn’s definition of watch tower?”

Despite himself Rick broke out laughing.

“I remember.”

The next second Daryl noticed the cerulean orbs nervously flash past him to what lay beyond Alexandria’s wall again, before they returned to his face. Daryl pulled Rick flush against him and then placed both hands to either side of his head.

“Why don’t we continue this conversation tonight in our own private watch tower over at the house?”

He touched his lips to Rick’s and for the length of an ardent kiss the leader was able to blind out the world and all dangers out there.

“That’s another good call”, the leader whispered to his partner and then reluctantly took a step back.

Daryl nodded towards the hatch.

“I best save whiny P.T. now b’fore Carl’s gonna push him off the damn wall. – Ya sure we still need the dude?”

A smirk tugged on Rick’s lips.

“For the time being.”

“Ain’t too sure that’s a good call”, he teased.

He reached out his hand one last time and Rick gently touched his fingertips to Daryl’s. Instantly he was painfully reminded of that wall in the Kingdom and this peaceful moment was destroyed once again. He had to get rid of these pictures, of the fear, the threat, their fate. Tomorrow morning at the break of dawn they were going to leave, no matter what.
Sentry duty was dull and boring, but neither Carl nor Daryl complained. As long as it was, it meant nothing was going on out there – no larger number of walkers were in sight and no hostile people, either. Dull and boring was great.

After they had run out of things to talk about – or rather after Carl had run out of things to talk about – they had played ‘I spy with my little eye’ for a while or made bets what hair color, gender or clothing the next walker that came into sight would have. But that got tiring after a few hours. Now and then Daryl looked up to the watch tower and a few times Rick had caught his gaze and had held it for a long moment, silently communicating with his partner. All alone up there Rick was bored to tears by now and all three of them wouldn’t have minded for someone to show up and take over.

As though their silent prayers had been answered, Sasha, Carol and Michonne came walking towards the gate around dinner time, all three of them armed and most obviously about to release them.

Even before any of the women had a chance to climb up the ladder, Carl had picked up his hat and fled from the observation platform as though his pants were on fire.

He ran past the trio with a strained “Gotta take a piss”, and was out of sight a moment later.

“You mean you need to go to the bathroom”, Carol called after him in the attempt to remind the boy of manners.

But as soon as she saw Daryl’s smirk she knew that she was fighting against windmills. The moment the archer had climbed down the ladder as well, he held his hand out to Carol for a high-five, but she just cast him a chiding glance.

“You’re turning the kids into savages.”

When his smile vanished and he let his arm drop, she knew that this had come out totally wrong. Before she could apologize he said:

“Ya know, Carol, first thing tomorrow mornin’ we gonna hit the road again. There ain’t gonna be no stupid bathrooms our there no more. The boy’s gonna hit the bushes jus’ like everybody else ta take a piss ‘n’ yer manners ‘s gonna sound nothin’ but ridiculous. Maybe I’m a savage ‘n’ ma way of talkin’ was inappropriate in the old world, but it’s dead on in this one.”

He meant to turn and walk away, but Carol’s hand on his arm stopped him.

“Sorry”, she said contritely. “You know I didn’t mean it the way it sounded.”

Daryl looked at her deadpan for a moment, then he nodded.

“Guess it’s ‘bout time we got outta this place. ‘s givin’ me the creeps.”

“So it’s decided? Tomorrow morning we’re gonna leave?”

“We gotta. Ready or not. Rick ain’t gonna make it through another day here without goin’ crazy.”

He cast a quick glance up to the tower and then turned to Sasha.

“Ya goin’ up?”
She replied with a curt nod.

“Good. Send him down, will ya? – He needs a break.”

“I’ll let him know you said that, papa Daryl”, Sasha remarked snappishly, before she turned and headed towards the tower.

After a few steps Daryl showed up by her side and, getting a firm grasp on her elbow, pulled her along.

“I want a word with ya.”

When they were out of earshot, he released Sasha’s arm and two sets of piercing eyes bored into each other.

“I know yer angry ‘n’ hurtin’ ‘cuz ya lost someone ya loved. Ain’t jus’ you. Save for Rick ‘n’ the kids, we’ve all lost the last of our kin, no exception. Maggie, Glenn, Tara ‘n’ I – we had siblings, too. And ‘chonne ‘n’ Carol had to bury their children. We all had someone ‘n’ now they’re all gone. Ya think ya own a monopoly on sorrow ‘n’ desperation?”

“Leave me alone. I don’t need your preaching.”

“Nah, what ya need is to understand that ya still got a family. All of us here, we ain’t blood, but we’re still yer family. And we all know exactly how ya feel, ‘cuz we’ve been there. So snap outta it, pull yerself together ‘n’ help protect that family, for Christ’s sake.”

Her expression even darkened.

“Are you done?”

Daryl’s eyes turned a deeper shade of blue when anger started boiling up inside.

“’s up ta you whether ya wanna listen or not. I jus’ want ya ta know that yer part a’ ma family ‘n’ if there’s anythin’ I can do ta help ya, I’m here. But ma man ‘n’ ma kids are part a’ that family, too, ‘n’ they mean the world ta me. If yer attitude or anything ya does puts them in danger, ya best run as fast as ya can.”

That said he turned on his heels and left Sasha standing. Gritting his teeth he climbed up to the observation platform once more, where Carol and Michonne had meanwhile taken up post.

“Everything okay?” Carol asked with a concerned glance to where Sasha had stood only a moment ago.

She was nowhere in sight any longer.

“We’ll see”, Daryl just said. “D’ya know if that RV is ready ta roll?”

“It is”, Michonne cut in. “Abe’s been working on it and we got all the supplies we need, too.”

“’kay. Looks like we’re set, so …”

The loud honking of a car horn in the distance had him fall quiet and drew their attention. Down the road a car was quickly approaching, honking time and again, apparently to signal the sentry by the gate to open up.
Daryl’s eyes turned as cold as glacier ice.

“Who’s that jackass? That noise draws the attention of every walker in the area – or worse.”

“Deanna’s scouts”, Michonne replied with a dark scowl. “I think Carter headed out today with Francine.”

“ Whoever the hell that even is”, Daryl muttered with blazing eyes, before he slid down the ladder and hurried to the gate.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Rick appear in the door of the tower and come running in his direction the moment Daryl pulled the gate open.

As soon as the car had passed, the archer quickly pushed the iron bars closed again. Already the first three walkers came stumbling towards them. Daryl cocked and loaded his crossbow, aimed through the bars and released the bolt in a quick, silent shot. It hit its target simultaneously with two shots – one from the tower and one from the wall – that hit the walkers straight in the face.

For a second he considered going out to retrieve the bolt, but dismissed the idea. He’d rather give that idiot behind the wheel a piece of his mind. The moment he turned to the car, he saw Rick pull the driver’s door open and grab Carter by the collar.

“Have you lost your freaking mind luring every walker in the area here with that noise?”

“Believe me”, Carter replied with wide, panicky eyes, “that handful of walkers there are far from being every walker in the area. I’ve seen them! Hundreds, thousands even.”

Rick felt a massive block of ice settle in the pit of his stomach.

“Where?”

“In a quarry, a few miles away. They’re locked in, but there’s no telling for how much longer.”

The leader closed his eyes for a moment and breathed in deep.

The walker horde that was going to overrun Alexandria! So this is where it would come from. Rick didn’t remember a quarry in his vision, didn’t remember how those walkers had gotten out – but they would, there was no doubt about it. They would.

Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week – and maybe they already had in this very moment.

“Go inform Deanna”, he ordered Carter and the other man didn’t even bother telling Rick that he wouldn’t take orders from him.

He’d been on his way to Deanna anyway and was just glad to get away from the gate, as well as Rick and his people.

As soon as the car had disappeared down the road, Rick met Daryl halfway. His agitation was palpable.

“Daryl, do me a favor. Find someone else to take over sentry duties and tell the group to meet up at the house. We need to leave tonight.”

“What’s goin’ on?”

“There’s a horde of walkers in a quarry nearby. They gonna overrun this place. I don’t know when, but they will. We need to get outta here. Now.”

“Damn, this day’s gettin’ better ‘n’ better”, Daryl grumbled. “Guess we ain’t gonna continue
our watch tower conversation then, huh?”

“Not tonight”, Rick replied with regret peppering his inflection.

“Huh. If ‘em walkers wasn’t dead already, I sure would like ta kill ‘em now. Damn spoilsports.”

He turned on his heels to head to the wall and alarm Carol and Michonne, when a hand grabbing him by the angel wing vest stopped him. The next second Rick’s lips were on his as the leader pressed a firm kiss to his mouth.

“I love you.”

That said Rick turned around and ran down the street, headed to their house, while Daryl’s eyes followed him for a second.

“I so wanna kill ya fuckers”, the archer cursed the horde of walkers, who had just ruined the last night their group would have spent here.

The last night for maybe a long time with a room, a door, a lock and shutters and drapes at the window.

An hour later the entire group down to the last person was gathered at house No. 1 once more. Tara was lying on the couch with Denise sitting on the edge of it, casting shy looks to the people around her. She had already gotten to know one or the other and they had been friendly enough, but still this was a kind of awkward situation. These people were a unit, a family, and they had known each other for months, years even. Feeling like an outsider wasn’t new to her, but so far she had made it a habit to just keep to herself, hide in her house and avoid trouble. Leaving Alexandria with these people would mean confinement with a group of strangers she couldn’t hide from. Being out there, outside the wall, where the walkers and God knew what else was lurking. Having to fight probably, although she didn’t know how. And not knowing if any of them would lift a finger to help her. Tara touched her hand reassuringly and cast her a warm smile and instantly Denise’s heart grew lighter. Taking these risks was definitely worth it.

“There is no easy way to say this”, Rick started, “but we can’t wait any longer. Carter came back an hour ago, reporting a huge horde of walkers only few miles from here in a quarry.”

“How huge?” Abraham tossed in.

“Thousands. They gonna break out, dollars to donuts, and they could come this way and overrun this place. I don’t know when, but definitely soon. Maybe they’re even already on their way. So we’re gonna leave right away.”

“We’re just gonna leave?” Maggie dared speak up. “Rick, there’s families here. Children.”

“We’ve got children, too, Maggie. And I’ve got our family to think of. That is the priority. It’s too late to do something and they wouldn’t listen to us anyway. I’m sorry, but this time I won’t make this town our responsibility. I can’t. Maybe they’re gonna be lucky and the wall is gonna hold. The herd might just pass them by or take another direction.”

He pulled in a deep breath.
“Either way – we’re leaving. Now.”

A light knocking cut him off and had everyone look to the front door. Daryl, who was standing closest to it, opened up and on seeing who it was stepped aside to let Aaron and Eric enter.

“Good evening”, Aaron said politely as usual, casting a warm smile to the gathered group. “I see you’re about ready to leave. Eric and I … we’ve been talking and thought things through.”

He looked at Daryl. “And if the offer still stands, we’d like to come along.”

It was deadly quiet in the room all of a sudden as everyone stared at the two men as though they had just grown a second head.

“What?” Rick croaked after a moment, hoping his hearing had just failed him or he was hallucinating things.

Irritated Aaron and Eric looked around themselves, before Aaron’s eyes came to rest on Daryl.

“You haven’t asked Rick before?”

“Daryl, can I have a word with you in private?” Rick cut in before the archer could answer Aaron’s question.

The situation was self-explaining anyhow.

“We can talk here”, Daryl replied. “Concerns all a’ ‘em.”

“I said outside.”

“Rick, ain’t a bunch a’ kids ya need ta keep things from. We’re ‘bout ta hit the road again ‘n’ leave a place behind that’s likely ta get overrun by walkers or attacked by groups a’ assholes. Ya said ‘twas right ta save Denise’s life.”

He pointed to Aaron and Eric. “I say it’s right ta save theirs, too.”

“Why?” Rick asked straight out, no longer caring that this discussion was taking place in front of everyone.

“’cuz they saved us first. At least for a while we had shelter, water ‘n’ food here, thanks ta them.”

“It was Deanna’s choice to let us in. I don’t see you trying to save her.”

Daryl pressed his lips together for a moment, before he grumbled.

“She’s like the rest a’ ‘em people here. Why d’ya think Denise wants ta leave or those two, despite the wall ‘n’ the supplies ‘n’ all? Maybe ya ain’t seen it or heard it, but I have. The gossip, the prejudiced looks, the hate. Why d’ya think Deanna sent Eric ‘n’ Aaron out there to recruit for her little perfect community? Let ‘em do the most dangerous job, where they’re not only up against the dead, but have ta deal with the livin’ as well? Not ‘cuz she thinks ‘em the most capable people ta do the job, but ‘cuz they’re expandable. They’re just the queers.”

There were several gasps and shocked looks on people’s faces and both Aaron and Eric were squirming uncomfortably now.
“Face the truth, Rick”, Daryl continued mercilessly, “you ‘n’ I, we woulda been scorned and spit at jus’ like ‘em as soon as these fine people here woulda noticed we’re a couple. Besides, Aaron ‘n’ Eric was the only ones who gave me a chance, talked ta me like I’s a human bein’. Of all ‘em peeps in this town they’re the only ones worth savin’. And Denise. That’s why they’re comin’ along. The rest a’ ‘em can go ta hell for all I care.”

Rick gritted his teeth while he looked into his partner’s blazing eyes. There he was again – the hateful, dark, angry, vengeful Daryl. The one Rick had never wanted to see surface again. That darker, heartless, merciless version of his lover scared him – this wasn’t the man he had fallen in love with. This was someone else. Alexandria evoked him, these people here did, just like the Saviors would in the future. And now more than ever before Rick wanted to leave.

Again one could have heard a pin drop, while Rick and Daryl just stared at each other, continuing their debate silently through looks alone. Abraham was close to opening a bet who was going to win. He would put his money on Daryl in a staring contest any day. If the archer was unwilling to back down – and it appeared as though there was no way Daryl would give in this time – then not even the devil himself would be able to stare him into submission.

Abraham couldn’t help wondering if Daryl was as fantastic a poker player as he thought he was.

“We only have that one RV, Daryl”, Rick picked up after what felt like a lifetime. “There’s no way sixteen people are gonna fit in there.”

“We have a car”, Aaron mentioned.

“They have a car!” Abraham said cheerful as though that would settle the entire matter.

Daryl cast him a killer scowl that carried a clear message:

*Keep out of this or there’s gonna be only fifteen people to consider.*

“Rick, four, maybe even five peeps can ride in that other car ‘n’ we have room for even more supplies. Aaron ‘n’ Eric were both out there long enough, know how ta fight, can handle themselves, know the outdoors.”

Rick sighed deeply. Just like before with Denise, he was clearly running out of reasons to say ‘no’. And after hearing what he just heard, he didn’t even mean to say ‘no’ any longer. If Daryl fought this fiercely for something, it was very important to him. And the man was right – Aaron and Eric deserved better, and two more battle-wise companions with knowledge of the outdoors were definitely a gain for their group.

The leader turned to the two men in question and let his eyes wander between the both of them and Denise. Then he said:

“The three of you – how many walkers have you killed?”

“None”, Denise croaked, not sure that was the answer Rick wanted to hear.

“A lot”, Eric answered for both of the men.

“How many people?” Rick continued.

“None”, Denise and Eric said in sync, while Aaron admitted: “Two.”

“Why?”
“Because they tried to kill me.”

Rick let the answers stand and his eyes wandered slowly over the assembled group.

“I don’t want to make this decision alone.”

His eyes flicked back to Daryl for a moment and there was something in the archer’s eyes that let Rick feel as though he was walking on very thin ice. He meant what he said – welcoming three more people into the group in their current situation was a big step and he wanted everyone’s approval for this. It concerned all of them and shouldn’t be his call alone. But saving those three people was highly important to Daryl. Any objection, regardless by whom, would result in a major conflict. The last thing they needed now was a fight within the group when the danger out there was already breathing down their neck.

“Is there anyone who doesn’t want Denise or Aaron and Eric to join us?”

“Yeah, anyone here who’s a total jackass jus’ like ‘em peeps out there?”

“Daryl – please.”

Rick pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger – and waited. Subconsciously he held his breath while he dreaded for someone to speak up. Ten seconds passed in silence, then twenty, thirty, but nothing happened. When the leader dared look into his people’s faces, he saw smiles, candid looks, relaxed features, but no objection.

“Looks like you’re part of this group now”, Rick said with a relieved sigh.

“Jeez, that was more awkward than the initiation at my college sorority”, Denise said with flushed cheeks.

“A lovely story for the road”, Sasha commented dryly, ignoring Daryl’s warning glance. “Speaking of the road – which way are we gonna go anyway?”

Damn. Rick rubbed both palms over his face to buy time and drive some of the newly building tension behind his forehead away. He didn’t have the answer to that question, didn’t have a clue where to go. He should have rolled that dice as Daryl had suggested or flip a coin, let coincidence decide, but he hadn’t. So once more it was up to him to make a decision.

“Your guess is as good as mine”, he chose to be honest. “I think we all agree that going back is out of the question. South is the one direction that is totally ruled out – there’s nothing for us back there. The Saviors and those other communities are to the west and we need to stay clear of them. East is an option, but it’s not too far to the ocean – that’s a dead end and not far away enough from Alexandria. I’d say north. To Pennsylvania, maybe even further.”

“I’m originally from Ohio”, Denise slipped, blushing once again when she wondered why the heck she had said that now.

“My place of origin happens to be Texas”, Eugene said flatly.

“Yeah, great”, Daryl growled, “‘n’ I’m from Georgia. If we find someone from each a’ the other forty-seven states, we can start a fuckin’ beauty contest. Or we could just pack up and hit the road already.”
“I second that”, Rosita said and was on her feet the next moment.

As though she had started a landslide, people one by one jumped to their feet and grabbed bags, boxes and supplies to carry them to the cars. In no time it was a busy running in and out as though someone had poked a stick into an ant nest. Only Tara headed into the back of the RV to lay down in one of the bunks, following doctor’s orders, while Rick used the now deserted couch to lay Judith down and change her diaper. The little girl was tired and whiny and would probably fall asleep as soon as the car was rolling, so riding at night was a good idea in more than one respect.

A shadow behind his shoulder let Rick look up a moment later. Daryl was standing silently behind him, watching him take care of their daughter, but the smile that usually played around his lips on these occasions wasn’t there now.

“What is it?” the leader asked, afraid that something had happened again or that there was a new problem he’d have to deal with.

“If someone had said ‘no’, would ya’ve left ‘em?” Daryl replied sullenly.

Rick sighed.

“Dunno. It didn’t happen, did it?”

“Coulda.”

“Like you said – best cross each bridge when we get there, right?”

He had finished putting Judith’s pants back on and picked the girl up now. While she placed her head wearily on his shoulder, he stood and faced his partner, who apparently wasn’t willing to let the topic rest yet.

“Ya know, the three a’ them – they’re good people. Ain’t nothin’ wrong with ‘em, but ‘em douchebags in this town, they treated ‘em like shit, said offensive stuff, hurt ‘em ‘cuz they’re … they’re like us, Rick. In love with someone of their own gender. That ain’t no reason ta hate no one. Ain’t no reason ta leave ‘em behind ta die, either.”

His expression was dark and hard, barely able to conceal the anger that was boiling underneath the surface.

“If someone woulda said ‘no’, ’s what they’d wanted us ta do – leave ‘em behind ta die. I think in that case we woulda taken the wrong people along.”

“Daryl!” Rick looked at his partner with a mixture of shock, anger and fear.

“That’s our group, our family you’re talking about. No one said ‘no’, okay? So, please, snap out of this. I know you’ve had bad experiences with homophobic people …”

“I grew up with ‘em”, the archer snapped.

“I know.” Rick placed a hand on his partner’s shoulder, knowing that physical contact with him usually calmed Daryl when he was agitated and about to spin out of control.

“I know there’s scars that run deep and this town and how you were treated here – and those three – probably reopened some of them. But I’m sure there’s good people among the Alexandrians, too.”

“Nah. They’re all alike.”
“You don’t know them well enough to say that. Please, stop working up that hate and fury. That’s not you. – And no one here is your father, Daryl.”

Rick saw the reaction in his partner’s eyes and knew that he had just stirred up a hornets’ nest, so he hurried to add:

“What they did, whatever they said – including your old man – don’t let them win. You’re better than them. You have a heart of gold and a beautiful soul and that’s why I love you. I cannot lose you. Not again.”

The sadness in his inflection seemed to get through to Daryl and the angry glow in his eyes subsided.

“Again?”

“In that damn vision I saw you turn into a darker version of yourself, too. Just like now there was so much fury and hate and the urge for revenge – I barely recognized you anymore.”

The hand on Daryl’s shoulder moved to the back of the archer’s neck and rested there, applying warm and gentle strokes.

“Let’s get outta here now, whadda you say? We just leave this place and the people that caused the pain and never look back. We’re gonna start over, somewhere new, with that crazy bunch out there.”

He leaned in and touched his lips to Daryl’s in a tender, feather-light kiss.

“Why don’t you try to leave your father here, too?”

“Would serve him right”, Daryl grumbled. “And them.”

The thought of this uptight, white-picket-fence neighborhood and its bigot people having to deal with Will Dixon – and vice versa – oddly made Daryl feel better. A malicious little smile tugged on the corners of his mouth. Oh yes, he definitely liked that thought.

It was amusing enough for fury and hate to be pushed into the background, at least for the time being. More than forty years of trauma weren’t healed and forgotten this easily. But the sadness and panic he had seen in Rick’s eyes on remembering that ‘darker version’ of his lover was reason enough to try and bury that part of him deep down inside and never let it surface again.

Abraham stuck his head through the front door and on seeing them standing so close in the middle of the living room, he commented with a smirk:

“You’re coming?”

He apparently thought the innuendo was hilarious. And despite the eyeroll they couldn’t help, both Rick and Daryl actually thought it was.

The archer took a step back and picked up his crossbow, slung it over his shoulder and followed Abraham outside without looking back. He wasn’t leaving anything behind here that he’d miss. Rick ran a hand softly over Judith’s back, listening to the soft breathing of the sleeping little girl, and couldn’t help a sigh.

He wouldn’t have minded for their journey, their search to come to an end. For Judith and Carl he would have loved to find a place where they could grow up without being exposed to the walkers on a daily base, without knowing hunger and having to run. But Alexandria had just been another pit stop.

“Better luck next time”, he muttered.
Then he placed a loving kiss on his daughter’s hair and followed Daryl outside. A moment later the door fell closed behind him.
It was almost dark when the two vehicles pulled up to the front gate – Aaron’s car in front, followed by the RV.
They had had a short briefing before they had all gotten into the cars and started their journey, and after looking at a map with Aaron making suggestions which route to best take, Rick had decided for him to take the lead and show the way.
Aaron and Eric had lived in Alexandria ever since the outbreak and they had thoroughly explored this area. If anyone knew each and every road, every shortcut and every alternative route in case one was blocked, it was them.

There hadn’t been any discussions as to who got to ride in which car. It made no sense for fourteen people to try and squeeze into the RV and leave the back seats of the car unoccupied, so Michonne and Sasha had instantly agreed to ride with Aaron and Eric. Or rather Sasha had instantly agreed to ride in the front car – she still barely slept, was still driven by this immense bitterness and fury and didn’t feel too comfortable together with her group at the moment. She had made it her job to be the group’s eyes and ears instead to make sure no danger could possible sneak up on them ever again – none of the kids were going to lose their sibling, none of the lovers were going to lose their partner. Not on her watch. So riding in the first car made sense.
Michonne had shared a room with Sasha this past week and had probably seen the most of her. She didn’t like what she saw. Sasha was like a seething volcano about to erupt any moment – the rumbling was there and the smoke and thus clear signs of danger. Maybe she would calm down again and regain her balance. And maybe she was going to go off and do something entirely stupid, something that may not only endanger her, but the group as well. Someone had better keep an eye on her and Michonne figured she didn’t have anything better to do anyway, so why not accept that assignment?

Tobin, a middle aged man with receding hairline, walked up to Aaron as soon as the two vehicles had come to a stop and cast him a surprised glance.

“It’s getting dark”, he stated the obvious, “are you boys sure you wanna head out on a recruiting trip?”

Only now he realized that Eric was sitting in the passenger seat and that there were two more people in back. With a frown he cast a glance to the RV and saw a grinning Abraham behind the wheel, waving at him.

“What’s going on?”

“Rick’s group is leaving. And Eric and I, we’re gonna go with them.”

“Leaving, huh? Going where?” Tobin asked, apparently not catching on.

“Away”, Sasha grumbled in the back seat and then cast the man a dark look. “Open the gate already.”

Aaron looked at her in the rear view mirror and made a soothing gesture.

“Just a moment, please.”

He opened the door and got out.

“Tobin, Deanna knows we’re leaving and she approves. You can check with her, but I doubt this group is willing to wait that long. We’re leaving Alexandria and we’re not coming back.”
“Why?”

“That doesn’t matter now. What matters is that you listen to me for a moment. Rick and some of his people were out there, same as Eric and I, and we’ve seen disturbing things. There’s hostile groups out there, hordes of walkers – keep your eyes and ears open, be prepared for an attack, talk to Deanna about training people for combat or allowing weapons throughout town.”

Aaron wasn’t surprised when he saw a frown appear on Tobin’s face. What did he expect? For the man to just believe him and instantly turn on his heels to do as he suggested?

“Be safe”, Aaron closed with a sigh, before he got into the car again.

A moment later the gate was opened and Tobin watched with wide eyes as the two vehicles rolled passed him and disappeared into the twilight.

Lost in thought he pulled the iron bars closed again and still stared down the street long after the taillights had disappeared out of sight.

Seeing that group leave sure was the last thing he would have expected. On the contrary. They had come over this town like a force of nature and if anything, he would have expected them to take over and run this place sooner or later. Rick appeared to be a strong leader, that Abraham dude had practically taken over the construction team in one day and led that group way better than Tobin had ever been able to and they all had worked hand in hand like a clockwork. These people seemed to know what they were going, what they wanted and they didn’t shy away from confrontations, work or problems.

If they left, if they ran, there had to be a good reason. Or rather, a very alarming reason.

Hordes of walkers, hostile groups … Maybe Aaron hadn’t exaggerated – after all, he and Eric were the ones who’d been out there the most. If anyone knew, it was them. Whatever they had seen, it scared them enough to pack up and leave this place along with the strongest group Tobin had ever come across.

“Francine!” he called to the woman up on the observation platform. “Go get Scott and tell him to bring a sniper rifle.”

“What for?”

“I think we had best have someone in that watch tower from now on, too, and he’s our best shot.”

“We need to be on guard more”, he added to himself.

Aaron may be right. After all, only this afternoon Carter had come back with alarming news about a huge number of walkers in the area and now Rick and his group had left like rats would leave a sinking ship.

Talk to Deanna. Convince her to train people, be prepared, keep their eyes and ears open … Tobin made a mental note to go see their leader first thing tomorrow morning. It wouldn’t hurt.

It was quiet inside the RV despite a dozen people being present. No one said a word. They were all lost in their own thoughts.

As soon as the cars had passed the gate and Alexandria had disappeared out of sight, the thought had sunk in that there was no turning back now. They were out on the road again, headed into terra incognita with an unknown fate ahead of them.

Soft, cozy beds, running hot water, electricity and full fridges lay behind them, and there was no telling when they would see anything like that again. If ever.

Reality had caught up to Rick’s group.
The past week had been a break, a breather, a vacation to Disneyland, but the real world didn’t look like that anymore. They had better come to terms with the fact that as of now they would sleep on the ground again, eat squirrel and opossum at best and would soon be the dirty and reeking bunch again they had been before. Until they found a new home, a place to stay – a place where they could build their own world and hopefully finally find some peace. No one wanted to think of the possibility that their journey might never end.

Thoughtfully, Carol cast a glance out of the windshield at the road that stretched out before them, before she turned to Rick and said unexpectedly:

“You were wrong. But you were still right.”

No more was said. It was a kind of mysterious thing to say, but Rick understood her instantly and it made his heart beat a little lighter. Ten minutes into their ride he walked into the back of the RV to where Tara was lying on one of the two bunks and gently lowered Judith to her side. The little girl needed to sleep and someone there with her would protect her from falling off the bed or getting scared or lonely. At least the baby should have the rest everyone else was unlikely to get that night. Tara drowsily opened one eye when she noticed the movement next to her and for a moment she was surprised to find the little girl by her side. Then she simply shrugged, yawned heartily and with her arm wrapped protectively over the little bundle went back to sleep.

For a moment longer Rick remained standing in the doorway and just looked at this heartwarming picture. It was soothing to know that his children would be taken care of, even if anything should happen to him and Daryl one day. Both Judith and Carl had numerous aunts and uncles in this group and each and every one of these people would do everything they could to protect them and provide as good a living as only possible. They were all of them a blessing.

“There’s an empty bunk back there”, Rick said softly when he returned and squeezed into the gap between Glenn and Daryl on one of the benches.

It was an unvoiced prompt for someone to just go and take a nap, but no one reacted. Rick tried to get somewhat comfortable in the little space each of them had, but there was no doubt that this would definitely going to be a long night. The two benches to either side of the RV just weren’t long enough to offer enough room for four adults. Daryl, who hated being cramped in anywhere, had scooted back into his corner as far as only possible and Rick almost expected him to get up any second and opt for sitting in the kitchen sink or the closet, if only he had some room to breathe.

More than his partner, the leader pitied his son and Carol who had to share the limited space with Eugene and Denise, who both of them weren’t exactly slim. For a moment Rick was distracted from his own discomfort when Eugene tried to move into a bearable position in between Rosita’s backrest and Denise, thereby bumping against the Latina’s seat and the blond woman time and again. Carl at the other end of the row almost fell off his seat, while Rosita cast a furious glance over her shoulder when she was pushed towards the dashboard repeatedly.

“Eugene! For crying out loud, sit still already.”

“My apologies for the inconvenience. I’m experiencing difficulties to adjust to the limited space.”

“Yeah, I don’t care. Either you stop bumping into my seat, or you can go sit in the toilet.”
Rick noticed more than one hopeful look on people’s faces around him and Daryl first of all seemed to seriously consider claiming the toilet for private accommodation.

“Okay”, the leader addressed the other seven people on the benches. “There is absolutely no reason for all of us to sit here like a bunch of sardines in a can, when there’s a bunk empty in back.” He turned to Maggie.

“Go lie down.”

“Why me?”

“Because you are …”

“Don’t say pregnant”, she warned him. “Pregnancy is not a disease and I don’t want to be treated like I was made of glass for nine months straight now.”

“Someone’s gotta go first”, Rick insisted. “We can take turns, if that makes you feel better, but please, just go. And take Glenn with you, so we’ll get some space here.”

Maggie exchanged a glance with Glenn and when she still didn’t move, Daryl growled:

“Ya ain’t in there on the count a’ three, I’m gonna go. Last chance.”

With the ghost of a smile the young woman stood and pulled her husband off the bench. Instantly Rick felt a wave of relief and he moved over a tad to make room for Daryl. The young couple disappeared into the back of the RV and in one quick flowing motion Carol slipped over to the other side and signaled Daryl that she’d like to sit next to him, so Rick scooted over some more. With a grin Abraham cast a glance into the rear view mirror repeatedly and commented dryly:

“Want me to put music on since you seem to be playing Musical Chairs back there?”

“Eyes on the road, ginger”, Daryl grumbled, not in the least in the mood for any teasing remarks.

He couldn’t help thinking that taking along three more people may not have been such a great idea after all. Or that they had best just leave Abraham and Eugene.

The situation was definitely better, now that Maggie and Glenn had left and for a while there they rode in silence again. It was Denise who revived the conversation when she turned to Eugene and asked:

“So, you’re from Texas?”

“That is correct.”

When he didn’t offer any more information, she shrugged and said:

“They tell me you’ve got several doctoral degrees?”

“That is correct.”

Irritated she looked around herself and saw the others suppress a smirk. Carl wasn’t too successful and started chuckling helplessly. Denise adjusted the glasses on her nose and picked up again, opting to share some information about her own background, but that barely changed the length or contents of Eugene’s replies. In the end
she nudged his shoulder with her own and cast him a smile.

“You don’t happen to be a Trekkie, do you?”

That caught him off guard and for a moment he stared at her as though she had asked him for a barbecued ermine.
Not waiting for an answer Denise added:

“I swear, you would have rocked every Star Trek convention as a Data cosplayer. Save for the mullet that is.”

Carl almost choked on the laugh he tried to suppress and the faces of everyone around visibly derailed, while Eugene just stared at the young woman at a total lack for words.
Daryl stretched his legs and leaned back in this seat, feeling visibly more at ease now. Bringing that girl along apparently had been a pretty good idea – she was funny and she managed to make Eugene shut up for a while. Both were definitely a bonus in addition to her medical skills.

It grew quiet again, save for one or the other yawn as fatigue started to get the better of them. The sun had set and darkness had swallowed the RV and the car in front, their head- and taillights the only thing visible out there at all.
The trees stood like black, impenetrable walls to either side of the road and for a moment the uneasy, eerie feeling in Rick’s stomach returned. It unnerved him not to know what exactly was lurking out there, whether they were headed straight into a trap or a herd of walkers. But they couldn’t stop. Before they had left they had agreed on driving all through the night to put as many miles as only possible between Alexandria and themselves. And they would stick to that plan.

Half an hour passed in silence, then forty-five minutes, and the longer they rode with the monotone noise of the engine lulling them in, the more often Rick noticed his son’s eyelids droop.
Just when he considered waking Tara, so the boy could lie down for a while, Carl slid off his seat and nonchalantly stretched out in the middle of the aisle. He took his hat off and covered his face with it, tucked one arm underneath his head and was fast asleep only seconds later.

“Damn”, Daryl whispered. “I’s jus’ gonna do that.”

And knowing Daryl, Rick didn’t think this was a joke.

Carol reached to the small light over the kitchen counter that illuminated the room and turned it off. Instantly it was dark inside the RV with the light from the dashboard the only source of illumination.

“Abraham”, Rick whispered to the red-haired man. “Are you still okay to drive?”

“Yup, no problem.”

“Good. Wake me as soon as you need a break.”

He only hoped that Aaron would do the same. The last thing they needed now was for one of the cars to end up against a tree or in a ditch.
In the darkness and silence embracing them like a blanket, Rick leaned against his partner and rested one hand gently on Daryl’s thigh. Instantly the archer’s hand got a hold of it and interlaced their fingers, while he turned his head to press a loving kiss to his partner’s temple.

“You’re okay?” Rick whispered to him and felt a tiny nod in response.

He wasn’t able to see Daryl’s face, but nevertheless Rick knew that this simple nod was the truth. Despite the little space and the crowd in the RV and the fact that they were exposed to the night and
its dangers, Daryl was more *okay* out here than he had been this past week in Alexandria. That town had probably made the archer feel like a fish out of water – unable to breathe, unable to move. He had just been released back into his element and the woods outside the window didn’t scare him at all. On the contrary – he felt like coming home. Rick thought he could feel Daryl smile.

The leader didn’t realize he had fallen asleep until the RV stopped and voices by the side entrance woke him. Alarmed his eyes flew open, but Rosita’s face and her soothing smile right in front of him made him relax instantly.

“Everything okay”, she assured him. “The other car is just switching drivers and Abraham needs a break, too.”

Rick gave a curt nod and tried to get oriented. Only now he realized that he had slipped to the side and his head had come to rest on Daryl’s shoulder, while the archer had scooped down in his seat far enough to rest his head on the backrest. He was still asleep, softly snoring with his mouth gaping open, while he held firmly on to Rick’s hand. On the other one of his broad shoulders, Carol had rested her head and was equally fast asleep. Rosita’s smile widened.

“I wish I had a camera”, she commented. “This is downright cute.”

“Don’t let Daryl hear that”, Rick whispered back to her. “*Cute* isn’t exactly what he likes to be called.”

“Ya can say that again”, the deep baritone of the archer muttered even before the shadow blue eyes opened.

He gave Rick’s hand a last squeeze, before he pulled back and reached out to Carol instead to gently nudge her shoulder.

“Hey, wake up. Ya need ta find a new pillow.”

“Nope”, she muttered still half asleep, “I like my pookie pillow.”

Daryl pulled a face when Rosita started giggling.

“First *cute* ‘n’ now this. Sun ain’t up yet ‘n’ ya girls done embarassin’ me twice already. Can’t wait for the rest a’ the day.”

He pushed Carol gently aside and stood the same moment Rick got up, too, visibly suppressing a smirk. There were definitely worse things to wake up to than Daryl being called *cute or pookie pillow*.

Once the change of seats had started, everybody was engaged in playing *Musical Chairs* again. Maggie and Glenn got back up and left the bunk to Rosita and Abraham, while Daryl and Rick moved to the front seats, where the leader slipped behind the wheel. All the while Carl remained lying in the middle of the aisle, unfazed by the fact that everybody had to climb over him and more than once the tip of a shoe kicked him unintentionally. He just grunted, turned on his side and tried to go back to sleep.

In the front car Michonne had taken over the wheel now and as soon as everyone was settled, the little convoy started rolling again.

Rick had no idea where exactly they were, but he couldn’t have cared less. They weren’t in Alexandria anymore and by now miles and miles away from it. That was all that mattered.

They had been driving for about fifteen minutes, when the thud of a pillow hitting someone’s head
and Rosita’s annoyed voice calling “Eugene!” startled everyone out of their slumber and had Rick look in the rearview mirror.
Daryl switched the small reading light above his head on and cast a glance over his shoulder. Eugene was standing in the door to the rear part of the RV, totally unimpressed by the pillow that had hit him or the fact that he was annoying the heck out of people again. The next moment Tara’s chided:

“Are you two for real? This is hardly the time and place to … There’s a baby in here!”

“Yeah”, Abraham commented dryly, “and Judith. So?”

The next pillow flew. This time it was Tara’s hitting Abraham square in the face, shortly before little Judy woke up and started crying.
Daryl was out of his seat in a flash and darted to the rear, practically jumping over Carl in the process.

“Eugene – sit!” he ordered, while he pushed the taller man out of his way. “If ya don’t stop that, yer gonna ride on the roof from now on. Ya can watch all ya want up there.”

Again Eugene was tempted to point out that watching *trees* wasn’t anything that could spark his interest, but he thought better of it and just returned to his seat.

Daryl entered the rear and in the twilight cast a glance in Abraham and Rosita’s direction – and said nothing. After all, he was one of the guys who rubbed together more than just noses the other night with the entire group in the same room. People living in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. And who could blame those two? He would have loved to continue his and Rick’s *watch tower* conversation that night and now there was no telling when they would ever have but a single private moment again.

“Keep it down”, he just grumbled, before he turned to the other bunk and reached for whiny Judith.

“Gimme ma baby”, he said to Tara before she had a chance to say anything, “stuff some toilet paper in yer ears ‘n’ go back to sleep.”

“Whoa, wait a second”, the young woman protested. “Are you really gonna let them …”

“Ain’t lettin’ no one do nothin’. I ain’t the zoo keeper round here, although that position definitely needs ta be filled.” He rolled his eyes. “Yer old enough, Tara, deal with it yerself. I got somethin’ better ta do.”

He placed a kiss on Judith’s head and bounced her soothingly on his arm to calm her. Then he left the room and headed back to the front.
After he had lowered himself in his seat, he sat the little girl on his lap and wrapped her securely in his arms, still gently rocking her. She snuggled up, tucked her thumb in her mouth and in mere seconds went back to sleep.
A smile spread over Rick’s face, while he reached up and switched the reading light off.

“The magical Daryl touch”, he whispered with an affectionate inflection.

“Yeah? Good thing ‘s only workin’ with her. If ya fell asleep each time I touched ya, we’d never gonna have no watch tower conversations again.”

Rick chuckled.

“Horrible imagination.”

“Ya can say that again.”
After that it was quiet again in the RV as the two cars headed into the night and covered mile after mile. At the break of dawn, when the first shy rays of sunlight peeked through the trees and colored the horizon orange and yellow, Rick suddenly reached out and placed a hand on Daryl’s arm. The archer had dozed off for a moment, but was instantly awake when Rick’s touch alarmed him. He cast his partner a side glance and was met by happy shining azure blue eyes and a wide smile.

“Look.”

Rick pointed out the windshield and when Daryl followed the way his index finger pointed, he saw a street sign a couple of yards ahead.

*Welcome to Pennsylvania*

“State line”, Rick said as though an immense weight had been lifted off his chest.

Daryl wasn’t quite as euphoric.

“What difference does it make? There’s walkers here, too. And maybe the same kind a’ bastards as that Negan dude.”

Rick’s smile didn’t falter.

“Maybe, but *that Negan dude* is not here and that counts. Nothing of what I’ve dreamed is here. It’s an entirely new state, so it’s gotta be a new fate, too. And it’s the keystone state, Daryl. This is where our country was founded, so I think it’s pretty symbolic that we’re gonna start over new here.”

“Fine. But I ain’t buildin’ no house for some stupid broken bell or crap, jus’ so ya know.”

Rick suppressed a laugh and held out his hand, palm up.

“Deal.”

Lightly, in order not to wake the sleeping child on his lap, Daryl slapped the extended hand and then held on to it. They kept on driving into the sunrise and with each mile, Daryl’s heart grew lighter, too. Rick was right. This was a new state, a new fate, a new chance. They could start over new here, far away from all the douchebags in and around Alexandria. Whatever they would find here, it had to be better than what they left behind. When the sun had come up over the horizon both Rick and Daryl greeted it with a hopeful smile.
Chapter 25

An hour after they had passed the state line, both cars had stopped by the roadside. The woods had opened to wide meadows and fields and the early morning sun warmed the sixteen people sitting on the ground, enjoying their breakfast. Or rather – they had their breakfast. Enjoy would probably have been an exaggeration.

Rick chewed on his half of an apple he shared with Carl and couldn’t help feeling guilty. Back in Alexandria they would have had scrambled eggs and bacon now, hash browns, toast with butter and coffee even. Here it was back to a meager ration of whatever was available, having to be mindful of their supplies and probably never seeing coffee and the likes again in their life. The vacation was over and as of now they had to bear the bleak everyday hassle again.

It was the only way to save his people and Rick had urged them to leave Alexandria for their own good, but that didn’t make him feel any better. He remembered all the times both he and Lori had said ‘no’, when Carl had begged for chocolate or any other kind of candy. They had meant well, had figured too much sugar wasn’t good for their child, but the sad and disappointed look in Carl’s eyes never stopped hurting. And right now Rick felt as though he had said ‘no’ to fifteen people longing for candy and that hurt, too.

It was quiet, save for Judith’s happy attempts to point out a flower in the grass next to her or a butterfly that flew by in that moment. She was the only one who’d had a good night’s sleep and this just now was a wonderful sunny morning with all the people who loved her around, having a picnic. No reason to be sad, nothing to worry about.

There was no one who wouldn’t have loved to see the world through the eyes of a child again, if only for a day.

Sasha sat to the side with her back turned to the rest of the group, silently brooding the way she usually did lately, when she wasn’t busy lashing out at the world. Denise had watched her for a while, still trying to figure her new companions out to get acquainted. Sasha was a challenge, just like Daryl and Eugene. She had never seen so many different people in one group before and the labels she had passed out so far varied from ‘friendly’, ‘cute’ or ‘very likable’ to ‘odd’, ‘mysterious’ and even ‘hostile’.

Leaning closer to Tara, who was sitting right next to her, she said quietly:

“What’s up with her?”

“She just lost her brother. He was the last of her family and they were pretty close. She isn’t coping too well.”

Denise acknowledged that with a nod and took another bite from her piece of bread, thoughtful looking at Sasha’s back. Unexpectedly she pushed the rest of her meal into Tara’s hand and stood.

“You can have it, if you like.”

Without waiting for an answer she walked over to Sasha.

“That seat taken?” she joked, pointing at the spot on the ground next to the black woman, but she wasn’t able to trigger the tiniest smile.

Sasha cast a dark look up to her and then focused on the tip of her shoes again. Not waiting for permission, Denise lowered herself to Sasha’s side and said friendly:
“I don’t think we’ve met yet. – I’m Denise.”

“I know who you are.” Hostile. Clearly hostile. “Whadda you want?”

“Just came to say hello, since we haven’t talked yet.”

“Does it look as though I feel like talking?”

“It looks as though you are sad – and angry. I thought maybe I could help.”

Sasha gave a derisive snort.

“I haven’t talked to them”, she pointed her thumb over her shoulder to the rest of the group. “And they’re my friends. Why would I talk to you?”

Denise remained calm and kept looking at the aggressive young woman just as friendly as before. She’d been trained for this. Originally the plan had been to become a surgeon and that’s what Denise had attended med school for. But she wasn’t made for the pressure, the responsibility, couldn’t deal with people dying on the table in front of her although she had done everything in her power to save them. So she had figured since she couldn’t treat people’s bodies, maybe she could help in a different way – by healing their souls.

She had heard and seen worse than Sasha’s unfriendly outburst just now.

“Sometimes it’s easier talking to a stranger instead of a friend.”

She had meant to say ‘instead of friends and family’, but she reconsidered and rather swallowed the ‘family’ part.

“You’re a shrink or something?” Sasha snapped.

“I had some training, yes, but …”

“And now you’re making me your post-apocalypse project or what? Don’t you have patients enough out there? Believe me, there’s more people than just me who need a shrink these days.”

She was wise enough not to say any names, although she felt like lashing out at everything and everyone.

“This isn’t supposed to be a session. I just meant to talk to you, get to know you, offer my help as the newbie in this group. They tell me you’ve lost your brother?”

Sasha turned away when the new pain caused an irritating stinging sensation in her eyes. She stared into the distance.

“What’s it to you?”

“I’ve lost my brother, too. “

“Yeah? Then you should know how I feel.”

Denise cast her a calm side glance and then shook her head.

“Actually, no, I don’t. I can understand the sadness, but I don’t get the anger and that you push the people away that are still by your side. That fury is only hurting you further. And being brave and angry is a dangerous combination.”

She sighed deeply.
“My brother was like that. It got him killed in the end.”

“Maybe he’s the lucky one”, Sasha croaked. “He got to go first. Wasn’t doomed to be left behind in this.”

“I think you’re seeing it the wrong way. Being the last of your kin is a privilege, not a curse. I mean, think about it – you’re the only one of that blood line now, the only one who still remembers your family members, knows what they looked like, what their names were. Only you could tell stories about them, keep their memory alive so they will not be forgotten. How can you give up? You are their immortality. This is important, this is your task now – your meaning. You are the keeper of a legacy and you should be proud, not angry.”

Sasha turned her head and looked at the blond woman as though she had lost her mind. Proud to be the last of a family? Was she really a psychiatrist or had she spent too much time on the couch herself?

Before she had a chance to snap at Denise again, the chubby woman beat her to it.

“His name was Dennis”, she said in a choked voice. “He was a tad older than me – by six minutes. We’ve always been together and then … then he just wasn’t there anymore. But I still remember and he’s a part of me, so he’s not really gone.”

Her eyes were moist when she cast a smile at Sasha.

“What was your brother’s name?”

For a moment the other woman still seemed to struggle, but then her features softened suddenly and she pulled in a deep breath.

“Tyreese. But everybody used to call him Ty.”

“Was he older or younger?”

“Older. And he was a huge teddy bear.” She chuckled despite herself. “I had him pretty much wrapped around my finger since the day I was born.”

The tension dissolved more and more and soon the two women were chatting about their brothers and tossed in one or the other story about other family members as well. With each passing moment, each story shared, Sasha’s heart grew a little lighter.

Nothing would ever take the sadness away entirely and she would always miss Ty until the day she’d follow him. But the rage inside of her slowly died down and what was a raging wildfire before turned into softly glowing embers.

Denise actually felt happy in a way she hadn’t for a long time. Up until now she had figured no one still needed a psychiatrist in a world like this. But with all the horrors and loss every survivor had to cope with these days, maybe a psychiatrist next to good friends was exactly what was needed.

Behind her back Maggie secretly wiped a tear out of the corner of her eye, while the rest of Rick’s group exchanged meaningful looks.

Nobody had ever seen their meaning in this world through Denise’s eyes. If they were being honest, they had all wondered at some point why they kept up the fight and for whom. And now they were the keeper of a legacy, of memories, of names and faces nobody else still remembered.

“I feel pretty important right now”, Abraham joked in the attempt to lighten the awkwardly
solemn mood.

“Don’t flatter yourself”, Rosita sassed.

Daryl leaned over to Rick and whispered in his ear:

“Jus’ so ya know – yer important, too, although yer not the last a’ yer line.”

Maybe this had been the attempt to joke or to flirt or both, but Rick’s features grew serious instantly.

“And I’m gonna make sure it stays that way”, he said sternly with a glance at Carl and Judith.

“We will”, Daryl replied.

And this time Rick smiled.

They kept on driving that day. And the day after. And the day after that.

It was an unspoken agreement to stay clear of the cities and larger towns, because any area that lots of people used to live in was most likely swarming with walkers now. No one was willing to take the risk.

They checked the stores in smaller towns they passed for supplies, searched promising looking larger buildings along the road and whenever they took a break for a while longer, Daryl went hunting to supply extra food in addition to the cans they were able to find.

It had turned out that Aaron was a skilled hunter as well and was familiar with the outdoors, so more often than not they headed out together. It meant more safety for the hunters and more food for the entire group.

So far they had been lucky as far as finding supplies or shelter for the night was concerned, but nothing was able to ease the worries on Rick’s mind.

They needed something permanent, something to build their new home in and they needed it soon. He still remembered the weeks, months after Hershel’s farm was overrun and he was fairly certain that everyone else who’d been there did, too.

They had been on a constant run, going from house to house, but never finding any peace. Walkers had closed in on them time and again, forcing them to move on. There had been no rest, no home, no time to breathe. And then winter had come. The houses they had found refuge in had been cold and damp and hunting had become more difficult for Daryl, so the little rations they had had soon had turned into tiny rations. Lori had been pregnant with Judith in all of that – and this time it would be Maggie.

The winters in Georgia were nothing like the winters up here in Pennsylvania and Rick dreaded to think of ice and snow, of roads being blocked and them having to find shelter in unheated houses with no way to run quickly if they had to.

In addition to finding food he’d make it a priority for people to look for proper winter clothing as of now. Jackets, sweaters, boots, hats, gloves – anything. And piles of blankets to keep them warm in freezing winter nights.

After having saved his people from the walkers and hostile groups, he’d be damned to lose them to the cold of winter.

Rick wasn’t the only one planning ahead. The will and the hope to one day find a proper place to build their new community was softly growing in all of them, despite the new rough times they were going through right now.

So Eugene had taken to gathering electrical parts he might be able to use, while Maggie had started to look for seeds to lay out gardens and till a field with.

Already the RV’s cabinets were bursting with these extra items and soon they would have to pile
things onto the roof, but no one was willing to leave anything valuable and urgently needed behind. After all, there was no telling if they’d ever come across the same pieces again.

A week passed. Then a second one, but the end of their journey was not in sight. Not knowing what they were even looking for made finding it twice as hard.

Like a man possessed Rick kept studying maps, as though the right place would make itself known if only he stared long enough, but no miraculous revelation took place.

More than once they had cautiously checked out places like schools, office and public buildings, animal shelters and even a zoo. Anything that had a roof, a fence around it and several rooms. But either those buildings were totally overrun by walkers, the fences had been torn down or there had been other people already occupying these places.

Rick had no intention of risking another open confrontation to take away from anyone what they needed. He was tired of fighting, tired of killing and risking his people’s lives. And if they took a building by force, it was likely for someone else to show up on their doorstep one day to do the same.

No, they needed something smaller than these huge buildings. Something that wasn’t as easy to find, that wouldn’t draw attention. But how do you find something small and secluded?

The more time passed, the more Rick felt fear, fatigue and a tinge of annoyance creep into his group. And however unfair this was, he knew that one or the other was secretly blaming him for their current situation.

Maybe nothing bad would ever have happened in Alexandria. Maybe they had best stayed there after all. Maybe coming here was a big mistake.

Deep down inside they all knew that Rick was right. That leaving was the safest, the best way to play it, but this was human nature. If things weren’t going well, someone had to be blamed and usually the leader was the most likely target. Ruffled feelings would get smoothed as soon as their journey came to an end. Hopefully that was going to happen soon.

The only one feeling more at ease and happier each time the sun rose again, was Daryl. He had barely ever hated a place with such a vengeance as he had hated Alexandria. And each mile further away from that place in his eyes was a mile into the right direction.

The poor shelters they had found so far and the scarce supplies didn’t bother him at all. He had grown up in poverty, was used to living in shitholes and having to get by with little to no food on his plate. He had survived the world alone before the apocalypse, so he sure as hell could do it with more than a dozen people by his side now. He had Rick and their children, friends – that was more than he had ever hoped for. So what reason was there not to be happy?
Chapter 26

It was close to noon on the 28th day of their journey when Rick, Daryl and Glenn stepped out of the woods onto a large meadow and headed across it towards a beautiful farm house. They had found it that morning and those who had been there back then were instantly reminded of the Greene farm.

It resembled Hershel’s house in size and appearance to such an extent that Maggie had to fight for her composure on seeing it. Things like this happened a lot. One of them spotting a house or any other place that reminded them of something they had lost. Something that brought back beautiful memories and left them with teary eyes for a moment.

Nothing of that kind ever happened to Daryl. He had seen a few houses that resembled the crappy place he had grown up in, but that hadn’t brought any tears to his eyes. He would have loved to burn them all down the way he had with Beth, but there just weren’t matches enough in the world to raze all these places from the face of the Earth.

It sure wasn’t pleasant to be reminded of a past that held only painful memories, but he was the only one who could shrug it off and tell himself that it was indeed the past. Nothing that could harm, hurt or bother him anymore. Gone. In the end he always felt relief. The others were reminded of things they loved, places they longed to be again and missed, but they could never have them back. In an odd way Daryl was the lucky one now.

The farm would be their shelter for the night, maybe even for a day or two. It was too exposed, too easy to spot from the road and there were no fences, so sadly it was ruled out as their new home, but it suited just fine for a break.

Everyone was looking forward to a soft bed, a good night’s sleep and water to wash up. Just a breather and some privacy again. Especially the four couples of the group were craving a room with a door, a lock and drapes and shutters at the window.

Rick had assigned himself to one of the two scout teams to take a closer look at the perimeters. He didn’t want any surprises; couldn’t risk for a horde of walkers to be just behind the next hill and overrun this place the same way as Hershel’s farm.

When he headed across the meadow back to the house now, with Daryl to his right and Glenn on his left, he looked around for a sign of the other team, but Sasha, Rosita and Aaron were nowhere in sight.

That didn’t worry the leader. His people were able to look after themselves – at least most of them – and maybe Aaron had used the opportunity to hunt, same as Daryl. It was a blessing to have a second hunter in the group now. One of them always caught something, so this far there hadn’t been a single night without meat on the dinner table.

Rick smiled when Glenn made a joke he thought was so hilarious that he started chuckling like a little schoolboy. It was good to hear someone laugh, and for a moment Rick indulged in the wave of happiness and optimism that washed over him.

They hadn’t found their new home yet, but at least they were together – unharmed and alive. The horrors of that vision had started to fade and were pushed more and more into a dark corner of Rick’s mind, the way someone would push a piece of old furniture into a corner of the attic. That nightmare would stay with him for the rest of his days, but just like that piece of furniture it would gather dust over the years, become insignificant until he’d barely remember that it was there at all.

He refused to think of what Abraham had said back in Alexandria.

“In Final Destination there was no escape, no matter what they did.”

This was not some dumb horror movie. This was their life, their fate and they had altered it.
They were in an entirely different area of the country now and none of the people that had originally caused their death were even near. Wasn’t it highly unlikely to run into another Negan, another group like the Saviors? It was. Rick would make sure that they stayed clear of people from now on, so they should be able to stay clear of any trouble, of anyone who could possibly make that vision become reality after all. He had to hold on to the belief that the nightmare was over. If he still waited for the other shoe to drop day in, day out, he would go insane sooner or later.

“Man, stop gigglin’ like a girl”, Daryl cast Glenn a side glance, shaking his head to himself. “That was the dumbest joke I ever heard ‘n’ ya … Rick?”

The leader had been so deep in thought, subconsciously smiling about Glenn’s chuckles next to him, that for a moment he hadn’t processed what he was seeing on the front porch of the house. When it finally registered, it hit him like a bolt out of the blue and the smile simply dropped off his face. He grew pale as a ghost.

“No”, Rick gasped with bile rising in his throat.

Couldn’t be. That just couldn’t be happening. God, no.

Alarmed by his partner’s reaction, Daryl followed his eyes and saw Denise crouch before Carl on the porch of the house. The three men were still a good sixty feet away, but the blood on the boy’s face was visible even over the distance, while Carl pressed a hand to his right eye.

Rick’s knees buckled suddenly and he dropped to his knees, panting as though he was going to get sick.

“Stay with him”, Daryl commented to Glenn.

And even before the Asian lowered himself to Rick’s side, resting a hand on his shoulder and trying to comprehend what was going on, Daryl had started running. In few seconds he had covered the distance to the house.

“What happened?”

There was a towel lying next to Carl’s feet, covered with blood. Same as the boy’s shirt and the hand he pressed on his eye. Denise, who’d been rummaging in her doctor’s bag, looked up with wide eyes, startled by the agitated deep voice behind her.

“Don’t panic”, she said soothingly, “it looks worse than it is.”

“Ain’t what I asked”, Daryl snapped.

With his son injured and his partner apparently close to having a nervous breakdown, he was not in the mood for chit-chat.

“I was playing catch with Michonne”, Carl cut in.

“And he ran into a low branch”, Denise concluded the sentence. “It’s just a cut over his eyes. It’s bleeding heavily, but that’s not life threatening. Maybe it needs a few stitches and there might be a minor scar later, but that’s not gonna mar his beauty.”

She winked at Carl, who cast her a brave smile.
“The eye ain’t hurt?” Daryl asked, a little softer now.

“No”, Denise reassured. “He’s gonna be just fine.”

Michonne came hurrying out of the house in that moment, bringing a few more towels and displaying a guilty air. What happened had been an accident and she was in no way to be blamed, but still she felt responsible, since the boy got hurt while he’d been with her.

“Playin’ catch”, Daryl grumbled under his breath. Then he gave Carl another scrutinizing look. “Yer okay?” he made certain.

“Yeah”, the teenager made a dismissive gesture, “but could you, please, tell the others that this happened while I put down a walker or so?”

He was clearly embarrassed about having been this clumsy playing a silly children’s game.

“Nah”, Daryl replied. “Ain’t gonna lie to yer dad ‘n’ the others. We can keep a lid on that playin’ catch thing, but it’s like I told ya the other day – ya ain’t got ta be cool all the time, Carl.”

He gave the boy’s shoulder a pat and then abruptly turned on his heels. Before either of the women or Carl had a chance to say anything, he was already running across the meadow back to Rick. Even before he had reached his partner, he called to him over the distance:

“He’s okay.” He dropped to his knees in front of Rick and snapped his fingers before his partner’s eyes to get his attention. “D’ya hear what I said? Carl’s fine. ‘s jus’ a cut, nothin’ serious.”

Rick was shaking like aspen leaf and looked as though he was scared witless. There was no telling if Daryl’s words even registered.

“Rick.” Daryl placed his hands on the younger man’s shoulders, but there was no response, no indication that Daryl got through to him at all.

“Rick? – Rick!”

Just like he had back at the prison after Lori’s death, the leader just stared blindly ahead of himself, his look going right through Daryl.

“What’s going on?” Glenn asked, shocked and confused about Rick’s sudden change.

“Nothin’. Give us a minute here”, Daryl replied sternly. And when Glenn got up to head back to the house, he added:

“Not a word ta no one, ya hear me? Don’t want ‘em ta think he’s losin’ his mind or somethin’. ‘cuz he ain’t.”

The Asian cast Rick a quick glance and when he looked at Daryl again, his thoughts were obvious: Are you sure?

“Somethin’ spooked him, ‘s all. We’ll be there in a moment. – Go make sure that Denise person knows what she’s doin’ ‘n’ don’t screw with the boy’s face.”

Glenn gave a curt nod and then, with a last quick glance to Rick, walked back to the house. Deep lines of worry distorted his face and he had to remind himself a few times to force them away, so there wouldn’t be any questions. Hopefully Daryl was right and in a few minutes Rick would have regained his composure. This was the worst time for their leader to have things to work out again. It had taken days, weeks even back at
the prison until Rick was his old self again and able to make decisions and take the helm. It hadn’t mattered too much back then. They had had a roof and fences, a place to stay, so Rick taking some time out and being unavailable for decisions hadn’t dazed the entire group. But things were different now.

Daryl shared Glenn’s concern, but not the reason for it. This group was a strong unit and together they were able to find their way and keep things going without one person telling them every step on the way what to do. If Rick needed some time out again, that wouldn’t result in chaos or total cluelessness. Their community had worked as a democracy before and perhaps it was time to go back to that and lift the pressure off Rick’s shoulders. But team decisions took time. That was a fact. It was easier for one person to make the calls, at least until they had found a new place to stay. They would manage, one way or the other. Daryl wasn’t too concerned about the how, who and when. What he was concerned of was the why.

What did just happen? Carl’s injury looked alarming, yes, but why did Rick freak out like that before he even knew what happened, how bad it really was? It wasn’t like him to lose his cool so easily. No doubt that vision had something to do with it and whatever it was that had scared him witless, it was still torturing him.

Rick heard Daryl’s voice from far away, but the words made no sense, didn’t get through to him at all. He didn’t feel Daryl’s hands on his shoulders, didn’t follow his conversation with Glenn and the Asian leaving never even registered.

The blood on his son’s face and the way he pressed a hand to his eye had the events of his vision play out before his mind’s eye in painful clarity once more. All the fear, the guilt, the pain and devastation had hit him full force again as this immense wave of memories washed over him. The flood of disturbing pictures carried him away and kept his mind caught up in a vortex of horrifying scenarios that kept replaying mercilessly, over and over and over.

Fate had caught up to them after all. There was no escape, no way to run. Despite the distance and the changed circumstances Carl had lost his eye and one by one his people would meet their predestined end. He couldn’t save them, couldn’t prevent the inevitable. He would lose them to painful and brutal deaths after all.

“Rick!”

Daryl’s inflection was a mixture of concern and annoyance now. Concern, because his partner was entirely unresponsive and seemed to have lost every touch to reality. He was lost somewhere inside his head, reliving the same horrible scenarios over and over while he stared ahead of himself with a panicky look in his eyes. And after all these weeks Daryl was getting furious about the higher power who thought it funny to torture his man like that. Who first sent him that blasted vision and now wouldn’t let him find any peace. The archer had wondered for a while now how much longer Rick would be able to bear this without going insane. Maybe he just got his answer. Maybe seeing Carl like that had been the final straw.

Out of the corner of his eye Daryl saw Rosita, Sasha and Aaron come out of the woods in the distance and Carol just appeared on the porch next to Michonne, Denise and Carl. No doubt everybody would be gathered out here sooner or later and no one needed to see Rick like this.

“C’mon, man, get up!” Daryl urged his partner and stood to pull Rick off the ground.

Totally abulic, Rick let Daryl pull him up and lead him around the corner to the side of the house where they were out of everybody’s view. The archer called his name a few times more, grabbed Rick’s shoulders and gently shook him, but there was no response. For a second he considered slapping Rick’s face, but dismissed that idea instantly.
His partner was lost in a place with way too much violence as it was. Adding more onto the already unbearable pile was unlikely to do any good.

So instead Daryl gently placed his hands to either side of Rick’s face and let his thumbs softly caress his partner’s cheeks, before he leaned in and kissed him tenderly, brushing his lips across Rick’s in a feather-light touch time and again.

Five seconds passed, then ten, fifteen, but Daryl didn’t stop what he was doing. He was getting scared. What if Rick had been pushed over the edge permanently? What if nothing Daryl did or said would ever bring him back? That was almost worse than losing him to death. It was a little like seeing a walker-version of his lover – alive and yet not. Just a living, breathing shell bare of everything that once made Rick the man Daryl fell in love with.

“Rick, please”, his voice sounded choked now. “I need ya, man. We all do. Snap out of it.”

He pressed his lips harder to his lover’s as a wave of desperation and fear washed over him – and suddenly Rick lifted his arms and wrapped them around Daryl’s middle. He responded to the kiss and when Daryl dared look in his eyes, they were focused again, seeing him.

With a relieved sigh Daryl pulled the younger man close and tried to compose himself. There was no need to let Rick see how much he had scared him.

“What’s going on?” Rick asked confused when he noticed them standing next to a dumpster on the side of the farm house.

“Always wanted ta do that Brokeback Mountain-behind-the-dumpster-kiss with ya. If ya don’t even remember ‘twas obviously mind-blowin’, man.”

He realized that this explanation was a mixture of dumb joke and silly story, but still it was better than the truth.

The memory came back to Rick like a bolt out of the blue and he gasped suddenly.

“Carl!”

“He’s okay”, Daryl replied quickly and pulled back to look Rick firmly in the eyes. “He jus’ pla … accidentally ran into a low branch ‘n’ has a cut ‘bove his eye. Denise’s patchin’ him up. Nothin’ serious, I swear.”

“God …”

Rick took a step back and rubbed his palms over his face.

“I thought …”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“What?” Daryl urged. “Ya said he got shot in yer vision ‘n’ that Denise saved him, but ya never told me … Did he get shot in the face? Lost his eye? That it?”

Swallowing thickly against the raspy sensation in his throat, the leader pressed his lips together to a thin line and quickly looked away. He didn’t want to talk about this. He couldn’t.

Daryl reached for Rick’s shoulders once again and squeezed them firmly to get his attention.

“Rick, ya need ta level with me here now. I gotta be honest – yer reaction there jus’ now was pretty dramatic ‘n’ ya almost scared the shit outta me. ‘Twas worse than back at the prison.”

The leader looked at him confused, cocking his head before shaking it in a helpless gesture.
“I … I don’t remember.”

“Ain’t important. Yer back. But I think ’s ‘bout time ya told me more a’ that damn vision.”

“I already did.”

“Nah, ya gave us the basics, but there’s more, right? Details ya keepin’ to yerself. All the stuff ya refused ta fill me in on when I asked ya the other day. – I need ya to tell me, Rick.”

“No”, the leader’s inflection wasn’t nearly as firm as he had intended. It sounded more like a whine even to his own ears.

“Look”, Daryl’s patience was running out. “I know this is tough ‘n’ prob’ly the worst shit ya ever hadda talk ‘bout, but ya can’t carry that load alone no longer. ‘s gonna drive ya nuts sooner or later ‘n’ it’s irritatin’ like shit that anything, anything, even a minor injury like that cut, can completely push ya off balance. D’ya think if Carl had known what happened ta him in that dream, he woulda done sittin’ there lettin’ ya see him like this? We all got no clue what could trigger ‘em flashbacks, what kinda situations we gotta avoid. Ain’t helpin’ no one if ya keep ‘em infos to yerself, man. On the contrary – if that shit happens in a tight situation, ya gonna put yerself ‘n’ us at danger. And not knowin’ what may be in store for us ain’t makin’ it easier for no one. So cut the crap already ‘n’ jus’ tell me.”

Rick pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger and breathed in deep a couple of times. Daryl was right. He knew that he was right, but that didn’t make it any easier.

“What about the others?”

“Yer call. I can drum ‘em up for a powwow or ya can tell jus’ me ‘n’ I fill ‘em in. Whatever’s easier for ya.”

“It’s not gonna be easy either way.”

“I know.” Daryl reached out a hand and let his fingers comb through Rick’s curls. “’s why I said easier. Ain’t nothin’ easy in this world no more.”

“Some things are”, Rick replied thoughtfully while he looked deep into the other man’s eyes. Like being in love with this incredible man.

The leader wrestled with the problem a moment longer, dreading to bring all these painful memories out into the open. He would have prefered for them to remain in their dusty, dark corner of his mind, but unfortunately they weren’t like that old piece of furniture in the attic. They were alive. And they were vicious, unlikely to ever leave him alone. Daryl was right – he had to share the load or it was going to break him sooner or later.

“Okay”, he said in the end after pulling in another deep breath, “what do you wanna know?”

“The whole bunch. Just go step by step from the moment Carl got shot till … ya know, the end.”

Rick grew pale, but he gave a brave nod and then started talking. Slowly at first, but soon the words gushed out of him as though a dam had broken. Unable to stand still he paced incessantly, while Daryl followed his every move with his eyes, listening quietly.
There were tears in Rick’s voice when he described their final moments at that wall in the Kingdom and his heart was beating so violently that he was sure Daryl could hear it. Two of his fingers wiped over his eyes quickly, before he pinched the bridge of his nose again, trying to regain his composure while he revealed the entire cruel truth to his partner. When he fell quiet, he didn’t dare look at Daryl. He had heard him gasp behind his back, could easily picture the horror in the shadow blue eyes and right now that was too much to bear.

“Ya said ya watched all of us die”, Daryl croaked after a moment, “but … I’m gonna be the last man standin’ – like Beth said. That girl cursed me ‘n’ prob’ly didn’t even realize it.” After a moment he added almost inaudibly.

“’m glad it ain’t gonna be you.”

Rick whirled around on his heels.

“It’s not gonna be either one of us, because I’m not gonna let that happen, Daryl.”

The archer’s face was visibly paler than before, but he gave a curt nod to that promise and left it at that. There was no telling if he thought it was an empty phrase or a promise he believed in.

“How much longer till we can be somewhat certain that none a’ this shit’s gonna happen?”

Rick swallowed thickly.

“Couple of months. Maybe a year. Maggie was close to giving birth, so if she’s really pregnant, the timeline of that vision ends round about nine months from now. So in a year or so I’m gonna allow myself to breathe again.”

Daryl bit his lip and chewed on it for a moment before he said:

“Can’t believe ya been carryin’ all that ‘round with ya all that time ‘n’ didn’t say a thing. How many times did one of us do or say a thing that triggered ‘em memories ‘n’ made ya relive ‘em?”

Rick just shrugged helplessly.

“I lost count”, he said almost inaudibly.

“God.” Daryl pulled him into a tight embrace and for a long moment they just stood like that, unmoving and silent, both in dire need for the contact.

“I wish ya’d stop doin’ that”, he older man said into the silence.

“What?”

“Tryin’ ta protect me – all of us – by keepin’ things to yerself ‘n’ workin’ ‘em out without help. What is it with ya Grimes men that ya think’ ya need ta be so damn tough all the time?”

“Look who’s talking.”

Rick smiled despite himself.

“Nah, I ain’t tough. Michonne says I’s a softie, Carol calls me pookie ‘n’ I can already see Judy tryin’ ta braid ma hair one day.”

“And I bet you’d even let her.”

“Prob’ly. That girl’s got me wrapped around her li’l chubby finger already.”
A fond smile tugged on the corners of his mouth for a second, before the stern expression returned.

“Promise me ya gonna stop bein’ such a damn hero. I need ya ta talk to me, share yer problems with me. Damnit, Rick, we’re partners – for better or for worse.”

“For better or for worse, huh?”

Rick pulled back to look Daryl in the eyes.

“It’s been a while since I last heard someone say those words to me.”

“Yeah? Ain’t never too late ta hear ‘em again.”

They held each other’s look and Rick noticed how his heart picked up pace. Was Daryl really saying what he thought he was saying?

“Ya ain’t promised yet”, the archer said softly and Rick’s heart instantly skipped another beat. Promise? What was it Daryl wanted him to say? A promise on forever and a happily-ever-after? Where they really talking about that? Here? Now? Standing next to a dumpster in an unknown place, still on the run and with Carl injured?

Funny enough, Rick didn’t even mind the circumstances. Even if they were stuck in the middle of a reeking walker horde, he would have been willing to promise anything to that man. A smile played around Rick’s lips suddenly, when he came to realize the nature and extent of his feelings for Daryl. And it felt so damn right.

“Promise you whatever you want”, Rick replied just as softly and the emotions that bounced back and forth between them were almost palpable.

If they were visible, Rick was sure they would look like the electrical charges the Tesla coils emitted.

“Good”, Daryl said with a smile, while he got hold of Rick’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Together then from now on.”

There still was no telling what exactly the archer was talking about. The promise for Rick to not be such a damn hero and share his problems with Daryl? Or a promise on you and I, forever. Maybe both. Rick decided that he would more than gladly give his word to either.

“Let’s go check on Carl now, huh?”

Side by side they started walking to head back to the front porch, but after only few steps Rick stopped Daryl and asked:

“I haven’t seen that movie so … what is it with that Brokeback Mountain-behind-the-dumpster kiss?”

“’m gonna show ya.”

With a grin Daryl got hold of his man’s hand and pulled him behind the dumpster.

Carol chose that moment to cast a cautious look around the corner to make sure Rick and Daryl were okay. She beat a hasty retreat instantly and suppressed a grin – they were most definitely okay. She headed back into the house where the rest of the group was gathered.

“Everything okay?” Carl asked concerned, a large band-aid covering the wound over his eye.

He had noticed his father’s extreme reaction and couldn’t help feeling guilty that his clumsiness had caused Rick more worries on top of the ones he already had to deal with.
“Definitely”, Carol made a dismissive gesture and smirked. “I guess we can start lunch without them.”

When several questioning glances hit her she shrugged and added:

“‘I’ve got two words for you – Brokeback Mountain.’”

“The dumpster?” Tara asked with amusedly sparkling eyes.

“Yup.”

Abraham gave a wolf whistle, right before several voices called in sync:

“Eugene – sit!”
Chapter 27

Daryl woke first the next morning and with a smile playing around his lips peeked into the first shy rays of the sun that fell through the shutters.
He didn’t move, although every muscle in his body screamed to be stretched, but the soft snoring close to his ear indicated that Rick was still asleep and Daryl had no intention to change that. Rick needed rest, badly, and every moment of peace was a gift.
Daryl watched the dancing light by the window, listened to Rick’s breathing and savored the warmth of his partner’s skin as they lay spooned up flush against each other.
A new day. He had always loved sunrises – they meant hope, a fresh start, some warmth and light in a life that used to be nothing but dark and bleak. But ever since Rick had told him about his vision the previous day, Daryl knew that he would never again appreciate sunrises more than he was going to in the next months to come. Each morning he would wake up with the family alive and unharmed was a step closer to the end of this nightmare.

His hand softly covered Rick’s where it was resting against his chest and breathed in deep.
It was totally beyond him how his partner had been able to live with the burden of that vision on his soul for well over a month without going insane. Daryl hadn’t seen those horrible scenarios, hadn’t lived them the way Rick had in his dream, but he had a vivid imagination and was quite able to picture whatever Rick had told him.
Up until this day Daryl had thought that his father had been the devil, but Will Dixon hadn’t been nearly as cruel and perverted as that Negan dude. There were probably still countless bastards out there – men like the Governor or the Claimers – but surely a degenerated, sick son of a bitch like Negan was one of a kind. They had put so many miles between themselves and that man, that they should be out of his reach now. Should be.
Daryl swallowed thickly. A year, then they would know. When Maggie and Glenn’s baby was born and Judith would have her third birthday with all of them alive to celebrate both occasions, then he’d believe that their fate had been changed.
Until then he would carry the same load as Rick.

Despite what he had told his partner, Daryl hadn’t decided yet whether he was going to tell the rest of the group or not.
Did they really have to know? Would it help anyone if they all had nightmares from now on?
Carl’s injury was a minor incident – if they had known the details of Rick’s vision, they could have avoided for the leader to see his son like that and spare him that shock moment. Fine.
But everything that happened in his dream after Carl getting shot was for someone to die. If that was really going to happen, nothing would spare Rick from the pain and new shock.
Would it help anyone to know how they originally died? Would that give them a chance to avoid it or would they just live in fear from now on?
Maybe they’d be able to stop the snowball effect before it was in motion. Denise was next in line, so if they had an extra watchful eye on the doc and made protecting her the priority, would that stop the avalanche? Or would Fate still be a bitch and just change the order, skip to the next one in line?

Daryl breathed in deep and tried to still his frantically beating heart.
God, this was what his lover had been going through for weeks now – thoughts tumbling over each other, horrible scenarios playing out before his mind’s eye in an endless rerun, the little wheels panicky going into overdrive to find a way out.
And yet, no matter how much thought they gave this, there was no way out. They had no way of
knowing if their fate was linked to the place in Rick’s vision or would happen no matter where they were, one way or the other.

Daryl curled his fingers around Rick’s and held on a little tighter as he came to a conclusion. He would keep quiet, wouldn’t fill the rest of the group in on what Rick had told him. As of now he would help carry the load, hoping that having someone to share the secret, someone to confide in was enough to lift some of the weight off Rick’s soul. There was no sense in putting it on everyone else’s.

Soft lips pressing a kiss to his neck in that moment derailed his train of thought and brought a smile back to his face.

“Good morning”, Rick whispered in his ear before he placed another kiss on Daryl’s neck. Daryl turned on his back and ran a hand through his partner’s unruly curls before they kissed each other tenderly.

“Mornin’. D’ya feel better?”

“A lot.” A slightly embarrassed air crept onto Rick’s face when he added: “Sorry, by the way. I think I fell asleep on you last night, huh?”

“Yup, literally, but yer forgiven. Ya at least had the decency ta stay awake long enough for both a’ us ta get off.”

Rick’s ears turned a deeper shade of red, which Daryl thought looked damn cute. A smile tugged on the corners of his mouth.

“I’s just kiddin’, Rick, relax. ‘s no wonder that ya was exhausted after what happened yesterday.”

The smile vanished when he added mentally: 

“And I know why ya chose ta top.”

Personally Daryl couldn’t have cared less about positions. Whether he was top or bottom, it made no difference to him – all he wanted was to feel Rick, be as close to him as only possible, become one with his man. Wasn’t that what sex was supposed to be about? Becoming one – body and soul alike? Rick however seemed to enjoy it even more when he was able to just let go, be the more passive part with someone else to set the pace, make the decisions, be at the helm. Unless he felt like he was losing control over every other aspect of his life. When uncertainty and fear made him feel helpless, vulnerable and weak. That’s when he chose to top during his and Daryl’s love-making, as though it would help him regain some kind of control.

“Ya really okay?” Daryl probed.

With a sigh Rick shrugged.

“Gotta be. It’s like Hershel used to say – we all got our job to do.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment.

“You know, I’d love to see old people again. Old fellows like Hershel and Dale, with the wisdom of decades to share.”

“Ya will. I can already see ya years from now sittin’ in a rockin’ chair with a long white beard, lookin’ like Papa Smurf ‘n’ sharin’ yer own wisdom.”

Despite himself Rick started to chuckle.
“Uh-huh. And you right next to me, with that hair all the way down to your toes, unable to still see a thing through those bangs and still not a sign of a decent beard or wisdom.”

Daryl's fingers were on him the next second, tickling him mercilessly for that little charming remark. Rick giggled helplessly and then fought back, starting to tickle in return. The tickling fingers turned into roaming hands simultaneously and the giggling ceased as hungry, eager lips found each other and were engaged in ardent kisses a moment later. They pressed against each other and both moaned when they felt the other's hard erection rub against their own. There was definitely no better way to start a new day than …

A knocking at the door had both of them freeze.

“Mornin’. Rise and shine”, they heard Abraham’s voice from the other side of the door. “Sorry, boys, if I’m interrupting any early-morning exercise, but …”

The door was roughly pulled open and the red-haired man took a step back when he came face to face with a clearly pissed off Daryl Dixon, who was not only giving him a killer scowl, but stood before him butt naked, presenting an impressive erection.

“Whoa, dude”, Abraham said, not sure whether to laugh or not, “don’t stab the messenger.”

When Daryl’s expression even darkened, Abe opted for suppressing the smirk for his own sake.

“What d’ya want, God damnit?” Daryl growled.

The amusement in the other man’s eyes disappeared all of a sudden when he said:

“Just meant to let you know that Eric spotted a handful of walkers out back, at the edge of the woods. Not too alarming, but we figured Rick should know.”

Behind Daryl’s back Abraham noticed Rick jump out of bed and head to the window. He gasped audibly a second later.

“A handful?”

Daryl turned on his heels and joined him by the window in a flash.

“Shit, man. That’s at least two dozen ‘n’ there’s more in between a’ ‘em trees. That could be a herd.”

“Abe”, Rick turned to the man by the door, blinding out the fact that, just like Daryl, he was in his birthday suit. “Grab six of the others and stop those walkers for as long as possible. – Go!”

With a curt nod the red-haired man acknowledged the order and hurried to gather a team of his choice to build their first defense line.

“Daryl, I need you and Michonne to take care of Judith and protect those who can’t fight for themselves. I’ll have everyone else gather our stuff and start the cars.”

He cast a glance out the window and saw more walkers pile out of the woods onto the meadow behind the house.

“We need to get out of here. Fast.”

“Ya got it.”

They both hurried to get dressed, secretly cursing those damn walkers and their terrible timing. While
Rick ran down the stairs, Daryl headed across the corridor to a room they had assigned as nursery for the night. When he came through the door, Carl had already changed his sister’s diaper and just fastened the last button on her dress.

“Good job, man.”

Daryl gave the teenager a slap on the shoulder and then lifted the little girl off the bed.

“Do me a favor ‘n’ check if everyone’s up. Tell ‘em ta gather their gear ‘n’ head to the cars asap.”

“’kay.”

That said Carl was out of the room and Daryl followed him a moment later after he had grabbed ‘Bunno’, Judith’s plush-bunny, and her diaper bag.

The house was a busy bee-hive when the archer came down the stairs. People were running in and out and carried their supplies and belongings back into the two cars that were parked out back with running motors. They all knew the drill by now and the group had done those hasty retreats often enough for things to work smoothly without the need for many words.

Five minutes after Daryl had handed Judy to Michonne to watch over her, he sat behind the wheel of the RV and honked, same as Eric in the other car. The first defense line had been able to hold back the walkers so far, but the shots had alarmed every one of them that was in the area and more and more came out of the woods. They had to find more silencers soon, Daryl made a mental note. It was little effective to put one walker down, only to lure two more. And there was no telling who else might be listening. That was the part that worried him even more.

Abraham gave the signal for retreat the moment he heard the horns and together with Aaron, Sasha, Rosita, Glenn, Carol and Tara he came running back to the cars. As soon as the doors had fallen shut, both vehicles started moving instantly and were back on the road a moment later. Nobody looked back. Nobody cared to see another place being overrun that had been a refuge at least for a little while. They didn’t even have breakfast yet and already the day sucked.

An hour into their journey Daryl accelerated the RV and passed the other car by, taking the lead, when for the third time Eric chose a direction that didn’t feel right to the archer.

Why head down a road that according to several street signs lead to a larger town, when they had decided to stay clear of larger towns? Why make a turn onto an unpaved side road where the large and heavy RV could get stuck? Why head away from a creek when their water supplies needed to be restocked? Aaron clearly had way better instincts than his partner, but Aaron was in the RV with them and Eric was apparently totally clueless.

As soon as he had taken the lead, Daryl made several turns until they were driving alongside the creek he had spotted before. He slowed down and stopped entirely the moment he found a spot where the embankment was shallow and gave easy access to the water.


A smile tugged on Rick’s lips when he cast him a side glance from the passenger seat.

“What-the-fuck-ever creek?”

“Yup. Pretty sure that’s what it said on the map. ‘s Pennsylvania, man, they got weird names for towns and rivers here.”

“That so?”
“Ain’t kiddin’. Take a look.”
He grabbed the map that was sitting on the dashboard and after unfolding it pointed to a couple of places.


“Those are Indian names”, Denise cut in.

“The politically correct term would be Native American”, Eugene corrected her.

“Yeah, ‘n’ the Dixon name for that creek down there is What-the-fuck-ever. And now get out.”

“You know”, Carl whispered to him when they were about to leave the RV, “I think that name rocks. It’s way easier to keep in mind than Consho … whatever.”

“Yeah, I hadda feelin’ ya’s gonna say that. Jus’ don’t let Carol hear it or I’m never gonna hear the end of it.”

Daryl wasn’t even surprised when Carol spoke suddenly, standing right behind him.

“Did I just hear my name here?”

The archer exchanged a glance with Carl, while the boy visibly struggled not to laugh.

“Yup”, Daryl answered the next moment when he turned around to Carol. “I’s jus’ sayin’ that ya prob’ly don’t mind refillin’ our water canisters with me. We were a good team when we’s stayin’ at Gabriel’s church.”

“You dropped your canister back then”, she retorted matter-of-factly.

“Uh-huh, ‘n’ you didn’t catch it. Still we got that water back ta our people. Like I said – good team.”

Carol couldn’t help chuckling.

“Daryl logic.”

She left the RV first with Carl right behind her. Daryl adjusted the weight of the crossbow on his back and was just about to follow when he heard Tara’s voice mutter in the kitchen area behind him:

“I’d kill for a cup of coffee now.”

He cast a glance over his shoulder and saw both her and Rosita rummage in the cabinets, apparently in the attempt to find anything that could pass as breakfast for the group.

“Urgh, more beef jerky and zwieback”, the Latina replied. “I think I’d kill for some nice, fluffy scrambled eggs with herbs and tomatoes.”

“Sounds good to me.”

They both sighed audibly and then went on going through the cabinets, unaware of the archer who was standing in the door, casting them a dark look. For a moment he felt the urge to give them a piece of his mind, but then he reconsidered.
If they felt better nagging although that wasn’t helping their situation at all, why bother? They were probably just hungry or sad that they couldn’t stay a day or two longer at the lovely farm
house. Or they were sulking, because their early morning exercise had been interrupted by those
damn walkers as well. Somehow he could relate to all of these reasons, he just didn’t share the need
to nag. That farm got overrun, but unlike at Hershel’s farm there were no casualties this time. They
were all alive and well and together. Daryl thought that was a reason to be grateful, not to complain.

While the rest of the group was stretching their legs and making sure that the area was safe, Carol
and Daryl got the canisters to fetch fresh water as they had planned. The group was lucky to have
found this creek, because next to food, water was the top priority.
No doubt it was going to be another hot late summer day and despite the early morning hours it was
already humid with temperatures in the lower 70’s.
Daryl had no desire to see a repetition of their journey right before they found Alexandria – or rather,
before Alexandria found them.
Not just because they had almost died due to lack of water and food, but because their dire need for
either was one of the reasons that the people of this group were only too happy to follow Aaron.
Being in a life-threatening situation let people run out of choices, take risks or trust too easily if
someone or some place promised salvation.
Daryl didn’t care to see another Woodbury, another Terminus, another Alexandria.

After refilling her canister Carol scooped some water into her hands and splashed it into her face,
before she let out an audible sigh, just like Tara and Rosita before.

“God, I really miss the showers back in Alexandria.”

Daryl felt something snap deep inside of him and harsher than he intended the said:

“Now ya listen to me. ’m growin’ pretty tired of everybody whinin’ ‘bout not havin’ ‘em
damn overrated showers no more or any a’ that other crap y’all think ‘s so damn important. The
community this group’s gonna build, that we already have, ‘s way better than anythin’ else on this
walker infested planet, even if we end up livin’ in a goddamn cave ‘n’ eatin’ squirrel for the rest of
our days.”

His face was flushed with agitation now and the veins in his neck showed clearly.
He couldn’t help his sudden rush of anger and it wasn’t directed at Carol personally – she was just
the misfortunate outlet. Daryl kept seeing the guilt and regret in Rick’s eyes each time his people
whined about what they left behind and it had to stop, here and now.

“Ya seriously think Alexandria may have been a good place after all? A town where a jackass
like Anderson, who’s beatin’ his wife ‘n’ kids is a respected citizen? Where they insult ‘n’ spit at gay
people? We can do better than that. In our community no one is ever gonna be abused by no one.
And two people of the same gender bein’ in love, livin’ together ‘n’ havin’ a family is gonna be
totally normal. It already is. Women ‘n’ men ‘s gonna be equals, ‘cuz the guys a’ this group know
that ya girls are jus’ as strong ‘n’ smart ‘n’ valuable as we are. And it don’t matter if a person’s white
or black, Asian, Latin or what the heck ever.”

“Or a Dixon”, he added softer. “Way I see it our community’s better than anythin’ that’s still
out there – damn showers or not. ‘s better than anythin’ that was out there even before the
apocalypse. Ain’t no one got no reason ta whine here. We’re the lucky ones.”

Daryl fell quiet and breathed in a few times to calm down, before he picked up the canister of water
to head back to the RV. The sound of clapping hands behind his back made him jump to his feet a
second later and whirl around on his heels.
Up by the roadside a few feet above his head, the entire group had gathered and was literally giving
his speech standing ovations. He hadn’t noticed them, hadn’t realized that anyone else next to Carol
had been listening and despite him really meaning every word, the situation was nothing short of
awkward now.

“Amen, bro!” Abraham called to him with a grin, before he gave a wolf whistle. “That was the best damn speech I’ve heard in all my life.”

“Cut it out”, Daryl grumbled.

He cast a side glance to Carol, realizing how rude he had spoken to her, but she was smiling when their eyes met and even quickly wiped a tear out of the corner of her eye.

“Bunch a’ idiots”, he muttered, touched and embarrassed at the same time about the fuss they were making.

He pushed the canister into Carol’s hand and then, instead of heading back up to the street, slung the crossbow over his shoulder and followed the creek. After a few feet he called over his shoulder:

“I’m goin’ huntin’.”

“Want me to go with you?” Aaron called after him.

“Nah. Y’all can go on actin’ like a bunch a’ hysterical fangirls some more. I need some peace ‘n’ quiet.”

And with that said he disappeared between the trees.

“He’s not exactly fond of being the center of attention, huh?” Denise said gently next to Rick.

“What gave him away?” the leader replied, while he forced a smile on his face.

“Just a hunch.”

Smiling to herself, Denise turned on her heels to join the rest of the group for a delicious breakfast of fresh creek water, crispy beef jerky and crumbly zwieback, while Rick stood frozen with a frantically beating heart. 

His eyes remained fixed on the spot between the trees where his partner had disappeared in and he couldn’t help the uneasy feeling that was settling in the pit of his stomach.

It wasn’t another foresight, not a case of knowing. Just a feeling. Nothing he could put his finger on, nothing he could name or identify – it was just there. Like a very subtle scent on the breeze that registered, but whose source or nature couldn’t be determined. The wind of change. There was no telling if that change was for better or for worse, but just like he was certain that the sun would rise in the east, Rick knew that something was about to happen.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger ... hehehe. Don't we all love cliffhangers? :-)
Seconds ticked by painfully slow and seemed to stretch into minutes, minutes turned into hours while Rick waited for Daryl to return.

Despite their previous nagging, the rest of the group sat on the warm pavement and had whatever was available for breakfast, although neither scrambled eggs nor coffee were on the menu. Only their leader stood a few feet away, unmoving, and kept staring down the empty road. His stomach was in tight knots again and just the thought of food made him sick. He would eat when Daryl was back, not a moment earlier.

This wasn’t the first time his partner had headed into the woods by himself to hunt or look for water or just because he needed some solitude. Daryl had done that several times during the weeks they were out on the road after the fall of the prison. It had never worried Rick half as much as it did now. As so many times before his soul reached out to his man, tried to communicate over the distance, but the echo he received wasn’t able to put him at ease. The vibes were strange, different than they’d been before, indefinable. Something was up and the uncertainty left Rick nervous, anxious and restless.

More than anything he wanted to follow Daryl, make sure he was alright, but he couldn’t just leave the group and head out there alone, too. Especially since, contrary to his partner, he sucked as a tracker and would get lost in those woods dollars to donuts. So he stayed put. And waited.

Both Carol and Michonne had tried to talk to him, but he had asked to be left alone. He didn’t need any reassuring words that Daryl could take care of himself and knew the woods better than anyone else. Rick knew that. And empty phrases like “He’s gonna be okay” weren’t helpful at all. That was the one thing nobody had a way of knowing until the archer stepped out of the woods, alive and unharmed.

And until then Rick just needed to be left alone.

Hopefully they didn’t have to wait much longer. Not primarily because Rick’s nerves were strung to breaking point, but because the two cars and the group were totally exposed out here on the road and there was no telling what might be headed their way in this very moment. They had to keep moving, needed to find shelter for the night.

The worst possible scenario Rick could imagine was one of the others approaching him sooner or later, going “We can’t wait any longer”.

When they had all been on foot last time they’d been out on the road, Daryl had always been able to catch up to them when he’d gone on his solos. The group had been slow and their tracks were easy to follow.

Things were different now. At some point Rick would have to make a decision – wait, stay here even during the night and putting the entire group at risk. Or move on, leave Daryl behind, hoping he’d find a way back to them.

The knots grew tighter and tighter. Leave without Daryl? Without knowing where he was and what he was up against? If he was okay at all or needed help? Even if they drove slowly – how was he supposed to catch up? What would he think if he returned to this spot and found his people gone? How would he feel if his family just left him? Would he understand that it was necessary for the sake of everyone else, his and Rick’s children first of all?

Rick felt his thoughts go into overdrive and breathed in deep several times to ease his frantically beating heart.

He was definitely thinking three steps ahead and reminded himself of what Daryl had told him the other day:

“We best cross each bridge when we get there.”
The archer had only been gone for an hour, maybe two. Rick had lost all sense of time, but it was definitely not long enough to justify leaving without him. No way.

An arm snaked around his waist suddenly and someone gave him a short comforting hug. When he cast a glance to the side he saw Maggie standing there, looking down the road the same way he had done before. She didn’t say a word, didn’t meet his eyes, just held her arm wrapped around him in a gentle, supportive gesture that said “I know how you feel.” And he knew that she did. Same as Glenn. Both of them had been looking for each other after the fall of the prison, afraid to never see the other one again or to be too late when they finally did. She knew what separation anxiety meant, how the uncertainty hurt. She probably couldn’t understand why Rick was reacting this way after such a short period of time, but Maggie wasn’t the kind of person to question these things. She knew of the intensity of emotions two people could feel for each other and if Daryl had left only five minutes ago, she would understand if Rick missed him achingly already.

Promises no one had the right to make didn’t help. Empty phrases didn’t help, either. What did help was her being there by Rick’s side, reminding him that there was always hope. Grateful he wrapped one arm around her shoulder and returned the squeeze. And then they just stood like that, silently and unmoving. And waited together.

Breakfast was long over, all canisters were filled with water and one or the other of the group had headed into the woods to look for berries. All of them stayed in sight and earshot, but the waiting made most of them edgy.

Rick started pacing, unable to stand still a moment longer. He didn’t even have to cast a glance at his watch to know that it had to be pushing noon by now. The sun stood high in the sky and it was getting as hot as predicted. They had moved the two cars a few yards into the shade of larger trees, so they wouldn’t heat up as much, but no doubt it would be an oven in there soon nevertheless. The leader was aware of the glances that were cast his way by one or the other of his people. The inevitable question would be voiced soon, no doubt about it.

Rick wiped one sleeve over his forehead to wipe the sweat away and then ran both hands through his curls in a helpless gesture. God, what was he going to do? What if Daryl …?

“Hey”, a well-known baritone sounded a few yards away when the archer stepped out of the woods.

“Sorry, took me a while ta …”

“God”, Rick just sighed in relief while he walked up to his partner in few large steps and pulled him into a tight embrace.

“Nah, the name’s Daryl, remember?”

Rick pulled back and cocked his head.

“Barely. It’s been a while since I saw you last”, he said sarcastically.

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that. But …”

“Man, we almost took roots here”, Abraham interrupted rudely, “and you didn’t even catch anything?”

For once neither the way Abraham had cut Daryl short, nor the criticizing remark resulted in another verbal exchange between the two men. To everyone’s biggest surprise Daryl just looked from one of this companions to the next and suddenly started smiling.
“Saddle up. Got somethin’ ta show y’all”, he said mysteriously. “And it’s way better than squirrel.”

Daryl was behind the wheel of Aaron’s car and just made another one of several turns, while the RV followed close behind.

He hadn’t given any further information on what exactly it was he had found. He kept saying that they had to see if for themselves. Then he had cast a look at the map, the position of the sun and had calculated the direction in which they had to go, before he had sounded the decampment. Curious, everyone had piled into the cars quickly and was ready to finally hit the road again.

They had been driving zig-zag for about half an hour and Abraham behind the RV’s wheel couldn’t help the feeling that Daryl didn’t have a clue where he was going at all. But he reminded himself after the forth or fifth turn that if anyone could find their way out here, it was Grumpy.

He pushed the brakes when the car in front slowed down and proceeded at walking speed for a few yards. Then suddenly it stopped and the driver’s door was pushed open as Daryl got out.

Abraham cast a look around, but there was nothing spectacular to see at all. Woods all around them, nothing else. He lowered the window and leaned out.

“Hey, Dixon, you just taking a piss or is this it?”

“That’s it”, Daryl replied, unwilling to let anything or anyone ruin his good mood.

Abraham looked around again and gave an appreciative whistle.

“Yup, I can see why we drove all this way. The trees look much greener here than back there.”

“Yeah, pity ya still the same jackass here that ya was back there”, Daryl shot back, throwing all good intentions to the wind.

That man found a way to push his buttons even on a great day like this. The archer walked to some bushes by the road side, while everyone was watching him through the windows of the two cars, and a moment later retrieved his red shop rag that he apparently had left there as a marker. It was returned to its accustomed place in the back pocket of his pants, before he grabbed the ‘bush’ and moved it aside, revealing a narrow paved road behind it.

A second bush, that turned out to be just a pile of scrub as well, was moved to the other side and Abraham couldn’t help grinning.

“Like Moses parting the Red Sea”, he commented.

“Uh-huh, but allegedly Moses had a decent beard and no red flag attached to his ass”, Rosita joked.

“Says who?” Carol cut in with a stern glance to either of them. “What Moses most definitely did was lead his people to safety and I got the feeling that’s exactly what Daryl might be doing just now, too. So shut up. Both of you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

When he had cleared the way, Daryl slipped behind the wheel of the leading car again and drove through the gap, before he stopped and leaned out of the window and signaled Abraham to follow. As soon as both cars had passed, Daryl hurried back to the road to move the bushes back into their original place to conceal the road.
It was unlikely for anyone to be in the area at all or drive by in this particular moment and feel inclined to follow this entirely not promising looking small path, but better to be safe than sorry. Slowly the two cars headed further into the woods. It was deadly quiet in both cars now as Daryl’s companions held their breath, curious and on the edge of their seats to find out what he had discovered.

What could possibly be in the middle of the woods, miles away from any town? If this was just another barn or a hunting cabin, would the archer make such a fuss about it?

Rick cast his partner a side glance and his heart skipped a beat when he noticed the smile that was playing around Daryl’s lips. Whatever was out there – it was way better than a barn or a hunting cabin and like before Rick sensed the new, indefinable vibes. Excitement and nervousness, that’s what it was, mixed with optimism and an incredible wave of hope. No wonder Rick hadn’t been able to identify these vibes before – he hadn’t sensed these feelings in anyone for a long time.

There were two bends in the road, while it wound about three hundred yards through the woods before it opened to a clearing. To their right the tree line had retracted about one hundred yards to make room for a wide meadow, but no one paid the least attention to any of the beautiful, colorful flowers blooming there or the way they were bathed in sunlight in between the shady trees. All eyes were focused on what lay right in front of them.

“Oh – my – God”, Rick said breathless while he got out of the car, never taking his eyes off what Daryl had found.

The group piled out of the cars and a moment later gathered around the leader and his right-hand man, who were standing silently side by side. No one said a word.

Right in front of them sat several one-story buildings arranged in a square. The approximately sixty by sixty yards large perimeter was secured by a ten feet fence with barbed wire at its top and a large gate to the front that even the RV would easily fit through. To the right of the gate sat a higher building with two large roller doors that apparently functioned as a double garage once and was high and long enough for two trucks, so it would be perfect for their two cars as well.

“I know it don’t look like much”, Daryl said into the silence. “Them buildings are old ‘n’ dirty ‘n’ they’re empty – no furniture or nothin’. But … I’s inside ‘n’ took a look around. There’s enough rooms … with doors.”

He cast a dark glance in Eugene’s direction.

“And it’s got a kitchen.”

He pointed to the chimney on one of the roofs.

“Stove’s there, but I swear ta God, Carol, if ya gonna make any more casseroles ya gonna get banned from this place.”

There were several chuckles and agreeing nods that on any other day might have made Carol pout. But this wasn’t any other day.

“Deal”, she said with a wide smile. “What is this place anyway?”

“The sign by the gate says ‘s a test area for fire fighters.”

It was still unusually quiet and Daryl cast an insecure look around.

“I know this ‘s the ass crack a’ the world ‘n’ it needs a lot a work, but …”

Rick’s lips on his the next second cut off whatever he meant to say and as though a dam had broken, the entire group started cheering, laughing and hugging each other simultaneously.
“You found it!” Rick said with a wide smile when he pulled back again. “Daryl, this is it!”

He took a step toward the gate and looked around, squirming with excitement.

“We got the buildings and the fence – that’s a start. And that garage is high enough to make for a perfect watch tower – we just need to build some kind of shielding up there, but other than that …”

His eyes fell onto a second fenced in area to their left. It was way smaller and the only thing it contained was a water basin that was filled to the brim.

“Water! We’ve got water, too.”

“Ain’t jus’ that basin. There’s a creek nearby as well.”

Rick turned back around to his partner and locked eyes with him. For a moment they both drowned in blue, in a deep ocean of emotions before the leader croaked:

“Thank you.”

“Ain’t done nothin’”, Daryl replied softly. “Came by this place by chance.”

“Doesn’t matter. You took the chance of heading into the woods this far when no one else would have. Whether you found this place by chance or not – you did find it. You checked it out, you made sure the access was concealed so no one else would know it’s there and you came back for us. This was you, Daryl.”

He pulled the archer into his arms and held him close.

“You just gave this group a future. Something I could not.”

“Ah, shut up.” Daryl pulled back and looked his partner sternly in the eyes. “Ya know damn well that none of us would be here without ya. An’ each a’ these peeps there”, he pointed to the group, “did their share. We all saved each other at one point or another.”

He swallowed thickly and then added softer:

“If it hadn’t been for you, I woulda followed Merle. Woulda ended up as one a’ the Governor’s men ‘n’ woulda done standin’ on the wrong side a’ the fence at the prison. We might have ended up shootin’ at each other. Ya gave me a chance when no one else would, so whatever ‘m able ta do today, ‘s ‘cuz a’ you.”

He paused for a moment, fighting the embarrassment this emotional crap still stirred deep down inside despite of him. Then he added:

“Let’s jus’ say we’re a good team – all of us. So don’t ya dare think a’ namin’ this place Dixonville or some crap.”

Rick broke out laughing.

“Pity. I think that sounds pretty good.”

“Ya wouldn’t say that, if ya had a jackass of a father by that name. Ain’t gonna erect him no memorial.”

Rick’s smile faded while he placed a hand reassuringly on the archer’s shoulder.

“You are his memorial. Just like Denise said – the last of a family is the keeper of a legacy, of faces and names and the history of that entire family. If you want your father to be dead and buried,
you need to put him behind you.”
He leaned in until his curls touched Daryl’s long bangs.

“Let him die for good. Forget him as though he never existed. He shouldn’t have been part of your past and he forfeit the right to be part of your future. He’s got no room in our new world.”

“Easier said than done.”

“I know. But we’re gonna make new memories here and maybe in time they’ll be able to cover the old ones.”

Daryl shrugged and pulled back.

“Ain’t sure I’d want that. Only by rememberin’ what kind a’ shitty person, shitty father he was, ’m gonna be able ta do better. For Judy ‘n’ Carl.”

“You’re nothing like that man, Daryl. And you’re not like your brother, either. Actually, I kept wondering already back at the quarry if you were really of the same blood.”

“Yeah, I know the thought. When I’s little I’s hopin’ they stole me some place ‘n’ one day some nice dad would come, punch ma ol’ man in the face ‘n’ take me back to ma real home. Ya know, to a nice house with a momma who loves me, somethin’ ta eat ‘n’ a brother who wouldn’t taunt me all the time.”

He sighed audibly.

“I woulda loved ta have another name, be part of another family, but … never happened.”

Rick slipped his hand into Daryl’s and interlaced their fingers, before he gave them a gentle squeeze.

“It’s not too late, you know.”

“For what?”

“Becoming part of another family and … changing your name. If that’s what you want.

For a moment the world stopped turning as Rick held his breath and waited for Daryl to catch on, to understand what exactly he had just offered.

He remembered their conversation the previous day. The one about promises, about words like ‘for better or for worse’ – with Carl just having been injured and them having that talk standing right next to a reeking dumpster, this must have been one of the ‘worse’ moments.

Here and now they just found their new home, were facing new chances and a brighter future. Didn’t that qualify as one of the ‘better’ moments? So what better moment was there to make a proposal Rick felt he should have made a long time ago. It had felt right so many times before, yet he had never mustered the courage. Maybe because he had heard too often how Daryl thought about emotional ties and despite them having been a couple for a long time, this might just take it that step too far. A step Daryl was unwilling or unable to go as long as his father was still in the back of his mind, haunting him wherever he went. Maybe he’d never be free of him.

Daryl just stared Rick in the eyes, his face a deadpan, but the leader could almost see the little wheels in his partner’s head go into overdrive.

“Damn you, Will Dixon”, Rick couldn’t help thinking.

That man had no idea what he had done and unfortunately Rick could never get his hands on him to beat that knowledge into him.

“Sorry”, Rick said softly while he took a step back to give Daryl more room. “Emotional crap,
I know. I just need you to know that … I mean it. If you ever feel like … you know, being a Grimes would make a difference … I …”
He shrugged helplessly.

“Maybe the wrong time and place for this. Forget it.”

He gave Daryl’s hand that he still held in his own a last squeeze, before he released the archer’s fingers and turned to join the rest of their group.

“Ya know”, Daryl suddenly said behind his back and made Rick stop dead in his tracks, “I just told Carl the other day that the *emotional crap* ’s important, ’s what counts, what makes the difference.”

Slowly Rick turned back around.

“I’s tryin’ ta make the boy see that ya Grimes’ men don’t need ta be so damn tough all the time. Maybe ‘twas ‘bout time ya had a softie in yer family ta level things.”
A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“B’sides – Daryl Dixon … double D. Always sounded like Donald Duck ta me.”

Rick broke out laughing.

“I’m glad I can be of assistance there.”

“Man, ya sound like P.T.”

That said he reached for his partner’s hand and pulled him flush against him to kiss him. He didn’t give a damn about the whole group standing nearby, watching them. A Dixon would have minded, but he wasn’t a Dixon any longer.

Daryl’s heart was racing when he realized what this meant.

After more than forty years there was someone in his life now who wanted him, who loved him, who appreciated him just the way he was and was so proud to have him by his side that he would make it official by letting him share his name. A good name, a strong name, a name no one needed to be ashamed of. The name of a family where people valued and supported each other, where no one was hurt and taunted for who they were or hated for what they were.

Daryl Grimes.

That sounded strange, but right. It meant one thing first of all – there were no more Dixons in this world. That line had finally ended and not even Will’s name was still a part of it. That man was dead, obliterated, gone – there was no trace of him anywhere anymore. Not even in a name.

“Hey, you guys wanna get a room right now or can we check the place out first?”

Abraham’s voice behind their back had Rick and Daryl freeze and the archer couldn’t help thinking for a moment that the Ford family to be obliterated wouldn’t be such a loss, either.

Before Daryl had a chance to react, Rosita beat him to it:

“Looks like Abraham just volunteered for first watch tonight.”
She gave the red-haired man a hearty slap on the shoulder.

“My hero.”

There were a couple of chuckles and grins throughout the group and a smile even tugged on Daryl’s lips despite himself.

“I volunteer, too”, Sasha said in back and when everyone turned to cast her a surprised
glance, she shrugged. 
“We’re a dirty job, but somebody’s gotta do it.”

“Do we really need guards?” Carl tossed in. “I mean, there isn’t much to defend here.”

“Yer sister for one”, Daryl replied with a mildly chiding inflection. “And you, ‘s good enough for me.”

Rick’s eyes were suspiciously shiny when he turned around to his people. Just like Daryl’s words had touched him, Carl’s hidden criticism had hurt.

“I know this is not a place like Alexandria. There’s no electricity, running water, hot showers and heating. But …”

“Rick”, Maggie cut in calmly. “You’re right – this place is nothing like Alexandria.”

The leader’s heart sank and he pulled in a deep breath to defend this place, make his people see the benefits, when Maggie continued.

“And I think that’s a good thing. We can build our own world here, our own community, our way – just like Daryl said. And it’s small and well hidden and far away from any assholes like that Negan dude.”

She pressed her lips together to a thin line for a moment and her hands subconsciously covered her belly before she added:

“Glenn told me what he would have done. That he would have killed him and me and our unborn child.”

There were several gasps around her.

“I don’t give a damn about electricity and hot showers. I just want my baby to live and grow up as part of this wonderful group, far away from any bastard who might kill him or her one day or make my child live as a slave. This place here is a chance – for all of us. Yes, it’s gonna be lots of work, but we’ve never shied away from hard work. We’ve done it before and we can do it again. For what it’s worth, Alexandria has showed us what we’re good at.”

She pointed to the group.

“We’ve got two skilled hunters now to provide food, Eugene is great at engineering and Abraham has worked on the wall and can run a construction team – we can make this fence stronger, maybe build a second one that includes the water basin, so it would be within the fenced in perimeter and our access to it cannot be cut off.”

Excitedly several people started talking at once, tossing in more ideas about how to mold and shape this place into their new world. There were lots of plans like turning the meadow into a field and grow corn and grain there, having a garden laid out inside the fences for vegetables and erect greenhouses to be able to grow food all year around.

Eugene was displaying one of his rare smiles, happy and proud about Maggie’s compliment and eager to contribute visions of how he was going to install heating and electricity if they found solar panels and other electrical parts he could use. Some of the others were more concerned about locks on their doors and shutters at the windows.

While his people were chatting excitedly, Rick just watched them silently, a smile playing around his lips. He nudge Daryl’s shoulder with his own, while his azure blue eyes were shining a few shades lighter than usual and his relief and happiness were palpable.
Their journey had come to an end! This was the place they had been looking for and now for the first time in weeks Rick believed that they had an honest chance. Who would find them here to cause new trouble and seal their fate after all? There was no town nearby, no signs at the street that would point anyone in their direction and if they kept the narrow street camouflaged, no one would ever suspect for these building to be here. They were surrounded by woods, couldn’t be seen from the road and if they stayed under the radar and made sure not to be seen and heard, this would be the perfect hideout.

“Right”, Rick agreed to the others’ suggestions. “And maybe we should think about a moat around the fence, so no walkers can even get to it and push it in the way they did at the prison.”

“There shouldn’t be too many walkers ’round here at all”, Daryl cut in. “According to the map there’s only two smaller towns in the area – one’s five miles away, the other ’bout seven. Should only a couple a’ peeps done livin’ there, so no larger hordes ta be expected unless they doin’ mass migrations these days.”

“Even if they did”, Abraham said with a smirk about Daryl’s comment. “It’s unlikely for them to come by this place. Like Daryl said - we’re at the ass crack of the world here.”

Tara started giggling.

“Maybe we should name it that – Ass Crack Town, or so. Sounds about right.” Suddenly her face lit up even more when a new idea sparked. “Hold up – I’ve been saving something, waiting for the right occasion. And this is definitely it.”

She hurried to the RV and a moment later returned with a bottle of champagne that she held up with a wide smile. Abraham’s eyebrows rose to his hairline.

“Where the heck did you hide that?”

“A good magician never reveals her tricks”, Tara sassed.

“Yeah? Alright then, good magician, now I wanna see how you’re gonna pop that cork without a screw.”

“Shake it”, Rosita suggested.

“Ya nuts?” Daryl cut in instantly. “Ain’t no Formula One race here. That bottle’s gonna be half empty if ya open it that way.”

“It’s gonna be half full”, Denise dared shed some optimism, but the look in Daryl’s eyes gave her the impression that not everyone appreciated the attempt.

“Yeah?” the archer replied with narrowed eyes, “tell ya what, ya can have a sip from the upper part a’ that bottle after she done shakin’ it. ‘m gonna wait for the lower half. How’s that?”

“People”, Tara cut in with a smile. “This is cheap discounter booze – it’s got no cork. Screw-top, see?”

She opened the bottle and held it out to Denise, thinking it only appropriate that the member of their group who joined last should be the first to take a sip. And, of course, because she really, really liked that woman. The bottle was passed around to celebrate the occasion and when it was Rick’s turn to take a sip,
Carl called with a grin:

“Speech! C’mom, dad, ya gotta say a few words.”

“Yes, speech! Speech! Speech!”

Multiple voices joined Carl’s chant until Daryl growled at them:

“Keep it down! I said there prob’ly ain’t many walkers in the area or other people, but this fuckin’ noise’s like firin’ a flare gun.”

There was silence instantly and Rick used it to say softly:

“Frankly, I don’t have anything to add to what Maggie said right now. Or Daryl this morning. Save perhaps for – thank you. Thanks for believing in me and following me here, so we got a chance to build this new world together.”

“Hear, hear”, Abraham said with a smile.

“There is something though”, Rick picked up again, “that Daryl and I would like to tell you all.”

He noticed the archer tense up next to him and instantly regretted his words, wishing that he could take them back. He should know better than to make a big announcement on something that concerned Daryl as well. They hadn’t talked about letting anyone know just yet and Rick knew how his partner hated to make a fuss, to reveal personal stuff and things to the public. Damn, this was a mistake. He had better think of a way out quickly, so …

“Daryl’s pregnant”, Abraham tossed in with a teasing grin, but nobody laughed.

Just like Rick before, the red-haired man realized instantly that this comment had taken matters too far. Teasing Daryl was highly daring as it was, but apparently he and Rick had something important, something meaningful to share with the group and this was the worst of all times to cut in with a stupid remark. It was supposed to be a special moment – and Abe just ruined it.

Maggie saw the look in Daryl’s eyes. Saw the tension of before turn into annoyance and discomfort and she had seen that look often enough to know what was going to happen next. Either Daryl would explode and start a fight, or he would run. Just like this morning he might take off into the woods by himself again and choose solitude in favor of being with this group. It hurt her to think that this great day, this wonderful moment would be destroyed like that, so she hurried to say:

“He’s not, but I am.” She reached for her husband’s hand and held on tight. “Glenn and I found a test in a pharmacy the other day and … well, it’s positive. Rick was right. In a couple of months there’s gonna be a new member of this group.”

Instantly cheering started again – quieter this time though – and everyone gathered around Maggie and Glenn to congratulate and hug them. Everyone save for Rick and Daryl.

The leader used the moment of commotion to pull his partner to the side.

“You okay?”

“Huh”, Daryl grumbled in a way that could mean ‘yes’ as well as ‘no’.

Then he added:

“Ain’t the right moment ta tell ‘em. Ain’t sure I want ‘em ta know at all.”

“Why?” Rick asked with wide eyes.
“'cuz this is between you ‘n’ me. ‘s personal. Ain’t no one’s business. I heard enough insultin’ or teasin’ shit all ma life for bein’ a Dixon. Don’t need no questions or stupid comments now for not bein’ a Dixon no more.”

He cast a scowl in Abraham’s direction, but Rick’s words the next second let him focus on his man again.

“But … Daryl, I know this is a big step for you and I’m so happy that you’d take it. For me. For us. I mean, I’m so damn proud to have you …”

“And ya can’t be proud ‘n’ happy without shoutin’ it from the rooftops? Them knowin’ ain’t gonna make no difference. We’s a couple before, same as now. An’ I cannot luv ya more than I already do. Don’t want no sappy ceremony ‘n’ we sure as hell ain’t gonna cut no rings off of some walkers’ fingers. That’s gross as shit, man.”

“But Glenn …”

“That was Glenn’s decision ‘n’ if he felt it important for the world ta know ‘n’ have a ring, fine. I ain’t no Rhee – I’s a Dixon and now I wanna be a Grimes. And we don’t need no big parade, Rick. I just need you. ‘s enough for me.”

A smile spread over the younger man’s face while he looked his partner in the eyes.

“Same”, he said softly.

Just when he leaned in to kiss Daryl, a voice next to them had him freeze.

“Sorry to interrupt, guys”, Abraham said, unimpressed by the two scowls that hit him.

“No, you’re not”, Rick replied sternly. “As a matter of fact, you seem to have made this your latest hobby or something. What do you …?”

“I just meant to apologize”, the red-haired man said seriously with a side glance to Daryl. “I was out of line and … You got us here, man. So, thanks. And sorry. And … whatever. Good job, Dixon.”

That said he turned on his heels and returned to the rest of the group.

Rick noticed the tension in his partner dissolve and there was actually the ghost of a smile playing around Daryl’s lips for a moment.

“You’re aware that he will keep on calling you that, aren’t you?”

Daryl shrugged.

“Don’t care. ’m gonna call him lots a’ things, too.”

“I bet”, Rick chuckled.

“Difference is”, Daryl added with a smile, “unlike me he’s always gonna be wrong.”

Rick wrapped one arm around his partner’s shoulders and watched happily as the champagne bottle was passed around once more to toast Maggie and Glenn’s baby.

When last Daryl had taken his sip he held on to the bottle and gave it a thoughtful look. There was still a little bit of the champagne left inside and an idea suddenly had his shadow blue eyes light up.
He walked over to the large gate of their new community and said:

“This place needs a name. An’ I guess there ain’t no better way ta baptize it than this.”

He held up the bottle and heard several chuckles throughout the group.

“This is not a ship, Daryl”, Tara dared say. “Only ships are baptized with a bottle of champagne.”

“Yeah? Says who?” Daryl sassed. “That was in the old world. B’fore the apocalypse. B’fore this community. B’fore us. As of now towns are gonna be named by tossin’ a fuckin’ bottle at the damn gate.”

“And I’m gonna use the f-word as many times as I want to ‘n’ don’t wanna hear no crap ‘bout language ‘n’ stuff”, he added with a glance in Carol’s direction and saw her close her mouth again.

And she did it with a smile.

“So”, Tara spoke up again. “What are we gonna name it then?”

“Already know the name”, Daryl replied before anyone else had the chance to say a thing.

“Best name in the whole damn world. Know we gonna make it fit perfectly, too.

Daryl raised the arm that held the bottle.

“I hereby name this town …”

The next moment he tossed it forcefully at the gate where it shattered into dozens of pieces.

“Home.”

Chapter End Notes

They’ve made it! They finally found a new home. And I sure hope you like the place I found them.

The best part about it is that it exists, too. I come by it almost every day when I walk the dog and would like to show you some pics (see chapter 29). Let me know what you think!! I’m curious.

I think there are some loose threads here still, so there’s a rather long epilogue in two parts yet to come.

Thanks to everyone who's read so far and to all of you who left me such wonderful comments and kudos. It's so much appreciated!
“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear Judy, happy birthday to you.”

Sitting at the head of a long table, the birthday girl looked with wide eyes and an even wider smile at the cake and the assembled people right in front of her.

They had gone out of their way to make this a special day for Li’l Asskicker. Two pasting tables, that due to the lack of a real table functioned as one whenever they all came together for celebrations, had been set in the middle of the square outside the buildings and had been decorated as nicely as only possible. Carol had placed sheets on them to substitute for table cloths, everyone had helped to arrange plates, glasses and silverware and Tara and Sasha had picked several bouquets of wild flowers to make everything look even more festive.

Carl had sat for about an hour with a pile of daisies on his lap, desperately trying to make a wreath for his little sister, which had turned out to be more difficult than he had expected. No one had ever shown him how, probably because in the old world it was considered uncool or not manly enough for a boy to make floral wreaths. His dad had shown him how to play Baseball and use tools like hammers and saws to build and repair things. Later he had shown him how to shoot a gun and stab walkers with a knife. But today Carl wished someone had taught him how to put those damn flowers together, so Judith could wear them like a crown. She was everyone’s little princess and would love a pretty accessory like that.

After watching his futile attempts for a while, Michonne had wordlessly lowered herself to his side in a silent offer of assistance. Sometimes words weren’t needed. On the contrary – to push people and force them to react or reply backfired more often than not. Just being there was enough. That was a policy she had ignored way too many times and it had never done her any good. Until the day she had come to understand why the old saying ran “Silence is golden” – and why Rick had formed this incredibly tight bond to Daryl and not her or anyone else.

He didn’t appreciate to be pushed, to have someone worm things out of him, to have people demand answers and decisions when he wasn’t ready. Daryl’s approach was patience and silence. He was always there, let Rick know that he had his back and would give advice when it was requested and assistance when it was needed, but other than that he let his partner breathe and do things in his own time.

Many confrontations with their leader could have been avoided, if Michonne had adopted that policy sooner. And maybe, if she had handled things differently right from the start, it might have been her by his side instead of Daryl. Maybe. There was no sense even thinking about what could have been. That ship had sailed. But she had sworn to herself to do better in the future. And that future was now.

So she had sat next to Carl silently for a moment, letting him know just by being there that she knew
how to make floral wreaths and would be happy to show him. And just as wordlessly he had held out a palm full of daisies to her in the silent request for help. With a smile she had gone to work and together they had soon been busy making a long chain of linked flowers that would turn into Judith’s wreath in the end. She had felt closer to that boy than ever before, sitting shoulder to shoulder with him while they were working on their birthday project for Carl’s little sister, smiling to themselves. She loved that little girl. And she loved this teenage boy. And she would miss both of them achingly.

“Blow out the candles sweetheart”, Rick prompted and eagerly the birthday girl started blowing at her cake.

Or rather, she was spitting at her cake. Effort and enthusiasm definitely weren’t the problem, but her technique left something to be desired and thus one of the three candles still refused to go out by the time Judith started turning blue in the face. The moment she pursed her lips and spluttered at the stubborn candle heartily once more, Daryl happened to have a violent coughing attack in the same direction and a second later the candle was out. Everyone cheered and clapped their hands accompanied by Judith’s giggle, while Rick cast his partner an amused glance across the table.

“Better let Denise take a look at you and that nasty cough.”

“Nah, ‘m fine. ’might come in handy at yer b-day, ol’ man. Yer cake’s gonna have like a gazillion candles.”

Rick broke out laughing. Ever since Daryl had come to realize that he was the oldest man in the group, he considered teasing people about their age his God-given right. Instead of replying, Rick placed a loving kiss on Judy’s cheek and then took the candles off the cake to cut it. The first piece went onto the little girl’s plate and for a moment she just looked at it with wide eyes. Candy was a very rare treat and an entire cake sitting right in front of her snub nose was better than Christmas and Thanksgiving on the same day.

“Thanks, daddy”, she smiled.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart. But I didn’t make it. Denise did.”

“Thank you, Denise.”

Carol’s grin grew wider and wider on witnessing the exchange. Apocalypse her ass – if she could help it, the kids of this community would learn some manners, regardless of whether or not their parents acknowledged the importance of good behavior.

“My pleasure. Taste it – it’s good.”

“Why don’t we give everyone a piece first?” Carol said sugar sweet.

“Why don’t we let the girl dig in instead?” Daryl sassed.

Manners and good behavior had become an issue between him and Carol with each day Judith had grown and understood what was going on around her. The more Carol tried to teach the Grimes’ kids to watch their language, the more Daryl would swear in their presence. The more often she reminded them to sit straight, use a napkin and not burp or smack their lips, the more Daryl would eat like a pig deliberately.
It was a sparring match that appeared to be serious on the outside, but it was just friendly bantering. They were making this a pastime when otherwise there wasn’t too much to do around their new home except chores, gardening and working on the field. All of which both Carol and Daryl secretly considered *boring as shit.*

What Carol didn’t understand, didn’t know about, was that deep down inside Daryl was scared. He had tried to dismiss the thought, bury it along with his fear in a dark corner of his soul, but he couldn’t prevent it from surfacing once in a while. The fear that growing up as a well behaved young lady with good manners, little Judith would come to realize one day that one of her fathers had none. Would she still look up to him then? Would she still love him the same? Would she still be proud to say he was her dad or would she turn away from him? The thought that Judy might be ashamed of him one day hurt Daryl more than he could say.

It was too late for him to try to be someone he was not and he did have his pride. If people couldn’t respect and accept him for who he was, then they could go to hell. That had been his policy all his life and it was hard to teach an old dog new tricks.

He understood what Carol was trying to accomplish.

Manners were rules, rules were a codex the members of a community lived by and a codex meant order and stability. Civilization. And it was easy for everybody else to just go by those rules – they had all been taught when they were little. All, but Daryl.

The lack of manners had made him an outsider all his life and in a way he would probably be different till the day he died. There wasn’t much he could do about that without losing himself. All he longed for was someone on his side who was like him. Maybe that’s why he was trying to teach Judith a bit of *his* language and *his* rules – so she would be part of his world.

“Papa?”

His daughter’s voice ended Daryl’s train of thought and he blinked quickly a few times before he focused on what she was holding out to him.

Instead of waiting for everyone to get a piece of the cake, she had just dug her fingers into it, broken off a handful and held it out to Daryl with a wide smile now.

“Want some, papa?”

It was deadly quiet for a moment and without even looking Daryl could feel everyone’s eyes flick from him to Carol and back. He could vividly picture her expression. No doubt she was about to bite into the edge of the table in order not to scream, but he had definitely won this point. The next moment everyone broke out laughing – including the woman in question – and Daryl’s heart grew lighter again.

This was his daughter – not by blood, but in every other respect there was. She would always be a part of his world.

Greatly daring he opened his mouth and giggling Judith stuffed the handful of cake right into it. Much that Daryl tried to keep a straight face, his features derailed visibly.

“Yummy, huh?” Denise asked proudly. “It’s oat cake. Very healthy with lots of complex carbohydrates, omega 3’s …”

“Tastes the way it looks”, Daryl grumbled around the food in his mouth, which triggered a couple of more giggles around the table.

He didn’t have to be more specific for everyone to understand what he was saying.

“You’re just not used to healthy food”, Denise tried to defend her recipe.

“Thank God”, Daryl shot back, swallowing the remains of the ‘healthy food’ while trying to...
suppress a disgusted expression.

“I doubt I woulda turned this old on yer healthy stuff. “

“Sure you would have. And you’d turn a lot older, if you’d stop smoking and eat the way I told you to.”

“Definitely not.”

“Yeah? What makes you so sure?”

“’cuz I’s gonna commit suicide after two days.”

Before Denise could reply to that, the archer turned to the birthday girl and flashed her a wide, surprisingly convincing smile.

“Thanks, sweetheart. ’twas the best oat cake I ever had.”

And since it was his first – and definitely last – oat cake that wasn’t even a lie.
Before Judith could dig her fingers into it once more to distribute a helping to the other people around the table in her own special way, Rick quickly started cutting the cake into pieces and placed them on the plates that were handed his way.

Surprisingly no one dropped a single remark – not even Abraham – although Judith had dug her fingers into it and it had been spat and coughed on. And the silence wasn’t just due to the fact that they had all definitely had worse to eat in the past than this soiled and allegedly disgusting cake. It was because the people of this group, their dynamics, their points of view, their values and feelings – all that had changed. And this probably went for Abraham first of all.

Having a home, settling down and living in a community where they could be who they wanted to be, had all of them come to thinking. This was a crossroads and it was time to figure out what they wanted – and what they didn’t want.

Abraham had decided for himself that he didn’t want to tease anymore in order to mask his own uncertainty and aimlessness. The fact that he had no idea where he wanted to go with his life, what he truly longed for, what he needed, had confused him for the longest time – and he had tried to hide it by being cocky and displaying a self-confidence that wasn’t there. Not when it came to the meaningful things in life. He had teased those who knew their way, knew what they wanted, knew who they were. And that was Daryl first of all, but oddly enough, Eugene just the same.

The more Maggie’s belly had grown, the more Abraham had come to realize what he was missing. A woman by his side who shared his sense of humor, in whose presence he could be weak and still be respected. Someone who’d touch his heart, not just his dick. Children. A family.

Day by day, bit by bit things had changed for Abraham, had become clearer, until the answer had been right before his eyes – Sasha.

He was ex-military and she had still felt the urge to protect this group more than anyone else, so it was natural for them to go on patrols or being on sentry duty together. They made a good team. What had started as a close cooperation had soon developed into friendship, and it was just a minor step from friendship to love if the chemistry was right. And it was. Lord, it definitely was.

Abe hadn’t laughed as often ever since the outbreak than he did now, whenever he was with Sasha. He never felt that much at ease, understood and respected for who he was than when she looked him in the eyes and smiled. He never questioned why it had happened, he just wondered why it hadn’t happened way earlier.

It was Sasha he wanted, her he needed. And Rosita was not. Simple as that.

“Can Hope have a piece, too?” Judy asked into the silence as everyone was more or less
happily munching their piece of cake.

Maggie gently rocked her baby daughter on her arm and smiled at Judith.

“Hope’s still a little too young for cake, Judy.”

“’kay. Then I’m gonna save it for Bertha.”

Confused looks were exchanged between the people seated around the table before Maggie dared ask:

“Who’s Bertha, sweetie?”

“The baby cow.”

Smiles spread over everyone’s faces that varied from amused to touched. Only a three-year-old would think about sharing her birthday cake with a baby cow. A few months ago Aaron and Daryl had come across a farm during one of their hunting trips and once again luck had been on their side. Although it was unlikely for any of the livestock on that farm to still be alive, they had actually found three chicken, two horses and a young, pregnant cow securely locked into the barn. Apparently the old farmer had managed to take some of his animals to safety when the farm had been attacked by walkers only shortly before. The number of the dead roaming the farm hadn’t been a threat to Aaron and Daryl, but they’d been too many to fight off for the old man. They had buried his remains in respect for a man, whose efforts and property would make life easier and better for the group.

“What’s wrong with that name?” Denise gave the question right back and found herself at the receiving end of a ‘figures’ look from Daryl.

“Yer the doc, so I don’t have ta explain ‘em birds ‘n’ bees stuff to ya, right? That calf ain’t even born yet ‘n’ it might be a Bert for all we know.”

“Not for long”, Maggie muttered under her breath, but still loud enough to have several questioning looks cast in her direction.

Unimpressed the former farmer’s daughter shrugged.

“What? I’m sorry, folks, but unless we find another cow who’s not related to Bert, there’s not gonna be a breed here. An ox however can help on the field. That old tractor we found is not gonna run forever.”

“Ox?” Glenn croaked, giving his wife a side glance with wide eyes.

“Yup.” She used her index and middle finger to imitate scissors and suppressed a grin when she saw every man at the table grow pale.

“Ouch”, Daryl remarked dryly. “Jude, keep yer cake. We best find that calf an ice pack instead. Jus’ in case.”

The group broke out laughing, including little Judith who didn’t have a clue what everyone thought so funny, but she loved the carefree and light mood around her. A shy smile tugged on Daryl’s lips and he couldn’t help lowering his eyes and staring at his plate. He still wasn’t used to people actually laughing about something he said, because they thought it was
funny – not because they thought it was ridiculous. These people here – they laughed with him, not at him. Sometimes he wondered how long it would take for him to be able to just enjoy this without being taken aback. If ever.

“I need a smoke”, Daryl muttered loud enough for Rick to hear, before he got up.

“Papa, you said we was gonna play some games. ‘cuz it’s my birthday.”

Daryl smiled inwardly and felt an immense wave of love and pride for that girl wash over him. She spoke an odd mixture of standard American English and Dixon and he thought it was absolutely adorable. No doubt Carol would beg to differ, but then Judith wasn’t her daughter. And next to manners, grammar was the last thing anyone needed in an apocalypse.

“We will, Asskicker. ‘m gonna be right back. Why don’t ya start a round of Blindman’s Buff with the others? Yer dad’s a natural.”

He suppressed a grin when he noticed Rick cast him a mock scowl. The younger man knew only too well how that translated.

_ Yer dad’s a natural _ disaster.

After the few futile attempts to teach Rick how to track, Daryl had commented that it was easier to teach a blind man instead. Same as even Bigfoot would probably walk more quietly than Rick. They had come to the conclusion right there and then that Daryl had best teach his skills to the rest of the group and give up on his partner in that respect. Which didn’t mean that they weren’t still heading out into the woods together. After all, there were other stuff and things they could teach each other out there …

Slowly Daryl approached the gate and with one shoulder leaning against the frame he lit a cigarette and took a deep drag.

His eyes wandered over the field outside the fence to the new building they had erected the previous month. Not for _some stupid broken bell or crap_, but as a combination of a barn and a stable. They were lucky that there was the need for both now.

The corn and sorghum they had planted that spring was growing nicely and hopefully they’d be able to enlarge their livestock further in the months to come. These animals were the future and whenever the away teams headed out there these days, it wasn’t for cans of ages old food, but to find tools, building materials, clothes, things of their daily needs and every book that might come in handy. Nobody was still deluding themselves. Day by day, step by step they were headed for the middle ages and nothing was able to prevent that. Food and meds that were still out there just weren’t good anymore. And every machine they had managed to get to work, would break down sooner or later. These days Eugene’s accomplishments were invaluable. Who would have thought that _Peeping Tom_ would one day be one of the most important members of this group? He had worked tirelessly to install solar panels for electricity, repair an old generator and pumps that helped pump the water of the nearby creek onto their field, into the moat and their water basin. And every available moment he was busy scribbling sketches of new inventions and improvements, first of all water and pin wheels that would substitute for their modern counterparts as soon as old age and the lack of parts for repairs would mean their doom.

Secretly the rest of the group had started to refer to him as “Leo”, since Eugene Porter had become their own personal Leonardo daVinci. More than once each and every one of their family had apologized for the way they had treated him before. It had been incredibly narrow-minded and nearsighted to think the survival in an apocalypse required no more than courage and the ability to wield weapons. In his own way Eugene did have courage – the courage to face a problem and go new ways to solve it. His weapons were wits, creativity, improvisation skills and not least of all
forsight. And foresight was it that had him suggest a few months back for everyone to pass their skills on to someone else. Just in case. He was the only engineer, Denise their only doctor, Daryl the only tracker, him and Aaron the only ones who knew how to hunt, Carol the only one who could sew and tailor clothes, Maggie the only one who knew about farming, save for the little Hershel had passed on to Rick. If anything was to happen to either of these people, their knowledge and skills would die with them. So Eugene had suggested school for the entire group. Each day. With everyone of the group teaching whatever they were good at to everybody else.

By now they knew better than to sneer at Dr. Porter’s ideas. As a matter of fact, they had all looked at each other the night he had made his suggestion, thinking: “He’s right. Why have we never thought of that before?” And so school attendance was compulsory for everybody in the group now – even if the subject of the day wasn’t their cup of tea. No protest was accepted, although Daryl had tried to skip in the beginning.

“I ain’t gonna wear no apron bakin’ stupid cookies ‘n’ no way ‘m gonna sew no clothes, either. ’m gonna look like a clown, man.”

“Why?” Carol had dared call him out. “Because those are chores for women? Wasn’t it you who held that speech about the men and women of this group being equals?”

That had made him fall quiet and give it some thought. Did she have a point? Was it okay for him that everyone here had the same rights, but not the same duties? Baking, cooking, cleaning, sewing – those were chores for women only? God, did he really think that way?

Inwardly Daryl had cringed. Clichés. The worst kind of them. The kind his old man would have preached – or Ed Peletier.

Daryl had seen the hurt in Carol’s eyes and had kept quiet, while he had wordlessly accepted the sewing needle and thread she had held out to him and gone to work.

Deep down inside he had wished for Will Dixon to be able to see him, wherever that bastard was now – hopefully it would make him turn in his grave till he got sick to the stomach.

Daryl hated sewing, but they all had things to do now they weren’t fond of. Still, Eugene was right. If they had to, they’d be able to and could pass their knowledge on to the next generation. And ever since the next generation wore vests with angel wing applications that Daryl had made for them, the archer had made his peace with that kind of pastime. It warmed his heart each time he saw Judith and Carl with their new pieces of clothing – the first pieces of anything Daryl had ever made at all.

In all his life Daryl had never painted a picture, written a story, made a sculpture – or sewed a piece of clothing. If he had died, there would have been nothing left of him. Nothing he created with his hands, nothing he could pass on, nothing to remain. Until now. He had given his children wings – literally. Sewing still was a stupid and boring chore, but it was worth doing it nevertheless. Actually, everything they did these days was.

“Hey.”

Carl’s voice next to him derailed Daryl’s train of thought and he cast the teenager a questioning side glance.

“Jude sent ya ta get me?”

“No. It’s her turn to be the blind man, so she hasn’t noticed yet that you’re gone.”
“Huh. Be right there.” Daryl took another drag from his smoke. “By the way – love that flower wreath ya made for her. ’s pretty.”

“Michonne showed me how, so it’s actually her wreath.”

“Nah. Carol showed me how ta use ‘em sewin’ needles without pokin’ holes in ma fingers. An’ I learned – yer wearin’ the result. ‘chonne showed ya, but ‘twas yer idea ‘n’ I saw ya sittin’ there with that pile a’ daisies, puttin’ ‘em together. That was you, Carl.”

The teenager shrugged.

“Let’s say it was a cooperation.”

“Very diplomatic. Ya really are Rick’s son, ya know.”

With a tiny smile the archer tugged on the brim of Carl’s cowboy hat, but the amusement wasn’t mirrored on the boy’s face. Instead he stepped from one foot onto the other, squirming, as though there was something on his mind he didn’t know how to bring across.

Daryl knew the feeling. He’d never been good with words and in the past he used to avoid situations like this by either ranting to mask his insecurity, or running. Neither was helpful. In both cases the things he had meant to say hadn’t been said and he had regretted that more than once. Especially when there’d never been a second chance to say them.

Ranting or running wasn’t Carl’s way to go about things. He was Rick’s son and had been taught to stand up for what he wanted, what he felt was right, what he thought needed to be said. But that didn’t make it any easier.

While the boy was still searching for the right words and his courage, Daryl wordlessly held his hand out to him. The hand that held the cigarette.

Wide blue teenage eyes were turned his way.

“’twas the deal”, the archer said with a shrug. “Told ya if Eugene stopped peekin’, ya’d get yer first smoke.”

“Nope. The deal was that I’d get my first smoke, if I found a way to stop Eugene from peeking. But I haven’t done anything.”

“Don’t matter. He stopped. ’s good enough for me. But if ya don’t want that smoke no more …”

In a flash the boy’s hand came forward and snatched the cigarette from Daryl’s fingers. He looked at it for a moment as though he had found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, then his eyes flicked nervously over his shoulder.

“My dad’s not gonna like this.”

“Prob’ly not.” Daryl shrugged. “Yer decision.”

“Think he’s gonna be pissed if he finds out?”

“Maybe. But ya know, Carl, growin’ up means makin’ decisions for yerself. Some’s gonna be bad ’n’ yer dad ain’t gonna like ’em, but ya gotta find yer own way, make yer own experiences. Ya can’t live Rick’s life – ya gotta live yer own.”

The boy gave this a moment of thought, then he put the cigarette between his lips and took a short drag. A second later the smoke was released in one puff and a wide grin spread over the teenager’s
face. It faded when he noticed Daryl’s raised eyebrows.

“That ain’t smokin’, man. C’mom, if ya do it, do it right. Ya gotta inhale real deep. It needs ta go all the way into yer lungs – anythin’ else’s kiddly stuff ‘n’ waste of a good smoke.”

Carl gave an affirmative nod and then did as Daryl suggested. He raised the cigarette to his lips again and took a deep drag. The next second he started coughing violently and his features visibly derailed.

“That’s gross as shit”, he gasped.

Daryl suppressed a grin while he noticed several eyes being turned their way behind the boy’s back, Rick’s included. Secretly the archer made a quick, soothing gesture and everyone was in the picture. Carl was being taught a lesson in growing up and making decisions.

“Uh-huh”, Daryl muttered unimpressed. “First drag always is. ‘s gonna get better. Try again.”

“Really?” Carl asked sceptically.

“Sure. Ya see me coughin’ ma lungs out? Yer gettin’ used ta it.”

“Okaaaay.”

Little convinced, the boy did as suggested and this time his face visibly changed color before he started coughing once again.

“Daryl, I think I’m gonna get sick.”

“Yeah, that can happen”, the archer replied mercilessly. “Take a couple a’ deep breaths. Ya don’t wanna start pukin’ in front a’ the whole group, right?”

Bravely Carl shook his head, but he didn’t look at the cigarette in his hands with curiousity or longing anymore. There was clearly a tinge of disgust there now.

“Did that happen to you, too, when you tried it the first time?”

“Sure.”

“Then why the heck did you go on?”

Daryl’s dark blue eyes rested on the boy for a long, silent moment. Then the archer replied:

“Never said I’s smart. An’ I had shitty role models. The kind that told me a real man hadda smoke – an’ if I wasn’t gonna learn ta be a real man, they’d beat it into me.”

Carl grew even paler than he already was, but before he could say anything Daryl added:

“’s bullshit, ya know. Doin’ any kind a’ crap someone tells ya ta do ain’t makin’ ya nothin’ but an idiot. Ya gotta do what ya feel ‘s right.”

He poked his index finger to Carl’s chest.

“In there. That’s what makes ya a man – not pullin’ that unhealthy shit into yer lungs. Still, if that’s what ya wanna do, if it’s yer decision ta start smokin’, jus’ lemme know. I still have a pack ta share.”

“No, thanks a lot.”

With a disgusted air the teenager handed the cigarette back to Daryl and suppressed a shudder.
“I just wanted to try it. Now I have and I don’t think that’s for me.”

“Suit yerself”, Daryl just said before he put the smoke between his own lips again and took another drag.

Inwardly he was grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

“Thanks, Daryl”, Carl said unexpectedly.

The archer cast him a surprised side glance.

“For makin’ ya sick?”

“For keeping your promise.”

Again Daryl shrugged.

“Always have.”

“Always will”, Carl added with a smile, recognizing the song lyrics. “I know.”

He fell quiet and watched the archer from the side, while Daryl’s eyes had resumed wandering over the nearby garden and the field beyond the fences. The cigarette hadn’t been the reason Carl had come here to talk to Daryl and they both knew it. Unexpectedly he said:

“Do you mind Judy calling you papa?”

The hand that held the smoke froze halfway to Daryl’s lips and was slowly lowered again a second later.

“Do you?”

“My mom hated it when you did that, you know. Giving a question right back to avoid the answer.”

“Yer mom hated lots a’ things I did.”

“In fact, she hated pretty much all of me”, he added mentally, but knew better than to say that out loud. 

“But ta answer yer question – no, I don’t mind at all. On the contrary. It makes me very happy.”

“Huh.”

The boy pulled in a deep breath, while the little wheels in his head kept turning faster and faster. This conversation was long overdue and he had meant to talk to Daryl for the longest time, but, jeez, this was awkward as shit. Then again, hadn’t it been Daryl who told him a while back that the emotional crap was important, what made the difference? So, he’d understand. Right?

“You’ve done a lot for us over the years – for Judy and me.”

Carl lowered his eyes before he added softly:

“Why?”

It was quiet between them for a moment, while Daryl dropped the smoke and stubbed it with the tip of his shoe.

It was his turn to pull in a deep breath. He had a hunch where this was headed and while he appeared to be entirely calm on the outside, his pulse rate had picked up considerably. Everything
inside of him urged him to run in order to avoid this conversation – and he might have, back then. At the quarry, at Hershel’s farm, maybe even at the prison yet. When he was still the Daryl Dixon Lori had looked down at, hadn’t respected or appreciated by her ex-husband’s side. And the archer couldn’t even blame her. He had never given her a chance to really know him, to see his true colors. But he wasn’t that Daryl Dixon anymore. He was a Grimes now and Grimeses didn’t run.

Why?

“Yer ma kids."

“No, we’re not. Not really.”

“Carl, there ain’t no not really when it comes ta bein’ a parent – either ya are or ya ain’t. Ma ol’ man … Unfortunately ’twas his sperm that brought me into this world, but that ain’t never made him ma dad. Jus’ like the whole Dixon bunch ain’t never been no family ta me. This group, all a’ em peeps here – they are ma family. An’ b’fore he became ma partner, Rick’s been more of a brother ta me than Merle ever was.”

He bowed a little to peek underneath the brim of Carl’s hat, trying to meet the boy’s eyes.

“Bein’ blood don’t make people family. Rick loves yer sis’ as though she was his girl, although he ain’t got no proof, ’cuz what ya feel inside ’s what matters. That’s why you ‘n’ Jude, yer always gonna be ma kids.”

Carl still was not looking up, but the cowboy hat moved as the boy nodded in understanding.

He was touched by what Daryl had just told him and yet torn deep down inside. He still heard his mother’s voice in the back of his head telling him:

“You gotta do what’s right. Promise me to always do what’s right.”

If she saw them now, what would she say? Lori never understood what Rick saw in Daryl, never accepted that she had not only been replaced by a man, but by a hot-headed, uneducated, unkempt redneck as such. Rick and Daryl – that was supposed to be the big plan? If she wouldn’t be there anymore, that man was going to take care of her babies, raise them, teach them? Dear God, teach them what? Swear words, how to pick fights and put their foot in it time and again?

Nervously Carl started playing with his fingers. Daryl just told him to find his own way, make his own decisions. What if that decision wouldn’t honor Lori’s memory? What if it was the opposite of what she would have called doing the right thing?

The silence didn’t go unnoticed and before it became highly uncomfortable, Daryl added:

“Jus’ want ya ta know that this ‘s what I got ta offer. Whether ya accept it or not is entirely up to you, Carl. It don’t come with no expectations or obligations, okay? Ya know, when ya fall in love with some girl one day, ’s gonna be pretty much the same thing – yer lucky when those feelin’s are gonna be mutual. If they ain’t – well, tough shit. Ya gotta learn ta live with it. Prob’ly ain’t gonna change the way ya feel though.”

Unexpectedly Carl gave a derisive snort.

“What girl? It’s pretty unlikely for me to ever fall in love around here. The only girl who’s not my sister is Hope and by the time she’s old enough, I’m gonna be an old man of like forty or so.”

He sighed.

“But I get what you wanted to say. – Thanks, Daryl.”
With his emotions in an uproar the boy turned on his heels and started walking away to do some thinking, but then he suddenly stopped dead in his tracks again.

“How do you know if you’re doing the right thing?”

Once more Daryl shrugged.

“If it feels right, it prob’ly is. But I sure ain’t the expert.”

The ghost of a smile played around Daryl’s lips and he was surprised to see Carl turn to him with shining eyes all of a sudden, a wide grin on his face.

“It’s so easy to do the wrong thing in this world, so if it feels wrong, don’t do it. If it feels easy, don’t do it.”

Those had been Lori’s words to him, back at the prison only moments before she died. And Daryl had pretty much just told him the same thing. Who’d ever have thought that one day those two would agree on anything? And the core message was: Follow your heart.

Carl held out his hand to Daryl for a bro-fist and when it was returned, both of them smiling at each other, the teenager said softly:

“Pity my mom never really got to know you. She would have liked you, pa.”

That said he turned on his heels and returned to the birthday party to join the next round of *Hit the Pot*, while Daryl watched him with a wide smile and eyes that shone a hue bluer than before. He had just become a father – officially – and in right that moment he was absolutely sure to be the happiest man on Earth.

Chapter End Notes

The second part of the epilogue will be about Rick and Daryl ... :-)
After Carl had left him, Daryl had been standing a little to the side for a while longer and watched his family – Rick, Judith, Carl … all of them. Breathing had been difficult all of a sudden and his heart had been pounding so hard that he feared it might break out of his ribcage any second. For just that moment he had actually been afraid to be having a heart attack or something, but although that feeling was eerie there hadn’t been any pain. It wasn’t even unpleasant, just something Daryl couldn’t identify at first. It was when Carl picked his little sister up to swing her around and he heard Rick’s laughter that the archer realized what that feeling was. He was happy. Simple as that. Entirely and completely happy, carefree and zen – for the first time in his life.

The past was the past, along with the memories of his childhood, his shitty father, the loss of more than one refuge ever since the outbreak and their desperate search for a new home, the asshole with the baseball bat and their horrible fate in Rick’s vision. Past, over, gone, no more.

There was no better day than today to start a whole new part of his life, Daryl had decided after another minute of watching his family engaged in silly children’s games. And there was no better way to start that new part than to make a complete spectacle of himself and join in, play Hit the Pot or what the heck ever although he’d never hear the end of it. He had promised his daughter, and good fathers kept their promises. And that’s what he was now, the father of two, and he’d be damned not to do everything in his power to be a helluva good dad to both of them. If that meant making them laugh by crawling on the floor, blindfolded and trying to hit a stupid pot with a wooden spoon, so be it. He had probably done worse in his life, he mused. Things he should most definitely have been ashamed of and was not. But that was part of the past that was over and forgotten.

An hour later Rick gave the “time out” signal and suggested a break, which was answered by more than one relieved puff by the adults and the to be expected protest of little Judith, although the girl had tiredly rubbed her eyes more than once during the latest egg-and-spoon race.

“It’s time for Hope’s nap”, Maggie explained to her with a smile, “and you all need to be a little quiet now so she can sleep.”

That wasn’t true, of course. Babies were known to be able to sleep in the middle of a crowded train station – or a hissing and snarling horde of walkers, for that matter – but it was a good pretense for the urgently needed break. Unexpectedly the realization hit Maggie that Judith and Hope would never know what a train or a train station even was, but until all those millions of walkers out there had decayed or someone found a cure, Judy and Hope would know what zombies were.

“I think I need a nap, too”, Sasha announced with a smile, while she ran her hand over her swollen belly.
It warmed Rick’s heart to see Abraham cover her hand with his own and he remembered doing the same more than once when Lori had been pregnant with Carl. 

God, how long ago had that been? 

It felt like part of a former life and in a way it was – a life without walkers, without the apocalypse, when Shane had still been his best friend and partner on the force – when things had still been normal. 

But in that former life, Daryl hadn’t been by his side. They hadn’t known each other and even if they would have met, they would never have become friends, let alone lovers. Despite the world having gone to hell and zombies roaming the Earth, Rick liked his new life better.

“I’m tired, too”, Carl’s voice ended Rick’s train of thought and he cast his son a surprised glance.

Carl hadn’t taken naps since he’d been Judith’s age. Was he sick? Before new worries could soil this otherwise perfect day, he saw the boy wink in his direction, before he picked his sister up and rocked her gently.

“Whadda you say, Jude, wanna lay down with me for a little while? I tell you a story, too.”

“’kay.”

It didn’t sound too thrilled, but her brother spending some time with her and even telling her a story made good for having to stop playing for a while.

“Thank you”, Rick mouthed silently in Carl’s direction and with a curt nod, accompanied by a smile, the teenager disappeared into one of the buildings with his baby sister on his arm.

One by one the people of the group went their separate ways to spend the break either relaxing some place or doing one or the other of the daily chores around Home, until Rick and Daryl were the only ones left in the courtyard.

Both their faces were flushed and their eyes shone brighter than ever before while they smiled at each other.

“You look happy”, Rick said softly.

He reached out a hand and ran it gently through Daryl’s hair, before he tucked one strand behind the archer’s ear. Old habits died hard and Rick still loved to do that although it didn’t work as well anymore ever since Daryl allowed Maggie to cut his hair. 

Just like the layer of dirt Daryl used to cover himself with like a shield, the long hair apparently had been a means of protection as well. A curtain to hide behind, to conceal his emotions, to blind out the world with. He had started to let it grow after Merle’s death. Although the older Dixon would definitely never have won the Brother of the Year award, he had still been some kind of support and protection for Daryl for as long as the archer could think back. Protection against their violent father and the world in general that held no liking for Dixons. With Merle gone all of a sudden, Daryl had felt vulnerable and exposed and had substituted his brother’s presence with the long hair. Things were different now. This was a new life for Daryl as well, a new world. He didn’t need a shield against it anymore – he loved the world as it was now. 

Finally, after more than forty years, he had come home, had a family, lived in a wonderful community where he was respected and appreciated and had a partner by his side he loved more than life itself. A feeling that was mutual, so this world was perfect in every aspect. And Daryl wanted to be able to see it without hair before his eyes half of the time.

So he had asked Maggie to cut it off. He hadn’t told her how much or what style he wanted. It didn’t matter. Just like he was pretty certain to never win in a beauty contest, he was just as certain that Rick would always think him beautiful no matter what she did with his hair. So, yes, it didn’t matter.
Daryl hadn’t even been surprised when she had held up a mirror after she was done to let him see the result. It was the length he had had at the prison, right before it fell – when Beth died. The last time Maggie’s baby sister had seen Daryl, this was the way he had looked and as though she had meant to preserve that moment, she had copied that style down to the last detail as though it was engraved in her memory.

And maybe it was.

No doubt she would never be able to shed the memory of Daryl carrying the lifeless body of her little sister out of the hospital, but the archer couldn’t help hoping that there were other memories that made Maggie choose this style. Memories of how he and Beth had sat in Rick and Hershel’s garden, playing with little Judith together. Memories of how he had taught the young girl to handle the crossbow or relaxed sitting next to her while she sang one of her songs.

Daryl and Beth had had a special bond, a close friendship Maggie had always admired. Beth’s optimism and cheerful disposition had put Daryl at ease and made his world brighter and his heart lighter, helped him to put his dark past behind him, while she had looked up to him, admired his strength and courage, felt safe in his presence.

The last time Beth had seen him he had looked the way he did now and maybe Maggie had meant to honor their friendship by giving him this particular haircut.

He hadn’t asked her. Maybe he was entirely wrong, but he truly liked this explanation, so he liked the new hairdo as well.

“I am”, he replied to Rick’s observation that he looked happy. “Carl called me ‘pa’ when we talked earlier.”

“I know he would eventually”, the younger man said with a wide smile. “Told you that’s what you were and I know he’s been feeling that way about you for quite a while now. He just needed his time to realize it, I guess.”

“Uh-huh”, Daryl cast him a meaningful look. “Seems ta run in the family.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Excuse me, Officer Friendly, but even Merle knew what was goin’ on between the two of us b’fore you finally got it.”

Rick cocked his head and didn’t offer a comeback as Daryl expected. Instead he looked at the archer calmly for a moment and then said:

“I doubt that. I knew pretty early, you know, but I had just messed up my marriage and hurt more than one person in the process. I just needed to be sure, so I wouldn’t mess up again.”

“Define ‘pretty early’”, Daryl prompted curiously.

“When Andrea shot you”, Rick said softly, swallowing against a lump in his throat. “When the thought of losing you hurt more than I expected, that’s when I knew.”

“I’s still way ahead a’ ya there.”

“Yeah? You know, bein’ quick isn’t a plus in every aspect.”

“Jackass”, Daryl said dryly when the innuendo registered, but he said it with a smile.

Rick chuckled, enjoying the friendly banter as much as he enjoyed everything that day. Nothing could possibly destroy his good mood, nothing would bring any clouds to his strikingly blue sky.
Life was just too perfect in right that moment.

“Ya look happy, too, ya know”, Daryl observed while his smile widened.

Unexpectedly Rick leaned in and pressed his lips to Daryl’s for a quick, firm kiss.

“Don’t you know what day it is today?” he asked enthusiastically when he pulled back.
“Judith’s third birthday! Remember what I told you about that damn vision? That I’d be sure we beat fate and were safe from what I’ve seen when Maggie and Glenn’s baby was born and Judith turned three without anyone of the group dying before that date?” He pulled the archer into a tight hug.

“And we’ve made it, Daryl. They are all here today, alive and well. Even more so – we got two new members in our family and a third one on the way. The nightmare’s over.”

“Ain’t too sure ‘bout that”, Daryl grumbled behind Rick’s back.

When the younger man looked him in the eyes in surprise, he noticed Daryl focus on something behind him and cast a glance over his shoulder.

The smile was instantly back, but before he could say anything Daryl beat him to it.

“Li’l Hope ‘n’ Sasha’s baby, they are great new family members, despite the latter bein’ a mini Abe. Lord help us. But that dude?”

He pointed to a man in his mid 50’s, who was kneeling next to Carol in the group’s vegetable garden, apparently busy weeding. Daryl watched them like a hawk for a moment, while Rick suppressed a grin.

Aaron and Eric had found the man wandering in the woods about a month ago. And although they had never discussed bringing in new people, they had decided there and then that he appeared to be friendly enough to take the risk.

He’d been all alone, injured and half starved and would have died all by himself. Aaron had claimed that a community of decent human beings wouldn’t just let someone die without trying to help. Especially since each new victim this world claimed would enlarge the mass of walkers roaming the Earth and threatening their lives.

Nobody had objected. Not even Daryl, although he wasn’t too fond of strangers and his slightly anti-social nature made it hard for him to welcome someone new. Still, he’d been willing to give the man a chance – until just recently Carol seemed to be spending way more time with him than with anyone else, the looks they cast each other lasted that tad too long and they sat and stood suspiciously close.

Right now the newcomer picked a small white flower and presented it to Carol with a smile, while she accepted it with a girly giggle.

Daryl was instantly reminded of the day back at Hershel’s farm when he had given the Cherokee Rose to her. That one had come with a story and a vase even and sure had been more of a flower than the poor excuse for one she was given over there right now. It appeared to be a simple daisy, no more.

“Mine’s bigger than yers, jerk”, Daryl couldn’t help thinking.

“Daryl.” Rick wrapped one arm around his partner’s shoulders and gave him a friendly hug.
“Stop staring. You’re drilling a hole into the poor dude’s skull.”

“Nah, ‘m jus’ makin’ sure he treats her right, ‘s all.”

Rick was actually touched by Daryl’s protective attitude.

“He hasn’t given us any reason to think that he wouldn’t. So far he’s been nothing but friendly
and cooperative. And he used to be a carpenter. You know we need people who are good with their hands.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of”, Daryl said with a dark scowl into the man’s direction, “that he’s good with his hands.”

Again Rick suppressed a laugh.

“Carol’s a grown woman, Daryl, and doesn’t need a chaperone. Man, I can’t wait till Judy has her first boyfriend.”

On any other day that topic might have triggered a reaction like:

“That dude needs ta get past ma crossbow first.”

But this wasn’t any other day. This was the day Carl had gotten Daryl to thinking and made him realize that everyone in Home without a partner was doomed to solitude, unless they opened their gates to new people. There was no one here who’d be a suitable partner for both Carl and Judith, and unless they became a bigger community the next generation would end up alone and isolated. Same as Michonne.

Deep down inside Daryl was happy that Carol would apparently be spared that fate. Still …

“Ain’t chaperonin’ or whatever the heck yer callin’ it. ‘m just makin’ sure she ain’t gettin’ hurt. Ya know how much she means ta me ‘n’ she deserves better than another douchebag like Ed Peletier.”

“He is nothing like Ed Peletier and you know it. As a matter of fact, he reminds me a bit of that Axel guy we met at the prison. Despite being an inmate, Axel was nice enough and Carol really liked him.”

Daryl rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, an’ he had the most ridiculous mustache. Apparently she likes ridiculous things in a man.”

Rick refrained from pointing out that this comment just backfired. With a nod to the newly enamored couple he asked instead:

“What’s ridiculous about him?”

“His name! I mean – Norman? What kind a’ name’s that? Sounds like a complete idiot.”

This time Rick lost the fight and broke out laughing.

“Are you jealous that Carol’s got a new pookie? Norman’s a perfectly normal name.”

“Not where I come from.”

Again Rick bit back the remark that where Daryl came from a name like Merle might have been normal, but truth of the matter was that it was kind of odd for a grown man. In fact, he knew that in some European countries it was a girl’s name, but he knew better than to say that out loud. Even if poor Norman over there had a perfectly average name like Mark or Andrew or whatever, he would be at the receiving end of Daryl’s dissing. At least until he had proven his trustworthiness and had treated Carol like a queen for a period of time that Daryl considered sufficient as probation.
“Ain’t jealous”, the archer’s voice pulled Rick out of his thoughts. “I’m really happy that she’s happy. I jus’ want it ta stay that way. She’s done sufferin’ enough in her life ‘n’ she deserves better. Jus’ want her ta have somethin’ like … like we have.”

Rick tightened his hug around Daryl’s shoulders and leaned his head against the side of his partner’s.

“She will. You just need to back off and trust her to make her own decisions. Pity though she cannot do the Dirty Dancing test with him.”

“The what?”

“You know, make the poor guy watch that gruesome movie with her to see if he would. For her. To do her a favor.”

As promised he didn’t tell Daryl that Carol actually hated that movie.

“You passed that test with flying colors, by the way.”

The archer pulled a face and cast his partner a side glance.

“Did she need ta torture me like that ta know I’s gonna do her any favor?”

“No. But still it’s nice to actually see it. Same as you may be sure of someone’s feelings for you and still it makes a difference to actually hear the words. Like someone calling you ‘pa’.”

He smiled at Daryl.

“Or saying ‘I love you’.”

The archer looked thoughtfully to Carol and her new boyfriend, who were totally oblivious to his close observation and went on pulling weeds from the vegetable beds as though that was the most wonderful pastime in the world.

“Maybe yer right”, he said softly after a moment of silence. “But I swear ta God, if that dude hurts her, it’s gonna be ‘last come – first serve’."

He held up his balled fist so Rick would catch his meaning and again the leader couldn’t help chuckling. Daryl’s protective instinct was one of his strongest characters traits and Rick had always loved and valued it. Daryl Grimes made this world that tad safer for all of them.

Unexpectedly Daryl nudged his partner’s side and said:

“Let’s go for a ride.”

Surprised Rick met his eyes.

“Now?”

He suppressed a knowing smirk.

A few weeks after they had settled in Home, Daryl had found a bike he’d been able to repair and it was his pride and joy. Ever since then ‘going for a ride’ with Rick translated into ‘let’s head out to our secret hiding place’, which in their case was a small barn about ten miles away from the community.

Each one of the couples had a secret hideout now. The buildings of their new home were small and the rooms even smaller, so despite doors, locks and shutters, privacy was almost non-existent. The only way to spend some time in intimate togetherness, unbothered by the rest of the group, was to head out into the woods or one of the towns in the area and find a cozy nest there to get away from it all.

In Daryl and Rick’s case the cozy nest was that barn, which had offered safety and privacy
numerous times ever since they discovered it. And ‘going for a ride’ in most cases meant heading out to do some rolling in the hay – literally.

“Daryl, it’s Judy’s birthday. We can’t just leave. She’s gonna be disappointed when she wakes up from her nap and finds us gone.”

“Nah, ya misunderstood.”
Regret clearly peppered the archer’s inflection.
“I really just meant goin’ for a ride, no more. Jus’ for a li’l while – once around the block, so ta speak.”

Rick’s eyebrows rose to his hairline and he couldn’t fight the well-known eerie feeling in the pit of his stomach. It hadn’t bothered him in a long time, but now it was back – like an old acquaintance he’d rather see leave than come and had hoped to never meet again.

“Everything okay?” he couldn’t help asking.

“Yeah, sure. I jus’ feel like ridin’ ma bike ‘n’ it’s the perfect day for … Let’s jus’ go, okay?”

Rick decided to ignore the blasted feeling and humor Daryl. He was probably just seeing things. The world, their world, was almost too good to be true now and after all this time it was hard to believe that the nightmare was finally over. So he probably just expected for Fate to come up with new obstacles, new disasters to toss their way.
Well, not on this day.
It was Judith’s third birthday. He had been looking forward to this ever since he had had that horrible vision and nothing and nobody would ruin it for him. Fate could go to hell and stay there for all he cared.

“Alright. I guess once around the block will be okay. – I’ll open the gates.”

That said he headed to the first one, while Daryl turned towards the garage to get his bike.
When Rick cast a scrutinizing glance over his shoulder, still unable to shed the feeling that something was up, he saw Daryl point his index and middle finger at his eyes and then at Norman, who had looked up in right that moment.
Shaking his head to himself the leader pulled the gate open and proceeded to the second one, while behind him he heard the engine of the motorcycle come to life.
Poor Norman wasn’t out of the woods yet and Rick already pitied the fool who’d one day dare court Judith under the watchful eyes of her overprotective papa.

The nagging feeling and Rick’s dark thoughts dissolved as soon as they were out on the road and Daryl accelerated.
Although he had never learned to ride one himself, Rick loved being the passenger on Daryl’s bike, with his arms slung tightly around his partner’s waist and pressed flush against his back. They both knew that the backroads of an apocalyptic world weren’t suitable to ride so fast that Rick had to hold on for dear life, but they both enjoyed that he did nevertheless.
The leader had long since come to understand why Daryl loved riding bikes, how it made him feel. There was nothing like watching the scenery fly by while the wind played with one’s hair, the sun warmed the face and the open sky above was the limit. It felt like flying and all worries and sorrows seemed to be blown away until nothing remained but carefreeness, pure bliss and a feeling of utter freedom.

Daryl shifted gears and turned the handle that made the bike accelerate even more.
It was risky to speed when old, broken down cars, fallen trees or walkers might obstruct the road right behind the next corner, but the archer couldn’t help it. He needed to feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins, needed to feel the power of the machine beneath and Rick’s arms tightening around him, needed to hear the roaring sound and savor one last time how the wind pulled on his hair and blew into his eyes until his sight was slightly blurred by tears. And then, maybe that wasn’t the wind …

His change of mood didn’t go unnoticed. In the rearview mirror Rick watched with a frantically pounding heart how Daryl’s eyes clouded over a little bit more with each mile they covered, until the joyful sparkle that had shone in them only an hour ago was gone. The grip on the bike’s handles was visibly tightening with each passing minute, so that Daryl’s knuckles showed white after a while, and more than once Rick felt him pull in a deep breath as though he was sighing. And he probably was. The eerie feeling hadn’t deluded him. Something was up, something Daryl had come out here to tell him and any moment now he would probably pull over and bring new clouds to Rick’s perfect blue sky. Apparently it had been too good to be true to not have any worries and sorrows. Not even for one damn day Fate could just back off and let them be happy.

What happened? What was going on?
Rick felt all color drain from his face suddenly. God, no. Did Daryl get bit and had kept it a secret till the very last moment, the way Carl had in Rick’s vision? Was he planning to stop the bike in the middle of nowhere, far away from the rest of the group, so they wouldn’t have to watch him die? Was this going to be a farewell and not the joyride Rick had hoped for?
The longer the ride lasted, the more Rick’s imagination was running wild and the most horrible explanations for Daryl’s sadness played out before his mind’s eye. The happy smile had long since disappeared from the younger man’s face and he was fiercely fighting back tears now.
This couldn’t be happening. Not now, not ever. Not when they had finally found a place where he and Daryl could grow old together to have their happily-ever-after. What had they ever done for Fate to hate them so much?
Just when Rick couldn’t bear it any longer and meant to urge Daryl to stop and finally tell him what was going on, the archer pulled over on his own accord.

He turned the engine off and once again pulled in a deep breath. While he cast a glance over his shoulder, he gave the hands of his lover that still rested on his belly a squeeze, wordlessly prompting Rick to let go.
When the younger man didn’t comply and, on the contrary, even tightened his hug, Daryl leaned into him and closed his eyes, indulging in the embrace for a moment longer.
He loved this feeling. Loved to sit on his bike with Rick so close, the warmth of the familiar body in his back and his partner’s breath like a caress on his neck, the way Rick would lean his head against Daryl’s and interlace the fingers of one hand with his whenever the bike’s speed and the condition of the road allowed it.
He was so going to miss all that, but the old saying was right – all good things must come to an end.

“Get off”, he whispered to Rick after a while.

They were only postponing the inevitable. Much that Daryl would have loved to, they couldn’t keep on sitting here like this forever.
Reluctantly Rick let go of his man and climbed off the bike, his heart growing heavier with each second that ticked away.
When Daryl stood right in front of him, one hand resting almost tenderly on the gas tank, he sighed audibly and then said:

“This is it. That was our last ride.”

“Why?” Rick croaked, the lump in his throat almost choking him.
“’m out.”

“What?”

“’m out a’ gas. First Aaron’s car, then the RV ‘n’ now ma bike. We ain’t got no gas no more. An’ no more a’ that chemical that makes the ol’ fuel good at all, so there’s no sense in checkin’ any of ‘em cars ‘round here. Means, no more rides to our barn, no more joyrides at all.”

He sighed again and actually looked as though he was close to tears, while Rick stared at him with wide eyes, trying to process what Daryl had just said. The next moment his fist shot forward and punched the archer to the chest.

“Are you nuts?!”

Anger was blazing in Rick’s azure blue eyes all of a sudden. “That’s all? You’re out of gas?”

Rubbing over the spot where Rick had hit him, Daryl was totally taken aback by the sudden outburst.

“This ‘s serious shit, man. We’re officially back ta the middle ages now ‘n’ I gotta say good bye ta ma baby.”

“I thought I had to say good bye to you, you idiot!”

Agitated Rick ran a hand through his curls. “I thought something had happened. Thought maybe you’ve been bit and took me out here to break the news to me. I thought I would have to return home without you, because … because …”

Daryl grew pale, while his eyes widened about two sizes.

“Ah, shit, man. Why the heck would ya think that?”

“Because I saw how sad you were, felt that there was something up and when you just meant to go on a ride with no particular destination … Hell, Daryl, don’t ever do that to me again, you hear me?”

“Won’t. Ain’t got no more gas, remember?” Daryl started a lame attempt on lightening the mood.

Despite himself a single tear slid down Rick’s cheek and pressing his lips together he turned his back to Daryl, breathing in deep to regain his composure.

“You’re a jackass, Dixon.”

“Grimes.”

“Whatever.”

The next moment Daryl appeared in front of him and pulled him into a tight hug. In the first impulse Rick fought him off half-heartedly, angry about the entire situation and embarrassed about his overreaction. But then he just sank into his partner’s arms and returned the embrace.

“Sorry”, Daryl muttered. “I had no idea yer imagination was goin’ off the scale there. I’s just sad that our visits to the barn are history, that I ain’t never gonna ride no bike ever again in ma life. I’s hopin’ ta be able ta teach Carl ‘n’ Judy one day, the way Merle taught me, but now they never gonna know what awesome feelin’ it is. ‘twas part a’ me for so long … ’m jus’ gonna miss it, ‘s all.”
Rick buried his nose in the crock of Daryl’s neck and inhaled the archer’s unique scent. The mixture of smoke, leather, wood and sweat that he had come to love years ago.

“I get it. I really do. It was fun riding it and I loved it, too, but … it’s just a machine, Daryl. We gonna have to learn to live without lots of stuff we were used to, but frankly, I couldn’t care less.”

He lifted his head off Daryl’s shoulder and looked him in the eyes.

“The only thing I couldn’t live without … that’s you.”

In an impulse the archer had a ‘Yes, you could’ reply on the tip of his tongue, but on second thought he swallowed it. If tables were turned, could he? – Go on without Rick? Face this world alone without the one person by his side he had ever truly loved?

“No matter what, Rick”, he replied softly, “we both still got two more reasons ta go on. An’ we gotta. So for Judy ‘n’ Carl ya need ta promise me ta hang in there.”

“B’sides – I ain’t got no intention ta go anywhere. Yer jus’ thinkin’ too hard again, Butch.”

Again he was trying to lighten the mood, hoping that this time it would work. Despite Judy’s birthday and nothing bad happening for a long time now, that vision was obviously still torturing Rick. Maybe it would for the rest of his days.

Daryl’s heart skipped a beat when he noticed a smile spread over his partner’s face. Apparently his attempt to cheer Rick up was effective.

“You really love that movie, don’t you?” he smirked.

With a shrug Daryl took a step back and replied:

“Yeah. Can’t help it, I sort of always admired ‘em.”

“Admired them? They were criminals who robbed trains and banks.”

Rick’s eyebrows rose to his hairline.

“What’s to admire?”

Daryl lowered his eyes and took great interest in the tip of his shoes suddenly.

“Ya know, despite bein’ the bad guys, they was still the good guys. Did what they hadda do in order to survive, but they tried not ta harm no one and … they’s friends, brothers even. Ya know, they stuck together till the end, stood up for each other, cared for ‘n’ protected the other one.”

He shrugged again, not daring to look up.

“I could always identify with bein’ one a’ the bad guys. I’s a Dixon after all – we’s bein’ born bad. Least that’s what people let us know wherever we went. Still I’s tryin’ ta do better, survive somehow without hurtin’ no one, so’s I was one a’ the good guys nevertheless. I’s hopin’ if I tried hard enough, I’s gonna be rewarded one day – with a friend, a brother like Butch, who’d care for me ‘n’ stand by me.”

A smile tugged on the corners of his mouth as he slowly lifted his head and cast Rick a glance.

“Worked, too.”

Deeply touched, Rick looked his lover in the eyes and mirrored the smile.

“Why do you identify with Sundance? Butch had the bike after all.”

“Very funny.” Daryl pulled a face. “Ain’t it obvious why I favor Sundance?”
Rick waited silently, expecting to hear an explanation like Daryl not being the type to lead, to make the calls and thus being more like Sundance, but a moment later he broke out laughing when Daryl added dryly:

“He’s got the better hair.”

Chuckling Rick felt his earlier tension subside and his heart beat lighter again. He placed his hands on Daryl’s shoulders and had his thumbs gently stroke the sides of his partner’s neck.

“I guess we don’t need to be afraid anymore to lose each other, huh? If we share their fate, we’re gonna go out together in a blaze of glory.”

“Yeah, right.” Daryl pulled a face again. ‘Blaze a’ glory doin’ what? Feedin’ some damn chicken or shovelin’ horse shit outta the stable?“

A rumbling in the distance caught their attention and spared Rick an answer to the chicken and horse shit comment. Simultaneously they cast a glance up to the sky and saw the first dark clouds accumulate over their heads. Instantly a concerned air appeared on Rick’s face and he started to squirm nervously. Daryl wrapped his arms soothingly around his partner’s middle and pulled him close.

“Relax. Ain’t the first storm ‘n’ ya know they got things under control.”

Rick didn’t even need to say anything for Daryl to know that he was worried about Judith and Carl, the livestock, the garden, *everything*. It was a habit he apparently just couldn’t shake. In all the time they had been here now, their entire group had learned to work like a Swiss clockwork. Everyone knew what had to be done, what needed to be taken care of, so Rick Grimes’ supervision wasn’t needed. But a born leader would always be a leader, if only in his heart.

“Rick”, Daryl drew his partner’s attention when the cerulean eyes flashed to the sky repeatedly. “That storm’s still miles away. ‘s jus’ the first rumblings. Might be hours till it gets here ‘n’ maybe it’s even gonna pass us by completely.”

“If it hits though”, he added with a smirk in his voice, “I hope’s gonna wait till tonight.”

Rick’s eyebrows went up, but before he could even ask, the archer added:

“So we ain’t gonna have ta keep it down.”

The worried air on the younger man’s face was replaced by a wide smile when he caught on.

“I like the way you’re thinking, Sundance”, he breathed into his lover’s face before his lips met Daryl’s.

For the length of two more warning rumblings in the distance the two men were engaged in an ardent kiss, neither one worrying about the approaching storm anymore, but actually looking forward to it.

When they broke apart in the need to breathe, Daryl said:

“Guess we best head back now nevertheless. Jude’s gonna be waiting.”

“We don’t have the bike anymore”, Rick stated a known fact. “How do we get back?”

“We’re gonna walk, man.” Daryl released his man and took a step back. “’s jus’ half a mile
down the road.”

He nodded into the direction they had been headed before and could barely refrain from rolling his eyes when he saw the flabbergasted look on Rick’s face.

“Ya still can’t track for shit, right? An’ I bet ‘em stupid chicken got a better sense a’ direction than you.”

“Fact”, Rick replied unimpressed. “Doesn’t matter, though. I happen to know a pretty good tracker who’s always gotten my ass safely back home so far.”

“Huh, yer lucky ya got an ass that’s worth the trouble.”

They smiled at each other for a moment and then started walking down the street, headed for Home. After a few yards Rick stopped unexpectedly and cast a look over his shoulder.

“What about your bike?”

“’s a useless piece a’ trash now”, Daryl said sadly. “No sense in bringin’ it along.”

“You sure?”

“Rick, jus’ leave it ‘n’ let’s go.”

His inflection left no doubt about this translating into: “Havin’ ta leave ma bike ‘s breakin’ ma heart, so don’t make me talk ‘bout it ‘n’ jus’ leave quickly b’fore I start cryin’ in a very unmanly way.”

Relenting Rick nodded and started walking next to his partner down the road again. Neither of them looked back.

One of them went back though. Early the next morning, before the sun was even up, Rick sneaked out of Home secretly and headed back to retrieve Daryl’s baby. He pushed it all the way back home and parked it securely in the garage next to the equally useless RV and car, smiling to himself all the while. He knew Daryl would love seeing it, although he wasn’t able to ride it anymore. At least until Eugene had figured out a way to run machines through solar or wind power or whatever and found a way to get Daryl’s bike to work again. Maybe one of these days Daryl might actually have a reason to love Peeping Tom.

“The little blond whirlwind came darting towards them the moment they came into sight and when Daryl held out his arms, she rushed straight into them and squealed excitedly when he swung her around.

“Hey, Asskicker”, he greeted their daughter when he set her back down. “Did ya have a good nap?”

“No!” she pouted. “Being in bed is boring as shit.”

Daryl suppressed a grin, when again the little angel sounded pretty much like he usually did.

“Ya gonna change yer mind on that one day”, he promised and chuckled when Rick elbowed him to the side.
The innuendo hadn’t gone unnoticed.

“Have you been playing some more while we were gone?” Rick asked the birthday girl and again she curled her lips in a pout.

“They were all busy with stupid stuff like closing doors ‘n’ windows, chasing them chickens to lock them up in their henhouse, tie things down ‘n’ bring Humpty and Dumpty into the stable.”

While Rick acknowledged all the things his people had reliably taken care of, *Humpty and Dumpty* was the only thing Daryl really heard.

“Who the hell’s Humpty ‘n’ Dumpty?”

“The horsies, papa.”

“An’ whose idea was it ta name ‘em poor animals that?”

“Uncle Norman.”

“Figures”, Daryl growled, before he added under his breath: “He’d know ‘bout stupid names.”

“That was fun”, Judith continued with a wide smile. “While everyone’s done doing stupid stuff ‘n’ things, he played with me. We gave all the animals funny names. The chickens is now Larry, Moe and Curly.”

Rick broke out laughing, but sobered up instantly when Daryl’s dark side glance hit him.

“Ya think that’s funny? ‘s ridiculous, man. All ‘em chickens are girls. Ya can’t name ‘em …”

When he saw Judy’s big eyes and realized that the unspoken question ran “What’s the difference between girls and boys”, he swallowed the rest of his rant and opted for quickly changing the subject.

“So, nanny Norman’s done takin’ good care a’ you?”

“He better”, Daryl added mentally, “or we gonna have room for someone new sooner than expected.”

Judith’s curls bounced when she nodded enthusiastically.

“Yup. He’s funny, papa.”

“That so?”

Despite himself Daryl swallowed thickly against a lump in his throat and fought a terrible stinging sensation in the center of his chest.

He may be lots of things, but *funny* sure wasn’t one of them. He didn’t know any children’s games or songs or rhymes. And if he gave people or things names, it wasn’t for entertainment or to prove his sense of humor. No wonder Judy liked that Norman dude – he was a jokester apparently and every child loved clowns.

“‘m glad ya had fun, Jude”, he croaked and pressed a kiss to the girl’s chubby cheek.

He ran his hand tenderly over the blond curls.

“Can I go play some more b’fore dinner time?”
Daryl just nodded wordlessly, trying to keep a straight face. The little girl turned on her heels with a wide smile and toddled off. After a few steps however she stopped and called over her shoulder:

“Can ya play with us, papa? And daddy, too? It’d be so much more fun if you was there.”

Another rumbling rolled over the community in that moment and Daryl wasn’t sure if that was thunder in the distance or the sound of that immense weight that had just dropped off his chest.

“We’re gonna be right there, munchkin”, Rick reassured their daughter, while he wrapped one arm around Daryl’s shoulders.

While Judy ran off after a curt nod accompanied by a wide smile, Rick said softly to Daryl:

“You’ve got no reason to be jealous, Daryl. Or to doubt anyone’s dedication to you. That Norman dude may have won both Carol and Judith’s hearts, but there’s only one pookie for Carol. And there’s only one papa for Judy. No one will ever be able to take that away from you.”

After the words had sunken in, Daryl felt better, but the green-eyed monster wasn’t chased away so easily. Some things took time. But then, time they actually did have now, so maybe one of these days Uncle Norman might actually find mercy before the eyes of Daryl Grimes.

“Yeah, an’ no one had better try ta take ‘em away from me, unless they care ta get a special position at the next crossbow class – as the target.”

Rick broke out laughing. He hugged the archer close and pressed a hearty kiss to the side of his head.

“Don’t know why you think you’re not funny. Your dry remarks are hilarious. And the names you give to people and things, too, by the way. Lori was ranting for a week about you calling her Olive Oil.”

“I wonder why you never gave me any nicknames. Or a pet name, for that matter.”

Daryl’s eyebrows went up as he cast Rick a side glance.

“Pet name? Like what? Sugar honey cutie pie?”

He pulled a face.

“’s givin’ me cavities jus’ sayin’ that. I ain’t no guy ta call ma partner by stupid pet names, Rick. I think yer name fits ya best ‘n’ I’d call ya jus’ what ya are in front a’ everyone who wants ta know.”

“And what would that be?” Rick whispered softly to him.

“Love a’ ma life.”

A smile tugged on the corners of Rick’s mouth while he looked the other man deep in the eyes.

“See, that’s actually funny again. Because, you know, I’d call you exactly the same.”

Lightning illuminated Rick and Daryl’s bedroom, instantly followed by the loud cracking sound of thunder that rolled threateningly over the land. Rain poured onto the roof above their heads and drummed against the shutters, while a heavy wind rattled at them. Despite the threat of damage to their home or the crops, both men lay totally relaxed and sated in each other’s arms and indulged in the aftermath of their passionate lovemaking. They had snuggled
up and kept kissing tenderly, while their hands ran through sweaty and messed up hair and over
headed skin.
They blinded out the world beyond their window, focused entirely on each other and more than once
thanked the good Lord above for the apocalypse. As weird as that seemed to be.
Truth of the matter was, that the community their group had built here in Home was indeed better
than the world had been before. And without the apocalypse, Rick and Daryl would have missed out
on each other. Rick would probably still be married to Lori, stuck in a troublesome, unhappy
relationship. And Daryl would be alone. They had every reason to be thankful for the apocalypse. It
was a blessing in many respects.

“I love you”, Rick whispered softly after the next roll of thunder had died away.

“Luv ya, too”, Daryl replied, surprised how easily that passed his lips these days.
The scars on his back didn’t itch anymore and the razor blades in his throat had disappeared. It felt
good, it felt *right* to say these words. Apparently being a Grimes now made more of a difference than
he had realized before.

“Yer right”, the archer added after a moment when another lightning sent enough light through
the shutters for him to be able to look Rick in the eyes.

“It does make a difference ta actually hear the words. Or say ‘em.”

It was dark in the room again when Rick’s lips found Daryl’s once more and then started traveling,
leaving a volley of small kisses along the archer’s jawline and on his neck.
Just when Rick was about to kiss his way south some more, Rosita’s squeal from the room next door
had him freeze.

“Eugene!”

In the first impulse annoyance about that man rose inside of him, but then he remembered. Despite
himself he started chuckling.

“It’s funny, isn’t it? She’s still squealing his name, but these days it’s not because he’s peeping at her,
but because he apparently learned lots of good stuff and things by peeping that he’s now showing to
her.”

The next lightning illuminated the room, so Rick could see Daryl smirk.

“Yeah. Still blows ma mind that those two became a couple. I mean, that’s Roger Rabbit ‘n’
Jessica over there – an’ he obviously knows how ta play patty-cake.”

“And maybe”, Rick said thoughtful, suppressing a chuckle about Daryl’s remark, “it’s because
for the first time in her life Rosita found a man who doesn’t just see a pretty face in her. I heard her
tell Sasha the other day that every man she’s ever been with just looked down at her, tried to teach
her the world as though she couldn’t handle herself, never acknowledged her strength. I guess Abe
was no exception. Our mad scientist over there, who’s brilliant but unable to tie his own shoe laces,
is the perfect match for her. They have a lot to teach to each other.”

“Eugene!!!”

“Yeah, I can hear that”, Daryl grumbled, but there was clearly a tinge of amusement in his
voice.
Unexpectedly he sat up and fumbled for his pack of cigarettes on the nightstand.
“Ya mind?” he asked when the next lightening allowed Rick to see him and the smokes he was holding.

Rick shook his head right in time before it went dark again and a new roll of thunder drowned out the sounds from the adjoining room. Daryl lit one of the cigarettes and took a deep drag.

“We got lots a’ happy couples here now, huh?” he said into the darkness.

He felt Rick’s surprise rather than saw it and his impression was clearly proven when the younger man replied:

“Yeeah. So?”

Somehow Rick was expecting another rant about Carol and Norman, so the next sentence caught him totally off guard.

“Some a’ em peeps here are still lonely, ya know.”

“Daryl … What …?”

“Michonne’s thinkin’ ’bout leavin’, case ya haven’t noticed.”

That had Rick sit bolt upright in an instant and cast his lover a wide-eyed glance although Daryl was unable to see him.

“What? No … Why …?”

He was at a total lack for words, which gave Daryl the opportunity to pick up again.

“Face it, man, she’s the only adult in this community without a partner ‘n’ unless she’s as lucky as Carol, there ain’t never gonna be no one for her here. Rick, she’s a woman in her prime. Ya expect her ta live like a nun, jus’ ’cuz we decided ta make this a secluded community?”

He breathed in deep and added:

“She’s gonna leave, rather sooner than later, mark ma words. An’ she might think a’ takin’ Carl with her.”

“What?!?”

Agitated Rick was about to jump out of bed, but Daryl’s hand on his arm held him back. Soothingly that hand started running gently up and down Rick’s arm while the archer said:

“I didn’t say they was gonna leave first thing in the mornin’. All I’m sayin’ is that the thought may be there. Carl commented earlier that he’s never gonna have no girl in this community, unless he waited for Hope ta be old enough. An’, jeez, Judy, same as Abe ‘n’ Sasha’s baby are gonna have the same problem.”

He nudged Rick’s shoulder gently with his own.

“Unless we think ‘bout openin’ this place up to new people ‘n’ send Aaron ‘n’ Eric recruitin’ again, we gotta have ta face the possibility that one by one we’re gonna lose family members. Not to death this time, but to solitude.”

It was quiet inside the bedroom, save for the rumbling of thunder that was growing softer bit by bit as the storm slowly retracted.
“Rick”, Daryl added softly. “We can’t curse the next generation to a life of loneliness, while they watch everyone else grow old ‘n’ die.”

“You really think Carl would leave?” Rick croaked after a moment.

“He might. Maybe not by himself, but if ‘chonne leaves … I mean, damnit Rick, the boy needs ta share a room with his baby sis. He can’t even jerk off at night, so could ya blame him?”

“Alright, too much information”, Rick said, pulling a face. But he knew that Daryl was right.

He had ignored these problems so far, had figured unless someone openly complained, everything was okay. He was more than reluctant to bring in new people. Norman had been an exception. He was just one man, kind and friendly, a skilled carpenter and no threat at all.

The more people they brought here, the more their strong unit would be broken apart. It meant more mouths to feed, more sources of conflicts, more people who knew about this place and could use that knowledge against them if things went south.

“Hey”, Daryl said softly. “Know what yer thinkin’, ya worrywart. Yer picturin’ crowds a’ strangers marchin’ through our gates. An’ half a’ them’s a second Negan, right? Ya already see this place doomed, jus’ ’cuz it ain’t gonna be as secluded an’ the best kept secret of the world no more.”

When he heard Rick sigh, he knew that he was dead on.

“Come here.”

Daryl wrapped his arms around the younger man and together they sank back down into the pillows. Rick’s head came to rest on Daryl’s chest, while he wrapped one arm around the archer and pulled him close.

“Ain’t gonna happen, Rick”, Daryl said soothingly. “Even with a second story on these buildings, Home has its limits. I’s talkin’ ‘bout a couple a’ new peeps, not the population of a smaller country. There ain’t too many people left out there anyway.”

Rick felt him swallow against a lump in his throat.

“In all the time we’s been here, Norman was the only livin’ soul we came across in this area. Let Aaron ‘n’ Eric go lookin’ for a while – maybe they gonna be lucky. An’ even if ‘chonne ‘n’ Carl decide ta leave … they need ta know they got a place ta come back to ‘n’ bring someone along, in case they been lucky.”

Daryl felt Rick nod while he sighed once again.

“We’ll bring that before the council first thing tomorrow. It’s not my call alone anymore.”

“Uh-huh, I know. But there’s democracy ‘n’ then there’s democracy.”

He smiled.

“Yer the head a’ that council ‘n’ they still listen ta what ya think. Guess ya always gonna have the last word.”

Lovingly Daryl combed his fingers through Rick’s curls and then placed a kiss on his partner’s head, while Rick let out his breath in an audible puff.

“I’ll think about it”, he said wearily. “You’re probably right, but … I can’t worry about this right now. It’s giving me a headache.”
“Sorry. I jus’ thought ya should know …”

“Daryl”, Rick cut in. “I don’t think you’ve heard what I just said. I can’t worry about this right now, because it’s giving me a headache.”

“Headache, huh?” Daryl finally caught on with a grin spreading over his face. “Yer lucky, Mr. Grimes, that I still know the perfect remedy for headaches.”

“Now you’re talking”, Rick teased.

Anything else he might have wanted to say was smothered by ardent kisses and a moment later the world outside the window ceased to exist. They didn’t hear the fading rumbling of thunder, didn’t notice the next bright lightning. All they heard was the other one’s voice and the moans of pleasure they drew from each other as lips and hands started roaming. All they felt was the warmth of the familiar body of their lover and the bliss when they became one again with every fibre of their being. With each lightning all they saw was the face they loved most in this world, adorned with eyes like the sky or as blue as the ocean.

As long as they were together they’d find a solution to each new problem that Fate chose to toss their way. But for now, all those problems belonged to the world outside their window. They couldn’t harm them, they couldn’t reach them, they simply bounced off of the protective cocoon of love Rick and Daryl had woven around themselves.

Whatever it was they needed to worry about, it could wait till later. Till tomorrow. – Till after the storm.

Chapter End Notes

This is it, folks. I hope you enjoyed the final chapter and the entire story as such. It's been immense fun writing it and taking the course of their story into a whole new direction. If that was canon, I would like the show a whole lot better. :-)

Thank you all so much for reading, leaving me all these wonderful comments and giving kudos. You guys rock.

P.S. If you like emotional rollercoasters and stories with lots of feels, some angst, humor, too, and definitely a happy ending, you may wanna check out my story "And then they went fishing". That one's my 'baby' and my personal favorite, if I may say so. Give it a try. :-)
https://archiveofourown.org/works/11601624/chapters/26079000

End Notes

Thanks a lot to everyone who's taking the time to read and leave comments and/or kudos.
You have no idea how much this is appreciated.
Btw, I'm accepting comments from guest readers as well, so everybody who'd like to share their thoughts is welcome to!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!