How It Could Have Gone Down
by D_J_Marlowe

Summary

Paul 'Jesus' Rovia lives. 'Nuff said.

Notes

Includes divergent elements from both the comic and TV show, but especially the TV show.
A Life Still Worth Living

Aaron didn’t know how fast he had ridden on his way back to Hilltop as he hugged Paul 'Jesus' Rovia close to him, his artificial hand clapped hard against the stab wound on Paul’s back. Both were covered in blood, yet he could still feel a heartbeat against his chest and Paul’s soft breath on his neck. Daryl and Michonne, who had Eugene on the back of her horse, rode just as quickly and the gates were practically flung open as Rick and Maggie looked on. There were gasps from those who were nearby when they saw what had happened.

"He’s still alive. Just passed out." Aaron noticed Siddiq and Enid running from the medical trailer and they helped him get Paul off of the horse.

"What happened?" Maggie ran over, an almost panicked look on her face.

"Them walkers ain’t walkers. They’re people who put on their faces." Daryl held up the torn off mask.

Rick took it from him and examined it. "We’ll have to talk more about this later."

Right now everyone’s attention was on what was happening in the medical trailer. Practically all of Hilltop’s citizens stood vigil outside as Siddiq and Enid quickly stabilized Paul.

"Good thing he donates blood every three weeks." Siddiq took a couple bags from the refrigeration unit and hooked them up. "Those sutures ready?"

"Yeah. Blood pressure is a bit low. His pulse and respiration are steady."

"Hang in there, Jesus." Even though Siddiq knew the man couldn’t hear him. "We’ll get you patched back up in no time."

Aaron had changed out of his bloody clothes and now sat beside the bed in the medical trailer. Paul was now on his back in a hospital bed resting comfortably with an IV bag full of fluid and one blood bag connected to his right arm. His breathing was stronger but he had yet to regain consciousness. Aaron grasped Paul’s hand as a sign of reassurance both for himself and for Paul, only looking up at the sound of soft footsteps.

"Hey." Aaron nodded at Daryl who had come into the room.

"How’s he doin’?" Daryl now stood beside the bed.

"They think he’ll pull through. Lost a lot of blood."

Daryl sat down in the other empty chair. "He’s strong. Ain’t one to give up so easily." He noticed Aaron holding Paul’s hand. "You two, uh, together?"

Aaron laughed. "Not in a sense people might think. We’ve had a few moments of intimacy while in the woods. Just two men who needed to release some sexual tension from time to time. Mostly we’re very close friends. Teaching me how to fight has been one of the best things to happen to me since losing an arm. It’s given me my confidence back." Paul stirred slightly and Aaron reached over and wiped some sweat from his forehead. "Besides, he has his eye on someone else."

Daryl raised an eyebrow. "A boyfriend?"
"Umm, no, just someone." Before Aaron could elaborate further there was a small yelp of pain from Paul as he opened his eyes. "Hey, Paul, it’s me. Aaron."

"Aaron." Paul’s voice was almost inaudible. "Where am I?"

"You’re safe and sound at Hilltop. You got stabbed, remember?"

"I don’t know." Paul looked over and noticed Daryl and smiled slightly.

"None of your vital organs were hit, but the wound will take a long time to heal, which means you get to stay in bed." Aaron tried to sound upbeat and cheerful even though he was still torn up inside.

"Shit." Paul’s mind was still a jumble of images of walkers whispering in the mists.

Enid entered the room and smiled when she saw that Paul was awake. "Hey there, Jesus, you had a close call. Thanks to Aaron and Daryl they got you back here pretty fast. Are you in a lot of pain?"

"That’s an understatement." Paul tried to sit up. Daryl reached over and got a pillow to gently put behind him.

"I’ll see about getting you some pain killers." Paul was about to protest. "Nope, none of that talk about those who might need it more. You’re the one in need now." Enid left the room.

"Bossy isn’t she." Paul looked over at Daryl. "Surprised to see you here."

Daryl merely shrugged. "Hey, you’re my friend, too."

"Going to stick around for a while this time?"

Aaron could barely contain his laughter at Paul’s question.

"I thought I might. Why?"

Paul shrugged. "I miss you. Besides, while I’m recovering I want you to help Maggie out. Both you and Dog. Maybe you can teach him to fetch my slippers while I’m down for the count." There was a slight flirty tone in his voice.

"Fetch your slippers?" Daryl couldn’t believe how absurd that sounded.

"Why not? Better than walker hands and feet."

Daryl glared at Paul then pointed a finger at him. "Should have left ya in that cemetery. See ya, later." He walked out so fast Aaron wondered if he would be able to catch up with himself.

Paul and Aaron exchanged grins. "He’ll come around one of these days." Aaron leaned closer to him. "I think he does like you."

"He does. He just doesn’t know it." Paul felt his stomach growl. "Now get me a little something to eat like a grilled cheese sandwich. Ask Ms. Maitlin to cook it."

Aaron stood up and saluted. "Yes sir." He then leaned over. "Better not get used to this. I’m going to make sure I’m in charge of your physical therapy." He kissed the back of Paul’s hand and left.

Paul laid there taking a deep breath and smiled to himself, in deep thought trying to remember all that had gone down and looked up when he heard someone come up to the side of the bed.
Maggie looked down at him with such concern and worry it almost brought him to tears.

"I’m alright, Maggie. I’m still here. Alive."

"That’s as it should be." Maggie sat down in one of the chairs.
Chapter Summary

Paul continues to heal and realizes he now may have some help along the way and shouldn’t be so impatient.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


"Yeah, when I exhale." Paul felt Siddiq examine the wound that had been stitched together just two days before. It was still tender and he winced whenever Siddiq’s fingers pushed too hard. "Still feel weak. I have to get out of here. There’s still too much to do." He lifted his arm slightly and let out a slight scream.

"You are staying here and stop doing that." Siddiq prepared the new bandage.

"I have to get my strength back."

"You will in time. You keep agitating the wound the stitches will come out and I’ll have to keep you in here for another week. Behave yourself and you’ll be out of the infirmary in two days." He carefully put the bandage on then helped Paul put on a clean t-shirt.

Paul’s thoughts had not stopped drifting to that fateful night. "I instinctively felt he was aiming for my heart. I moved just slightly to the right and he missed."

"Jesus, he still got you. There are muscles and other tissues that need to mend. Plus you lost a lot of blood and still have to build up some in your system. It’s going to take a while."

Paul sighed realizing he wasn’t going to go anywhere anytime soon. "They have to know what it is they are getting into."

"Rick, Maggie, Michonne, Daryl, and the others are working on it. They even sent for King Ezekiel and Carol."

"Then they have to at least keep me in the loop." Siddiq helped Paul down from the exam table and followed him back to his hospital bed.

"You worry about getting better first. Then worry about what’s beyond the fences."

Aaron had just come into the room and overheard the last statement. "That’s what I keep telling him." He assisted Siddiq and together they got Paul back into the bed.

"I’ll bring your food tray in a couple hours. Until then get some rest." Siddiq then left the room.

Paul looked at Aaron with an expression of anguish on his face. "I can’t stand this. With the
exception of when I was a child, I’ve hardly ever been sick a day in my life."

"Dammit, Paul, you almost got yourself killed two days ago. And for what? We all know what a fighter and warrior you are. The way you took on Negan and throwing the enemy’s grenades back at them. I understand you want to be in that kind of shape again, but you need to be patient. I’ll tie you down if I have to and get Daryl to help."

"At least that answers my question that you’re both into the kinky stuff." Paul laughed slightly.

"Oh you!" Aaron playfully hit him on the arm. "Maybe I can find some gay porn movies in the storage shed."

Paul grinned. "Been a long time since I watched any of that stuff. In a lot of ways I don’t really miss it."

They heard a short whistle from outside. "Come on, Dog. Bring `em here." Moments later Daryl entered with his faithful canine companion not far behind. In Dog’s mouth was a pair of slippers. "Here ya go, ya prick."

Paul rolled his eyes. "I was joking."

"So am I." Daryl motioned at Dog. "Put `em down." Dog dropped the slippers, barked once, and then sat there panting. "Good boy."

Paul peered over the side of the bed and glanced at the slippers. "They have dog drool all over them."

"They’ll dry." Daryl sat down in an empty chair.

Out of anyone it had been Daryl and Aaron who cheered him up the most. Practically every resident of Hilltop had sent Paul something or stopped by, so much so, that Siddiq had to limit the number of visitors and only permitted Daryl, Aaron, and Maggie to see him at any time.

"Who gave you the bouquet of cosmos?" Aaron fingered the large vase of flowers on the bed stand.

"Bertie and Ms. Maitlin. They mean peacefulness, wholeness, and modesty." Paul laid back on the pillows feeling somewhat weary from the morning’s activities. "Any more information on those walkers/people we encountered?"

"Rick and Maggie are sendin’ out scouts. Think it’s a good idea to lay low. We gotta figure out who they are and why they do that whisperin’ shit."

"I’ve had the same nightmare the last two nights. Hearing that voice. ‘You are where you do not belong’." Paul rubbed his face. "It just keeps repeating itself in my head. I can’t seem to squeeze it out. I want to get out of this bed and just shake the bastard until he tells me just where it is we don’t belong."

"Daryl shot him with his crossbow. It’s now only a dream, Paul."

"I came this close." Paul held up his hand, two fingers held close together. "This close." He felt his other hand being squeezed and looked directly into Daryl’s eyes.

"Ya gotta put it behind ya, Paul." Daryl’s voice was soft and soothing. "The sooner ya do, the sooner you’ll be out of bed. Ya hear me?"
Paul nodded. "I hear you." He paused. "I always thought I was so strong."

"You still are. You`re just human like the rest of us." Aaron adjusted his pillows.

"I don`t scare easily but the other night I did. Maybe I was having too much fun and need to take things more seriously." The discomfort on his left side was now a constant reminder of how much more serious his situation could be.

"Ah, you`re the most fearless man I know. You and Daryl, anyway."

"Include yourself in that. Maybe we`re the three musketeers or somethin`."

That made Paul laugh. "All for one and one for all. He must be d`Artagnan." He pointed to Dog. All he got in response was a loud happy bark and a wagging tail.

Chapter End Notes

By popular demand I have decided to continue the story, more so as a Desus/Jaaron/Jaaryl fanfic. I don`t even know how many chapters this will go or in exactly what direction the story will take. I usually don`t work that way, but I`m willing to give it a go. Comments always keep me motivated.
"Your hair is so soft." Enid gently brushed Paul’s long locks. He had been sitting up in a chair for most of the morning and gotten his first real sponge bath and then washing his hair afterwards.

"I think it’s Ms. Maitlin’s natural shampoo." He sighed enjoying her strokes that seemed to relax him.

"Feeling better this morning?"

"A little. It hurts when I do this." He lifted his left arm.

"Then don’t do that."

Paul turned around slightly and noticed the smirk on her face. "All you doctors are alike when it comes to punchlines."

Enid laughed as she finished brushing his hair. "You look so pretty you could be Miss Bearded America."

"I never looked that great in an evening gown."

Enid had to hesitate for a moment. "You mean to tell me you’ve worn drag?"

"Yeah. As part of an act when I worked in a gay bar. I was eighteen at the time." Paul gestured with his hand in the air as he said each word. "'The Queens of the Pink Cockatoos'. My name was Phoenix Divine. Didn’t last long, three months I think. I started growing the beard after that."

Enid held her stomach and dropped the hairbrush she was laughing so hard. Maggie entered and stared at Enid somewhat dumbfounded.

"What’s so funny?"

"Jesus once dressed in drag." She picked up the hairbrush and left.

"It was good money at the time."

Maggie only shook her head and sat on the edge of the bed. "It’s good to see you up and around."

"Siddiq said he’ll be releasing me from here in a couple days."

"We have a room all made up for you in the house. Kal gave up his and is rooming with Eduardo. Can’t have you sleeping on that sofa in the hallway. And since you gave up your trailer to that family..."
"They needed it more than I did."

"Not disagreeing with you. We all care about you, Jesus. I know you don’t want to let anyone in to tell you that--."  

"Please, Maggie. Not now." He turned away from her.

"Why not now? Take that fortress around you down, Jesus. You obviously care enough to go after Eugene and almost dying. Let people care for you, too."

Paul was silent feeling the intensity of her gaze even when he wasn’t looking at her. There was a long silence before he spoke again wanting nothing more than to change the subject. "Have you heard from Georgie lately?"

Maggie dug into her shirt pocket and took out a letter. "This arrived yesterday." After she handed it to him he read it in silence. "You know I’m thinking about taking a temporary leave of absence. She needs help with teaching some farming techniques."

Paul looked at her in frustration. "I don’t want to be leader of Hilltop, even temporarily."

"What if it was a favor to me?"

Paul looked even more troubled. "You know why I think I was almost killed out there? It was because I was holed up so long behind these fences. Because it was so long not being out there I lost my sense of danger. I lost the ability to think that walkers that don’t act like walkers might really be people. I rushed in where angels fear to tread just for an instant and almost joined them."

He didn’t realize how much he had raised his voice until Enid peered in from the other room.

"Everything okay?"

"We’re fine." Maggie reached over and squeezed his arm. "I’m sorry. Maybe I should have realized you’re not ready for something like this. I’ll ask Tara instead. You could still be second-in-command, give her advice like you give me." She then looked at him somewhat sternly. "Go out there if you have a mind to, but there are conditions."

"What’s that?" He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear them, but he knew he owed Maggie at least that.

"Don’t go out alone and don’t be a hero. Aaron has gone to Alexandria to get Gracie. They’ll be moving here. I’ve asked him to be your back up. If he can’t then Daryl will. Or both."

Paul looked at her somewhat astonished. "Daryl will be staying here?"

Maggie nodded. "Guess he got tired of the woods. Anyway he’s requested to stay here. Wouldn’t give me any reason, but that’s nothing new. He’ll be leaving later today to deliver a message to King Ezekiel from me and should be back in a day or two."

Paul sighed and closed his eyes. "Okay. I accept your conditions."

"Good." Maggie got up and leaned over, kissing the top of his head. "No one realized how much of an asset to this place you are until you were almost taken from us. I’ll see you again before I leave."

Paul nodded and handed the letter back to her. "I guess Georgie is the lucky one this round."

"Perhaps. She sent you some more records. Eighties alternative. Just what you like."
He nodded to her and smiled slightly. As soon as she was gone he frowned again. The thought of Maggie leaving Hilltop, even briefly, didn’t settle with him very well.

"Hey." Daryl came in and sat down. "You’re sittin’ up. Combed your hair, too."

"Enid did. Now she can start on yours if you like."

Daryl snorted. "Carol already cut it. Just how I like it."

"I don’t see the difference. You just want to hide your face. I can still see your blue eyes." Paul coyly batted his eyelashes at him.

"Yeah. So." Daryl was somewhat nervous about the look he was getting so he turned away for a bit before looking at him again. Paul had not stopped staring at him. "Ya wanna come with Aaron and me to the communal dinner?"

"That’s three days from now isn’t it. Is it a date?"

"No, it ain’t a date, asshole."

Paul laughed to himself. "Sure. Alright. Dog can beg for scraps under my feet if he wants to."

Daryl nodded once and left. Paul stared after him and sighed. He looked up and saw Enid observing him from the doorway. "What."

"Jesus, when are you going to go out on that limb and take that chance?"

"I don’t know what you’re talking about."

"Yes, you do. Daryl is finally going to stick around in one place for a change. Something in him has changed ever since the incident in the graveyard. It reeks of everything to have to do with you."

"Enid, why--." Before he could finish she had ducked back into the other room.

Paul could only sit there and bury his face in his hands. He did know what she meant and a part of him knew that she was right.

Chapter End Notes

A bit of TV show canon concerning Maggie, hopefully explained better.
Amazing Gracie And Aaron

Chapter Summary

Aaron and Gracie leave Alexandria to start a new life. Not everyone is pleased about that decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Got all your toys packed?" Aaron glanced at Gracie as he tucked the last of his shirts into a bag. Gracie was almost five years old but she seemed older since the world required even the youngest children to grow up faster.

"Yeah. Can I take Pookie Bear?"

Aaron grinned. "Of course you can. I think you would hurt your Uncle Daryl’s feelings if you didn’t." The bear had been a gift from Daryl and was one of Gracie’s favorites. He made a last minute look around the apartment.

"All done."

"Okay. Go say goodbye to Judith and the others. I’ll be talking to Michonne and Father Gabriel."

"Will we really get to ride in a wagon?" Gracie seemed excited by the prospect.

"Yes. All the way to Hilltop."

"I’ll miss my friends."

"I know. You’ll make new friends. Hilltop has a lot of children. Now go on." Gracie practically ran out the door and skipped down the stairs. Aaron gathered the last of their belongings and was soon walking away from the brownstone towards a small wagon that was being pulled by two horses. Michonne and Father Gabriel were standing by it, both looking at him with serious faces. He put the baggage in back beside a trunk and some other packs then turned to face them.

"Are you sure this is the right decision?" Michonne’s voice sounded grim.

"I’m sure. I’m sorry Rick decided not to see us off."

"You know how he feels about you leaving." Father Gabriel helped him with some of his packs.

Aaron sighed. "Alexandria has been a nice home for me and Gracie. It was for me and Eric, too." He glanced over at the space that had once been his and Eric’s home, destroyed in the attack by the Saviors. A new house had been built in its place now occupied by someone else. "The memories here are just that. I want to leave them behind."

"I was under the impression that you had started a new life here." Father Gabriel thought Aaron was being hasty.
"And you seemed happy." Michonne understood his decision, but wished he wouldn’t leave since he was such a help to Rick.

"Maybe I was on the outside, but not in here." Aaron placed his hand over his heart. "My life changed way too much when I lost my arm. In many ways I thought it was over. Then I met someone who gave me hope."

"You know you didn’t have to sneak away to train with Jesus." Michonne had been surprised when she found out. She realized it was something that was important to Aaron so accepted it for what it was.

"Yes, I did. With the growing rift between communities Rick wouldn’t have allowed it." Aaron chuckled. "I was surprised to see him at Hilltop when Eugene and Rosita disappeared."

"He was concerned." Michonne had convinced herself that served as a plausible explanation. "You noticed we didn’t stay long. Just enough to ponder the mystery of that walker mask."

"I think that will lead to something worse than what anyone thinks." Aaron glanced in the distance to see that Gracie was still saying goodbye to her friends.

"Are you leaving here because you and Jesus are in a relationship?" Father Gabriel had hoped Aaron would find someone else after Eric’s death.

"You know you’re the second person to ask me this week. We’re very close friends. Anything else is nobody’s business. After what has happened I feel the need for a change. Eric is gone. When I walk the streets here I still sometimes expect to see him waving at me from the porch or hear his voice yelling at me that dinner’s ready. They are all echoes of a past that no longer has a future for me. He’ll always have a special place in my heart. Now it’s time for something new." Aaron took a deep breath. "Wow that was a mouthful."

"Is Gracie okay with this?" Michonne was always concerned about all the children, not just Judith.

"I think she is. Hilltop will be a new adventure for her. She has that spirit in her." Aaron looked over at his daughter again. "Gracie! Time to go!"

Gracie gave some last hugs to Judith and a couple others and ran over to them. She and Michonne hugged then Aaron hoisted her onto the wagon.

"I’ve never ridden in a wagon before." Gracie looked excited to Father Gabriel.

"It’ll be fun." Father Gabriel stretched out his hand towards Aaron. They shook. "Goodbye, Aaron, and good luck."

"Thanks. I doubt I’ll be welcome here after this." He and Michonne hugged. "Goodbye, Michonne. Give Rick my best, regardless."

She silently nodded. "Take care of yourself. And you stay out of trouble, young lady." Michonne pointed a playful finger at Gracie.

"You stay out of trouble." Gracie pointed back at her causing everyone to laugh.

"Okay, scoot over." Aaron climbed onto the wagon and Gracie went to the other side of the seat. He took one last look at all of Alexandria. The memory of him and Eric walking around the lake popped into his head for a moment. He wiped away a lone tear, glad that it was the last memory he would have of the place. In his mind, he believed it had been Eric who sent it to him in approval of
the great change he was about to make. Eric would have wanted him to move on. He grabbed the reins and made a clicking noise. The horses went into a slow trot and the wagon headed for the front gate. As he went through he waved to the sentries who waved back. Once outside he took one last look at the faded 'WELCOME TO ALEXANDRIA' sign, then continued on his way never to look back again.

It took most of the day to reach Hilltop. Aaron was bound and determined not to spend a night outside of any protection, mostly because Gracie was with him and the mystery concerning their new enemy. Tara was on sentry duty and opened the gate.

"Daryl back yet?" Aaron passed through the gate and made a quick survey of his and Gracie’s new home.

"No. I think he said he’ll spend the night." Tara winked at Gracie. "Hey there, kid."

"Hey yourself." Gracie smirked at her reply.

"Paul doing okay?" Aaron playfully punched Gracie’s leg.

"Enid caught him trying to sneak out of the infirmary. Said he was looking for a beanie." Tara started to snicker.

Aaron laughed. "I thought he gave up on those. Sounds like he’s doing fine."

"Maggie said she wanted to see you in the morning. Oh, and you’ll have to spend the night on Jesus’s old hallway sofa since we don’t have a room for you. Gracie can stay in the children’s room."

Aaron sighed. "Well, we did just move here. Guess it’s better than the ground." He continued on his way towards the stables.

Yes, the new life already was starting to take hold. He smiled already feeling a certain happiness for a new beginning.

Chapter End Notes

My time jump is not as drastic as in the show. It’s more like 4-4 1/2 years total, hence Gracie’s younger age.
"Shut up!" Daryl yelled at Dog as the canine couldn`t stop barking at a cat that sat in a window across from where he and Carol were talking.

"He`s half wild animal, like you are." Carol laughed slightly. They watched as Dog settled down in a grassy spot keeping an alert eye on everyone who walked by. "So, you are leaving the wild man in the woods life behind. What changed your mind?"

Daryl shrugged. "Lotsa things. Gettin` some of my shit together. Still ain`t goin` back to Alexandria."

"Have you and Rick spoken at all?"

"Not a lot. We talked about them whisperin` walkers." He picked at a thread sticking out along the seam of his pants, not really wanting to talk about Rick.

"Zeke said there is a meeting at Hilltop in a week or so to discuss the situation." She stared at Daryl for a long time. "Dammit, Daryl, something big has changed in you. Talk to me."

He wasn`t sure if he was ready to reveal his deepest darkest secret but he did feel he owed Carol an answer. "That night at the cemetery when Paul almost got killed." An expression of longing briefly crossed over his face. "I just wanna be someplace."

"What has it got to do with Jesus? The two of you haven`t had much contact since the time Rick stuck you at the Sanctuary. And why Hilltop?"

Daryl bit his lip then chewed on his thumb for a moment. "I just wanna be close by just in case."

"In case of what?" Why was trying to pry information out of Daryl even harder than pulling teeth?

Daryl shrugged. "Just in case." He turned away from her and closed his eyes. "There`s somethin` I gotta tell ya. Ain`t told no one before." He slowly turned to look at her again. "I like boys."

Carol sat there for a moment in silence then burst into laughter. "I already figured that out."

"And ya didn`t say nothin`?" The last thing he expected was for her to laugh. Somehow he didn`t feel angry or offended.

"What is there to say? Daryl, nobody cares." Carol got up from the bench to stretch her legs. "My guess is you want to be close to Jesus because you have feelings for him."

"Never said that."
Carol threw up her arms. "You`re impossible. Come on, dinner`s probably ready."

Daryl grunted as he got up and whistled for Dog. As they made their way to where King Ezekiel held court and where he, Carol, and Henry lived they had to wade their way through a yard full of chickens in order to get to the front door. "Cluckingham Palace." Carol just threw him a somewhat amused look.

"Friend Daryl, welcome." King Ezekiel greeted him in his usual flamboyant manner. "Carol tells me you have decided to rejoin civilization again."

Daryl glared at Carol for a moment and she dismissed him with a small wave. "I`m movin` to Hilltop if that`s what ya mean."

"I do hope Jesus is recovering well from his almost tragic attack. I have meditated much on who these strange new people are and what evil they may inflict upon us."

Daryl wanted to snicker at the way Ezekiel talked but held back. "He`s gonna be fine. Real strong and determined."

"I think stubborn is the word." Carol and Ezekiel exchanged amused glances.

"Then I am pleased to know he shall be back in form and with us soon. We have prepared a most delightful chicken dish for dinner this evening."

"Surprise cluck, cluck."

"Hush and mind what few manners you have." Carol poked him in the side as they entered the dining room.

Dinner had lasted most of the evening and by the time night had arrived Daryl was quite relaxed due to the vast consumption of wine during and after the meal. He now sat in the garden and looked up at the stars as he swigged from a bottle of wine. Dog was curled up on the ground beside him ready to go to sleep.

"Won`t be just us no more. Ya gotta stop barkin` at cats. Save it for walkers. Lots of animals at Hilltop. Don`t go barkin` at them, either." Daryl paused and glanced at the nearly full moon. "I must be shit-faced drunk to be talkin` to a damn dog." He took one long swallow and belched. "Time for bed. C`mon, boy." Staggering for a bit when he stood up he and Dog headed for his assigned room.

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Aaron and Paul were sitting in the shade beneath a tree when they heard the sound of a motorcycle and turned to look at the gate. Paul was in a long bathrobe wearing the slippers that Dog had brought him. It felt good to be allowed out of the infirmary as long as he didn`t move around too much and to simply enjoy some fresh air. Many people had come up to him and hugged him telling him how glad that he was still with them and recovering. They watched as Daryl came through the open gate, Dog draped over his lap, jumping off when he came to a stop near them.

"How`s everyone at The Kingdom?" Aaron could not help but laugh as Dog struggled to get off of Daryl`s lap.

"Cluckingham Palace is still standin`." Both Paul and Aaron snickered. He came over to Paul. "Carol sent ya these." He held out two ripe plump peaches and handed them to Paul.
"She remembered." Aaron looked at him questioningly. "I love fresh peaches from their peach tree in the courtyard."

"Ya out of the infirmary yet?" Daryl sat down on a nearby stool.

"One more night then I get sent to Barrington House. By the way, where are you two going to stay?"

"I get your old sofa in the upstairs hallway. Gracie is with the rest of the children."

Daryl merely shrugged. "Probably a tent."

"As second-in-command of Hilltop I will demand better quarters for the both of you."

"What`s this I hear about Maggie leaving for a while. Will that put you in charge?" Aaron knew Paul wasn`t up for that kind of responsibility.

"No, thank goodness. Tara will be taking over by proxy until she returns." Paul seemed to slump a bit.

"Come on, back to the medical trailer." Aaron helped him to stand. Daryl came over and supported him on his right side.

"Looks like the three of us are finally together for the long haul." Paul minded his steps as they slowly made their way across the lawn. "Whatever that will entail is yet to be determined."

"You just stick around with us. You`ll be back in fighting shape in no time." Aaron just wanted Paul back to his old self, even though it would be a while since there was a lot of trauma to process.

"We got your back," Daryl`s and Paul`s eyes met for a brief moment.

"And I`ll always have both of yours." Inside Paul felt like he could at least open up to two more people in his life. It frightened him. Being stabbed was a reminder of just how short life could be.

Chapter End Notes

As you may have noticed I don`t go into much description (in this story anyway). My background is mostly in theater--writing plays, teleplays, and screenplays. I have written in novel form but for me it is dialogue that drives the story forward. I much prefer for the reader to use his or her imagination and there are enough images from both the comics and the TV show to help the reader form those images. As long as the story is enjoyable that is all that is important to me. So thank you, dear readers! Comments are always welcome for each chapter or for the story in general.
"If you ask me Maggie is making a mistake leaving us like this." Tammy Rose put some clean clothes in the closet of Paul`s room. It was his first day out of the infirmary and he already was tired even though it was ten o`clock in the morning. Maggie had never been popular with Tammy Rose, especially after Gregory was hung. "Harvest will be in a month, then winter. She may be snowed in by the time she wants to come back."

The bandage itched so much that Paul was somewhat restless in the easy chair that had been provided for him. "I`ll give her the benefit of the doubt that she knows what she`s doing."

"Don`t know if I have any confidence in this Tara or not."

There was a soft knock on the partially open door. Paul indicated for Tammy Rose to open it and a rather stocky woman with salt & pepper hair stood in the doorway. She pointed her spatula at him. "Paul Rovia!"

"What did I do this time? I can`t even go up and down the stairs very well yet, Betty." There was a bit of amusement in his voice.

"Was that some kind of a joke order you telling me you wanted a double cheese burger with fries and a Diet Coke for the communal dinner tonight?"

Paul started to laugh somewhat hard then suddenly clutched his left side.

"Is he giving you trouble again, Ms. Maitlin?" Tammy Rose was smiling slightly.

"Trouble? Paul Rovia has been trouble ever since he stepped foot inside Hilltop. You`re going to eat what`s put in front of you." Betty Maitlin put her hands on her hips.

"All that nutritious mush with no flavor you mean." Paul had been disgruntled about the nutritious diet that Siddiq had put him on.

"It`s what Dr. Siddiq ordered." Ms. Maitlin shook her spatula at him again. "You are going to get well if all of us here wind up killing you."

"Just remember to put a knife through my head afterwards." Paul then stuck out his tongue at her.

"I should box your ears for that." Ms. Maitlin knew he was more or less joking with her. They were good friends and they often bantered back and forth. "I`ll bring your lunch tray up when it`s time. If you weren`t so cute I`d spank you." She winked playfully at him.

"You know there are times I love S & M." He winked back at her. Ms. Maitlin pooh-poohed him and went on her way. "Oh, I just love that woman."

Tammy Rose turned around and grinned at him. "She told me once you`re her favorite kitchen
volunteer."

"Well, I’m out of that for a while, that and sentry duty."

Tammy Rose came over to him and patted his hand. "We’re just glad you’re still here, Jesus. I
know you’re tired of hearing it, this place wouldn’t be the same without you. Maggie may run the
place, it’s you who are the heart of it. If Hilltop ever falls it would only be because it lost its heart."

"Thank you, Tammy Rose, that’s kind of you. And do me a favor."

"Anything."

"Give Tara a chance. She’s smart. She’s efficient. She knows the ropes around here. Maggie taught
her everything she knew about farming. I’ll be advising her just like I do Maggie."

Tammy Rose hesitated for a moment then nodded. "Alright, Jesus. I trust you more than I do a lot
of people. You’ve never done me wrong and was good to Earl when he had his troubles."

"Thank you."

Aaron appeared in the doorway. "Eduardo told me they made room for it so can we bring it in
now?"

"Sure. Along that wall by the window." Paul pointed to the area he was referring to.

Moments later Aaron and Daryl moved the hallway sofa through the doorway and placed it in the
room.

"This thing’s heavy. Got the cot out there, too." Daryl grunted as they hauled the sofa across the
room.

"Set it up by the dresser. If we need the extra space we can fold it up. Oh, Tammy Rose, there’s a
plastic bag downstairs in the storage closet across from the back door. Would you go get it?"

"Sure thing." She nodded to both Daryl and Aaron as she left.

Aaron looked directly at Paul. "Are you sure you want us to share this room with you? I know how
you like being alone and it can get awful crowded."

"As if we’re going to spend the entire day here." Paul snorted. "The front balcony is just a few feet
away. All we have to do is brandish our weapons and anyone out there will go away. Besides, I
grew up in a group home. The only difference is it’s people whose company I can tolerate."

"Maybe we’ll manage to get him to shut up once in a while." Daryl went back into the hallway to
retrieve the cot.

Aaron exchanged an amused glance with Paul. "Do I really talk that much?"

"Yes." Aaron was shaking with laughter.

Paul hopelessly shook his head. Everyone seemed to think he talked too much. Daryl came back in
with the cot and unfolded it where Paul told him he could. He sat down on it and looked around
the room.

Tammy Rose returned carrying the trash bag. "This it?"
"Yeah. I think you can finish up later. I want to take a nap before lunch."

She nodded and set the trash bag down on the floor, closing the door behind her.

"What’s in that?" Aaron knew Paul was up to something.

"Daryl can open it."

Daryl looked from one to the other a bit confused. He got up and looked in the trash bag then pulled out a perfectly brand new dog bed. The price tag was still on it.

"He is housebroken, right?" Aaron wasn’t certain about an outdoor dog sharing the room with them.

Daryl shrugged. "He will be if he ain’t." He placed it over by the fireplace. "Get it on a run?"

"A couple years back. No one had any reason to use it." Paul started to get up and had to sit back down his back and side hurt so much. Daryl came over and lent him a hand as he went over to the bed.

"Paul, be honest with us. Why do you really want us to stay in here with you?" Aaron sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I don’t want anyone else to know this. I’ve been having worse nightmares than my usual ones. In one the guy succeeded in killing me and no one else was around. So I turned. I was sweating and breathing so hard I almost tore out the stitches."

Daryl eased him down on the bed and helped to adjust the pillows. Lying flat was obviously uncomfortable.

"I hated all that mist in that cemetery. Gives me nightmares, too. Still think it was a lucky shot I got a bolt into the guy."

"Maybe knowing I’m not alone will help me sleep better at night." Paul closed his eyes. Both Daryl and Aaron knew Paul didn’t sleep well overall.

Aaron indicated for him and Daryl to leave the room, softly closing the door behind them.
At least they can admit things to each other.

The communal dinner went well with Maggie giving a sort of farewell speech and as evening came on Paul, Daryl, and Aaron sat on the balcony overlooking the lighted torches of nighttime Hilltop. Soon even those torches would be put out. Aaron had brought each of them a beer and Paul slowly drank his with much gratitude. He looked down and saw Siddiq walking across the lawn heading for the front door.

"What`s up, Doc?" Paul used his best Bugs Bunny impression, the alcohol loosening his tongue a bit.

"Don`t go climbing down the pillar." Siddiq had a scolding look on his face, before he went inside.

"What does he know? I could do it with one arm."

Aaron shook his head, grinning. "I couldn`t." He raised his left arm up. "Will you stop? Relax."

"I`m worried." Paul looked at Daryl. "Aren`t you worried?"

"About what?" Daryl guzzled down his beer wishing there was more to be had.

"Those--those--whatevers." Paul gestured towards the fence.

"Geez, one beer and you`re buzzed." Aaron realized that Paul obviously didn`t drink much alcohol. "Are you sure you still aren`t on morphine?"

"I hear what the scouts say about them. All the herds do is just mill about for a bit then move on in no particular direction. Sometimes they`re in a camp just skinning walkers."

There was the sound of fast light footsteps and Gracie came out on the balcony.

"Hey, isn`t it your bedtime?"

"I want you to tuck me in, Daddy. Hi, Uncle Paul. Hi, Uncle Daryl."

Both Paul and Daryl waved at her.

"Okay." Aaron set his half empty bottle on the railing. "Say goodnight, Gracie."

"Goodnight Gracie." The girl giggled along with showing an impish grin.

"I can guess who put you up to that." Aaron looked directly at Paul.

Paul pointed to himself and mouthed `moi?".

"G`night." Daryl snickered at the fun banter, already starting to feel at home.
"Be back in a jiff." A few steps and Aaron was gone.

Paul got up and almost lost his balance. Daryl was beside him in no time. "Easy."

"I used to get high on grass and never felt this buzzed." Paul giggled and took another drink.

Daryl gently eased him down into a chair. "Merle used to deal it alongside the meth. I`ve toked a few."

"Do you miss your brother?"

"The good things about him. Don`t miss him callin` me Darylina."

Paul moved his chair closer to him. "Why would he call you that?"

Daryl looked away then looked at him again. "Cuz, I like guys."

Paul chuckled. "My gaydar is almost never wrong. Had you pegged right." He wiggled his eyebrows at him.

Daryl smiled shyly looking down trying to hide it. "Yeah, I know all about that shit from Aaron. He and Eric had me pegged but never said nothin` about it."

"The three gay musketeers of the apocalypse."

"What?"

"Nothing." Paul laughed to himself. "I bet the three of us together could really take on those whispering assholes, one fucked up herd at a time."

"One of us ain`t exactly up to par just yet."

"He will be. Each day I`m feeling stronger. Siddiq and Enid did some fantastic surgery to piece me back together." Paul finished off his beer. He was silent for a long time then he looked directly into Daryl`s eyes. "I never thanked you for taking my would-be murderer out."

"Just did what I thought was right. I was scared he had killed ya." Daryl paused. "I ain`t sure I could have lived with that."

"Too much death of those close to you?" Paul`s voice was quiet as if he understood Daryl`s pain quite well.

Daryl shrugged. "Realized a lotta things bein` alone in the woods. Thought about ya a lot."

"I think a lot about you too, Daryl. Ever since that day we chased each other in a field over a truck." Paul leaned over and held his head in his hands. "There are some feelings I just can`t get out of my head they are so strong."

"Ya sure this ain`t the beer talkin`?"

"I`m sure. I`m fond of Aaron, too. We grew close training together in the woods. Things would sometimes get so tense we had to get it on with each other. It was the only thing two lonely people could do. He missed Eric so much. I had nobody. It would just happen and we satisfied the ache within us. Then it was back down to business." Paul leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. "He knew I had deeper feelings for someone else." Paul let out a single sob.
"I think it’s time ya went to bed.” Daryl got up and helped Paul to stand and served as his support as he took him to the room they shared. Aaron was just coming back from the children’s room.

"What’s wrong?"

"Don’t think it’s a good idea for any of us to be alone no more.” Daryl and Paul went inside.

Aaron nodded his understanding and closed the door behind them.
A Visit To The Blacksmith

Chapter Summary

Maggie prepares to leave and Paul has a special request for the blacksmith.

When Paul woke up the next morning he realized he was in the middle of the bed. He looked from side to side and realized just how big it was. There was some soft snoring from the cot and he could see the sofa with Aaron with his back turned towards the room. The light coming from the window was dim, the sun had not yet risen above the horizon. He had somewhat of a hangover realizing even one bottle of beer didn’t mix well with painkillers. Getting up to relieve himself he slowly made it to the bathroom using the wall as his support. There were noises coming from Maggie`s room so when he finished his business he knocked on her door.

"Jesus, what are you doing up so early?" Maggie was surprised to see that it was him when she opened the door.

"I heard noises. What`s up?"

"I`m just finishing packing Hershel`s things. I`m sorry if I woke you." She returned to the suitcase on the bed.

"You didn`t wake me. I forgot today is the day you leave." Paul made his way over to a chair and sat down.

"I`ve given verbal and written instructions to Tara. I assured her anything she wasn`t certain about you would be."

"I promise to do my best. Not everybody is happy with you leaving."

"I know, but you read the letter. Their crops are failing and that puts our trade agreement at risk."

Paul nodded. "Be careful. We still don`t know the extent of this new enemy, how far their reach really is."

"I will. I want you to keep that promise to me about my conditions." Maggie looked at him with a steady warning gaze.

"I`m stuck here for a while whether I want it or not. By the time you return I will be back into game shape." He met her gaze with a hardness she had never seen before. "If we have to fight I won`t let this place fall."

Maggie came over to him and gave him a gentle hug. "I understand. Are you three really sleeping in the same room?" There was some amusement in her voice.

"For now. Who knows? We may end up sleeping in the same bed."

Maggie covered her mouth she wanted to laugh so loud and hard, however, she didn`t want to wake anyone else up. "Jesus, I think I see the hint of you taking some of those bricks down in your fortress."
Paul could only smile.

Most of Hilltop got up early enough to see Maggie and Hershel off when the twins arrived to pick her up. Daryl, Aaron, and Paul watched from the second floor balcony.

"Do Rick and Michonne know she was gonna do this?" Daryl was uncertain about her leaving Hilltop at such a critical time.

"No. Rick won`t speak to me. Part of why I had to leave." Aaron preferred not to talk about that part of his life anymore. "Anybody want breakfast? I think I could smell Ms. Maitlin making it in the kitchen."

Having seen enough Paul turned to leave the balcony. "Let`s go down. I hope to get something more appetizing before Siddiq arrives."

"He won`t let you have bacon?" Aaron knew Paul hated restrictive diets.

"As long as he doesn`t see me eating it he`ll never know." The other two laughed. "And don`t either of you say anything to him."

"My lips are sealed."

"Ya know I ain`t much of a talker."

After breakfast Daryl and Aaron headed out to work on some construction projects. Paul slowly made his way over to the blacksmith, who was already hard at work making new horseshoes.

"Jesus." Earl cheerfully acknowledged him with a nod. "What can I do for you today?"

Paul lifted his shirt where he had tucked his two sheathed knives. "I want you to clean and sharpen these." He handed them to Earl.

"These your knives ain`t they?" Paul nodded. "Thought you gave these up for the sword."

"I did. I want to use them again. Along with the sword."

Earl took the knives and set them aside. "You arming yourself for something?"

"Possibly." Paul didn`t really want to say much at that point.

"Speaking of your sword, it`s all cleaned up and sharpened." Earl went over to the back wall and picked up the sword in its scabbard and handed it to Paul.

"Thanks." He took it and tucked it under his right arm. "There`s something else I want you to do for me."

"Anything."

"I want you to make me some new body armor, especially to cover my back. It needs to be light, but strong enough to block out blades or spikes."

Earl looked at him somewhat concerned. He knew it was best if he kept his feelings to himself. "I think I can do that. I`ll have to measure you again."

"I want this done as soon as possible."
Earl took out his tape measure and Paul allowed him to take his new measurements. "I can have it ready in about a week if I don`t get too busy."

"I would appreciate it if you wouldn`t tell anyone else about this. For now." Paul didn`t want to alarm anyone just yet, especially those who didn`t quite understand what they were about to be dealing with.

Earl was somewhat confused by the request but he nodded his consent. There was a hesitancy in his voice. "Jesus, I can guess why you`re doing this, but don`t you think you`re being a bit hasty considering what just almost happened?"

"I`m not being hasty, Earl. You weren`t out there. You didn`t see them or hear them. They are more of a danger than anyone can seem to understand."

"I suppose you would know better." He placed a supporting hand on Paul` s shoulder. "I know you got this."

"Thanks. I`ll be back in about a week." Without another word he headed for where the gardeners were hard at work. He may not be able to do much yet, but at least he could keep an eye on the progress of the crops since harvest would be coming up soon. He much preferred his responsibilities outside the fence, yet he had no desire to neglect the ones inside the fence until he was able to make a change he was thinking about making. "I`m not going to die." Paul slowly made his way across the yard. "Or even come close. Not ever."
Aaron pointed and Daryl nodded towards the barn where they were going to hide the horses for the duration of their mission. It was the same barn that Eugene had hid in just over a week ago. The sun would be setting soon and they would be needing the cover of darkness. Dog was keeping pace with them and knew to be quiet as well. Once they reached the barn and closed the door they could finally speak in low voices.

"I hope we weren`t detected. These people know how to hide and not just in herds."

"The scouts said the one they saw near here has moved on." Daryl threw a small treat towards his canine.

"I must admit I`m a bit nervous about all of this. Paul seemed to think we could find some clue to how these people move about. The memory of what happened is still too clear in my mind." Seeing Paul fall at the hands of the human/walker with a knife in his back also brought the memory of the anguish he felt in that moment, fearing that Paul had been killed.

Daryl was also troubled by the memory. He could still hear Paul`s scream of pain as he fell to the ground and just lay there, unsure if he was still breathing or not. He also remembered his anger and wanted nothing more that to get that `walker`, who he knew in that instant was really a man and barely could recall raising the crossbow and putting a bolt directly in his head. "We do what we need to do and get back to Hilltop."

"What I don`t understand is why Paul wanted to keep this mission a secret." Aaron put their horses in one of the stalls. Nearby was a rain barrel so he gave them some water and some hay.

"He`s got his reasons. Ain`t our place to know." Daryl peered out a window and noticed the sun getting low. He also noticed a mist was starting to rise again. Neither of them needed that particular memory either. They both cautiously crept out of the barn, knowing Dog would let them know if there was any trouble nearby.

Tracking through the fields and woods as it got darker and the mist growing thicker, they made their way to the cemetery, retracing their steps from the week before. It seemed empty even of walkers. Daryl was ready with his crossbow and Aaron had a knife and handgun. They came to the spot where Paul had fallen, most of the blood having soaked into the ground, but there was still a stain. Daryl placed a reassuring hand on Aaron`s shoulder. Aaron nodded and they continued to search through the rest of the graveyard, some stones quite old and tall.

"Somebody`s here."

"Did they come back?"

"We must kill them."

Aaron and Daryl quickly hid behind two of the taller gravestones, Dog hid behind a smaller one.
Daryl put his finger to his lips and Dog even stopped panting, his ears raised alert for the slightest sound. They listened for more of the raspy whispers.

"Where are they?"

"Do not belong."

"We killed kung fu sword man."

Aaron chuckled slightly and one side of Daryl’s mouth went up as they glanced at each other. They became even more alert at the sound of footsteps and the growling of walkers.

"They hide."

"Find them."

"Could be anywhere."

Daryl peered from behind his hiding place to see if he could get an estimate of how many there were. It didn’t sound like a huge herd, even smaller than what they had encountered before in the same spot. He flashed his hand twice, which meant there were around ten that he could spot.

"I thought I saw a dog."

"We eat dog meat."

The voices sounded like they were coming closer so both Aaron and Daryl prepared to take action. Daryl quietly took out one of his knives. Dog emitted a low growl. All of a sudden a walker came right between the gravestones. Daryl took it out with one stick of the knife through its head and determined that it was a walker instead of a human.

"What was that?"

"Came by the large graves."

"We’ll get them."

"They will belong here dead within the graves."

They could hear more footsteps coming closer, low voices with words they couldn’t quite make out, blending with the growling of the walkers. Another one stepped into view and it was Aaron’s turn to wield his knife, but the walker tried to stab his left arm only to meet the metal of his prosthesis. Daryl knew it was human so this time a bolt from his crossbow took care of it. Suddenly Dog barked furiously as they were deluged with more of the herd. Aaron went into action remembering all that Paul had taught him with martial arts moves, kicking a couple of them down. He slammed his foot into one that was a walker, crushing its head. Another was human so he raised his gun and shot it in the head.

In the meantime Daryl had knocked one over with his crossbow and plunged a knife into its head.

"We leave. Go home."

They watched as the remaining ones ran away and disappeared into the mist. Since catching them would be almost impossible due to the darkness they decided to let them go.

"I think we put a little fear into them this time." Aaron wiped some blood off of his face.
"Must be territorial. Now all we got to do is find their territory."

"That will be good information for the scouts. Paul will be pleased about that." Aaron grinned.

Daryl returned the smile. "I’d do anythin’ for him right now."

"I know." Aaron paused. "You do know he’s in love with you."

Daryl stood there for a moment sucking on his finger, then nodded. "I know. Did he tell ya that?"

"Long time ago. He thinks that you don’t love him though."

Daryl turned away so Aaron couldn’t see the expression on his face. It was one of longing, awkwardness, and shyness.

"I do." He whispered even quieter than the words they had just listened to earlier.
Tara and Paul get some things straight and bond.

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tara found Paul lounging on the bed in his room his nose deep in a book. The door was open so she didn’t feel the need to knock. He was so engrossed in reading he didn’t look up until she rattled the sheaf of papers in her hand.

"Whacha reading?"

Paul held up the book so she could see the cover. "The Three Musketeers. A little Dumas pére goes a long way. I was recently reminded of it."

She looked around the room and noticed the sofa and the cot. "Little crowded in here for three people isn’t it?"

"Maybe, but it’s all we got right now. Every place is pretty much occupied."

Tara was deep in thought for a moment. "I might have to remedy that in the near future."

Paul set the book aside on the bed stand. "So, how did your first day go?"

"Like any first day of a new job. I don’t know where anything goes or how it gets done." Tara scooted a chair up next to the bed. "I’ll get the hang of it. With your help, of course."

"Of course." He winked and flashed his charming smile at her.

Tara smiled wishing in that moment that both of them weren’t gay. "Where are Daryl and Aaron? Bertie said they went out on a run. There have been no requests for any direly needed supplies."

Paul sighed. Should he tell her that he sent them out in secret? "Okay." His voice was low and quiet. "I sent them out to look for information."

"Where?"

"To the graveyard and the surrounding area."

Tara fidgeted with her hands for a moment not looking at him. "And you had no intention of telling me this?"

Paul looked away from her nervously. "The thought had occurred to me not to say anything or either to just lie to you. I’ve decided that’s not a good idea."

"Which means you don’t have a lot of confidence in me." She got up and paced and angrily glared at him. "I’m sorry if I don’t live up to your standards, Jesus. Maggie told me she offered you the chance to lead Hilltop. You turned her down."
Paul looked down somewhat ashamed. "I have my reasons." He looked at her. "Deciding not to lie to you now means I do want to give you a chance. I should respect you as the leader of Hilltop as much as I do Maggie."

"You could have consulted me first about this mission, Jesus. You still chose to keep it a secret."

"And that was my mistake, Tara. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again." He looked directly into her eyes.

She fidgeted for a moment, her stubbornness preventing her from giving in. "Oh, Jesus, you and those puppy dog eyes. No one can resist so I forgive you." She went over to him and they hugged, she being careful not to squeeze his back on the left side too hard. She then sat beside him on the bed tucking her legs underneath her. "What do you expect them to find?"

"I’m not sure. When I was stabbed he said we didn’t belong there. It must be part of what they consider their territory. That graveyard could be a starting point as to what their boundaries are."

"You know these talking walkers or whatever they call themselves are the weirdest people we’ve ever come into contact with." She sighed. "Maggie told me about some kind of meeting that’s going to take place in a couple days. She said representatives from The Kingdom, Alexandria, and maybe even Oceanside will be here." She handed Paul the papers she was carrying. "I’m not going out on a limb here by saying I’m not prepared for this."

Paul smiled slightly. "That’s what I’m here for. I’ll tell you what you need to know, you can take it from there. It’s not an important meeting, just an exchange of information."

Tara sighed. "Jesus, I do need you. I know we’ve had our differences in the past. This time it’s different. I feel like Maggie just dumped this in my lap with no preparation whatsoever. I felt so lost all day with people coming to me with complaints, requests, refereeing disputes, even breaking up a brawl in the corn field. I had to kick Kal’s ass. For real."

Paul burst out into laughter. "He probably deserved it. Wish I could have been there to see it."

Tara tucked herself in a bit more and reclined on a pillow. "It happened while they were preparing for the harvest next week. Kal said we needed to drag the wheelbarrow between the rows as we picked the corn. Some guy named Alan, I think, said we needed to park it at the end of each row. Kal said it was more practical to push it along. Alan said there wasn’t enough room. At this point they both start yelling, calling each other names, until Kal throws the first punch. Bertie comes over to the bean field to get me and by the time I get there they were rolling around between the rows and in the mud. I’m yelling for them to stop and they aren’t paying attention. Kal’s ass comes within range of my foot and I kicked him so hard he went sprawling into the tomato plants."

During her story Paul was laughing so hard his eyes watered and he was clutching his stomach. "I assume they stopped fighting."

"Kal just looked at me with an expression of pure surprise. I pointed at him and told him to take a double shift of sentry duty. As for Alan, I put him in the cell until he cooled off."

After he had stopped laughing Paul lightly punched her on the arm. "You did well, Ms. Chambler."

"I think I learned my kick from watching you."

There were some noisy footsteps in the hallway and Tara got up to see what it was. Aaron and Daryl entered the room both covered in blood and walker goo.
"We`re back." Aaron had a self-conscious grin on his face.

"Obviously." Paul snickered.

Tara looked up and down at both of them, scrutinizing them with a keen eye. "Be sure to clean the shower when you`re finished. I got a complaint today about it being too filthy for even the pigs to use." Aaron and Daryl had guilty looks on their faces.

"You see? You do know how to take charge."

Tara aimed a virtual fist bump at him, which he returned, then she left. Daryl and Aaron just looked after her with somewhat shocked looks.

Daryl looked at Paul. "We found some more walkers and those whisperin` assholes."

"No kidding." Paul was still snickering. "Get out of here, you smell."

Dog appeared in the doorway with no hint of ever being in a fight with walkers. Paul patted the spot Tara had abandoned on the bed and Dog gleefully jumped up and sat down beside him.

"I thought ya didn`t allow him on the bed."

"He`s clean. Out!"

Aaron grabbed Daryl`s arm and they quickly exited the room. Paul sat on the bed petting Dog, who now rolled over to have his belly rubbed which Paul did with enthusiasm.

Chapter End Notes

I thought I would develop Tara Chambler a little bit since the show has failed with her character as well. Seems like they have a big fail ratio with every gay character, male or female.
With Or Without You

Chapter Summary

Daryl admits to Paul he would rather have him alive than dead.

As the sun set and turned the woods and meadows surrounding Hilltop into a sharp fiery amber, Paul stood on the platform of an empty sentry post and watched the oncoming twilight spread itself into the impenetrable darkness. There was a somewhat strong wind that blew his long hair about his head and shoulders. For some reason he didn’t seem to mind. He only wanted to feel the touch of the wind move across his body. His thoughts drifted to that fateful night in the graveyard, thoughts that he had shoved aside because he wanted to focus on getting healthy again. Tonight, however, the dark thoughts would not leave him alone. In fact, they made him lonely. Not afraid. Not angry. Just lonely. Or was it being alone? He wasn’t certain he could tell the difference anymore.

The night watchman would be showing up soon so he knew his reverie would be coming to an end. When the sound of heavy shoes were heard on the wooden ladder he sighed. Couldn’t he have just a couple more minutes before being disturbed? However, as soon as the head appeared over the edge he didn’t feel so despondent anymore.

"What are ya doin` up here? They let ya climb the ladder?" Daryl was armed with his crossbow and a rifle, ready for his turn as the night watchman.

"Had my first physical therapy session today. I can move my left arm without putting too much strain on the injury." Paul pounded his foot on the wooden planks. "And I have my boots on again."

Daryl grinned remembering Paul griping to anyone in earshot about the slippers. He took out a cigarette and lit it. "Still didn`t answer my question."

"I hope you don`t mind that I`m up here."

"Nah. I could use the company. Gracie`s gotta ear infection so Aaron is nursin` her tonight."

Paul frowned. "I hope she`ll be alright."

"It ain`t bad. Won`t have to send to Alexandria for Siddiq." Daryl took a quick sweep of the area with binoculars.

Paul came up and stood beside him. "Do you think they`re watching us from somewhere out there?"

"Ain`t seen no herds nearby. Been outdoors enough to feel if I`m bein` watched or not." He stared at Paul for a long time in the dimming light. "Are ya okay?"

"Why do you ask?"

Daryl shrugged. "Just seem kinda distant--faraway."
"I was thinking about that night. Trying to process it all so I can move forward. I’m realizing I’m starting to act on paranoia instead of logic." Paul placed his hands on the edge of the railing. "That’s not me, Daryl."

"Hey man, I know Earl is makin’ ya some new armor. I was takin’ my knives to get ‘em sharpened. He was workin’ on it."

"How do you know it’s mine?"

"Nobody else wears it."

A lone tear slowly flowed from Paul’s left eye. "It’s hard to keep a secret from some people." He looked directly at Daryl. "I’m glad you know."

Daryl reached over and wiped away the tear. "I know ya want to get deep into the fray, Paul. It’s who ya are. It’s who I am. Ya do what ya need to do. I want ya to stay alive."

"I want me to stay alive, too."

"Don’t want another night like that night. I saw the way ya were fightin’. Knew you was havin’ fun in your own way."

Paul smiled slightly. "Guess I can’t help myself."

"I kinda was havin’ fun, too. Walkers ain’t nothin’ to me no more."

"I think they’re that way to a lot of us who are the warriors." Paul moved slightly closer to Daryl until he could feel the warmth of his body. Just a light touch. Daryl didn’t seem to mind since he didn’t move to make more room between them.

"Rather have ya with us than be without ya."

"Everyone has pretty much told me that in their own way."

"I want ya fightin’ by my side." Daryl’s eyes locked with Paul’s. "Fightin’ or just standin’ here talkin’," He reached up and placed his hand on top of Paul’s.

"What are you really trying to say, Daryl?" Paul could feel his heart skip a beat.

"My world would be a whole lot emptier. I may tell ya that ya talk too much. It’s better than not hearin’ your voice at all." Daryl tossed aside his cigarette.

Paul turned his head back and forth as he bit his lip. "I somehow feel if I were dead I would hear everyone’s voices as a cacophony of noise and would be so lonely because I wouldn’t be able to distinguish one voice from another, much less hear what anyone was saying." More tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Hey, ya gotta stop beatin’ yourself up like this, Paul." Daryl gathered him in his arms and let him sob on his shoulder for a couple minutes. He rested his cheek next to Paul’s head.

"I’m sorry." Paul could barely speak through his tears.

"Ya got nothin’ to be sorry for." Daryl handed him the black bandana that Paul had given to him. It smelled slightly of motor oil, but Paul didn’t seem to mind as he dried his eyes. "Ya get it all out of your system."
"Thank you. I do have these little breakdowns every once in a while. I try not to let anyone see."

"Ya let me see." Daryl took the bandana back and tucked it in his back pocket. "Guess that means ya trust me."

"I do trust you, Daryl. In more ways than you know." The wind blew his hair about his face. Daryl seemed mesmerized by its movement. "I better let you concentrate on your watch. Instinct or not, they may be observing us at this very moment."

Daryl swept his eyes over the landscape. "Maybe they’re bored."

Paul slightly shook with laughter. "No TV. Who knows? Maybe some night we’ll give them something worth watching." His tone was slightly flirty.

"They seem to like violence. Maybe they’ll like sex, too." Daryl smirked, not wanting to let on that he enjoyed Paul’s flirting. He reached over and pulled some hair away from Paul’s face. "Ya need to tie your hair up."

"I know. I’m getting lazy about the bun. Keep a good eye out." Paul moved towards the ladder. "And if I’m asleep when you get off watch, have a good night."

"I will." Even though he knew Paul was capable of climbing down the ladder okay, he watched until he was safely back on the ground before turning back to look into the starry darkness. "I most certainly will." Daryl wanted so much to be close to Paul and enjoyed their light touching tonight. He would find a way. He cared about Paul that much.
"I hope this meeting won`t take long." Tara tried to keep in step with Paul, Daryl, and Aaron. "We start harvesting in two days." They stood outside of Barrington House staring at the gate.

"Ask them to stick around and help. Some of this food goes to them anyway."

"That`s the best idea I`ve heard all day, Aaron." Tara sighed as the delegation from The Kingdom came through the gate. It consisted of King Ezekiel, Jerry, and one of their knights as an escort. "Where`s Carol?"

"Someone`s gotta stay behind to keep an eye on things. The place is fallin` apart."

"At the seams. Bound to happen when the plumber is the clog in your drain because he died draining the sewer." Paul`s off-the-wall sense of humor sometimes got the better of him.

Tara snickered. "Makes sense." She watched as two horses pulled a wagon behind The Kingdom delegation. Father Gabriel, Rosita, and Eugene were riding it. "Can`t even bring themselves to show up." They knew she was referring to Rick and Michonne.

"I placed a bet with Eduardo to see if they would or not."

"Gambling on Hilltop? Should we put a stop to it?" Paul asked only to tease Aaron.

"You wouldn`t believe what Eric and I used to do at the casinos."

"Did ya win or lose the bet?"

"Won. He takes a week`s worth of my shifts on watch."

"Well, as long as it isn`t for money." Tara playfully nudged Paul. "By the way, your bun looks great this afternoon."


"Jee--zuz!!" King Ezekiel couldn`t help calling out when he saw Paul, his arms open as he came towards them. "My heart soars with great jubilation to know that you are still among the living!"

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Paul felt playful nudges from both Aaron and Daryl.

Aaron whispered to Daryl. "Told you he`d do that." Daryl could only snicker.

"Will you two knock it off." Paul practically hissed as he talked out of the side of his mouth.

King Ezekiel came right up to Paul. "I was shaken to the core of my soul. To lose you would make the world shudder with sorrow." He grasped Paul`s arm and shoulder. "Are you in much pain?"
"No, Your Majesty. I'm healing quite well."

King Ezekiel kissed both of Paul's cheeks. Daryl and Aaron had to place their hands over their mouths to keep from laughing. Tara's mouth even twitched slightly. King Ezekiel turned to face her and she had to quickly regain her control. "I see that Maggie has placed a good and willing servant to take her place while she is away." He put his arm around her and led her over to a nearby tree for a private conversation.

"Cobbler." Jerry handed Paul a plastic container. He wore a broad toothy grin.

"What flavor?" Paul eyed the container with delight.

"Jerry with cherry. Good on ya, dude." Jerry then made the peace sign.

Paul returned the gesture with one of his own. Then it was time for them to greet Father Gabriel, Rosita, and Eugene.

Father Gabriel came up to Paul. "Rick and Michonne send their regrets."

"This ain't important enough for 'em to show up?" Daryl mostly growled his question.

"Some new people have shown up and he prefers to keep an eye on them." It was Rosita's turn to speak.

"What kind of people?"

"If you had stayed in Alexandria you would know." The bitterness in Father Gabriel's tone could not be ignored. "We may even send them here."

Aaron sighed and looked away.

"We're pretty crowded here right now." Paul, ever the diplomat, wanted to keep the peace. "You are more than welcome to bring them around. If they are acceptable we'll consider it. Tara may be a little hard pressed to convince in Maggie's absence."

"We thought you were the leader of Hilltop now." Rosita was somewhat taken aback by the revelation.

"I'm not. But I might be even harder to convince than Tara." Paul paused to catch his breath and not let Father Gabriel get his goat. "I hope you and Eugene have recovered from your injuries." He wanted nothing more than to change the subject. His bitterness towards Rick would have to wait for a while.

"Considering your almost demise we are of preeminent configuration, workable and primed for the duration." Didn't Eugene's tone of voice ever change from his usual monotone?

There was some confused looks from everyone.

"Umm, urr, that's good." Paul hoped he understood what Eugene had just said. "Your account of the events before what happened in the graveyard will be important." He turned to Kal. "Take them to the guest house."

"You have a guest house?" Rosita knew they were somewhat crowded and had been uncertain about any accommodations.

"Extra trailer. Nothing fancy." Aaron nodded to Kal.
Kal motioned for them to follow him. Paul, Daryl, and Aaron exhaled a sigh of relief.

"I want this shit over with. Instead of talking we need to be out there fighting." Aaron was growing impatient since he had seen the new enemy up close and knew what they were fully capable of doing.

"We don’t know what all we’re fightin’ yet."

"Settle down, you two. I’ll be over at the blacksmith’s." They could tell Paul’s mood wasn’t the best. They were unsure if it was because of Father Gabriel’s attitude or the fact he wasn’t in shape to do any fighting yet.

When Earl saw Paul heading his way he immediately stopped what he was doing and wiped his hands. "Let me guess, you came to see your armor. Sorry it took longer than I thought."

"You’re fine, Earl. I’d rather have it done right."

Earl opened up a large bag and motioned for Paul to look into it. "You can take it and try it on. Let me know if there are any changes you need."

"Looks good."

Earl handed him his knives. "Cleaned, sharpened, and polished."

Paul took one out and examined it. "Hello, old friend."

"Got another surprise." Earl reached down into a crate and pulled out a sheathed small knife on a strap. "Made this one myself. A four inch dagger to strap to your ankle." He handed it to Paul to inspect.

"I like it. For me?"

Earl nodded.

Paul took out the knife and threw it with precision into a nearby pole. He had never felt so good in days.
After visiting the blacksmith Paul wandered over towards the stables to look in on the horses, one of his more pleasurable responsibilities at Hilltop. Seeing that the ones from The Kingdom and Alexandria had been taken care of he passed by the wagon that Father Gabriel, Rosita, and Eugene had ridden in. He noticed a pile of canvas in the back and just for a moment he thought he saw a movement. Grabbing a pitchfork he lightly poked at it. Then with the end with the tines he poked down a little harder, a shit eating grin on his face.

"Hey!"

Paul put the pitchfork back where he found it. "If a certain father realized you sneaked in here he’d attack this place worse than any of the Saviors ever did."

A head poked out from beneath the canvas. "I had to get out of there." Carl Grimes climbed out of the back of the wagon. "No one knows I’m here. Not even Father Gabe, Rosita, or Eugene." He grabbed his hat and dusted it off.

"I’m sure you’ll be missed."

Carl suddenly grabbed him and lightly hugged him. Paul returned it and smiled. Carl then let go. "Heard it was a pretty close call."

"Isn’t that how it is anymore?"

"Yeah." Carl grinned. "I really don’t want them to know I’m here just yet."

"Well, you’d be pretty hard to hide under the circumstances. I could give you one of Ms. Maitlin’s dresses."

"Ha-ha, but no thanks. Is Enid in the medical trailer?" Carl eagerly glanced across the yard as if searching.

"Don’t know." Paul wanted to avoid talking about Enid at all costs. He then glanced around. "Sneak in through the back door of the house. There’s a servant’s stairway right beside the kitchen. Go to the room next to the balcony and you can hide there for a while. Aaron or Daryl might be there, but they won’t mind."

"What about Ms. Maitlin? She’s always in the kitchen."

"Ask her to give you a cinnamon roll." Paul slapped him on the back. "She can keep a secret too."

"Thanks, Jesus. You’re one in a million." Carl left practically at a run.

Paul was watching him leave when there was a shout from one of the sentries to open the gate. Curious as always, he made his way over to see what was going on. When he got closer he realized...
it was Michonne on horseback and was the only one who walked up to her. They silently looked at each other for a moment before she dismounted.

"Let me guess, you’re not really here for the meeting."

"Where is he?"

"I sent him upstairs to my room."

Michonne sighed. "By the time we realized he was missing it was too late." She looked him up and down. "You look well, Jesus."

"I still have a lot of healing to do, then get back into shape." He moved his left arm up and down only going as far as the height of his shoulder. "I’m hoping by the weekend I’ll be able to put it up over my head."

She smiled slightly. "We’re all glad you didn’t die. I think Rick feels the same way."

"I know he’s angry about Aaron and me meeting in secret." Paul stared off into the distance. "And that he still irrationally blames me for what went down with the Saviors. This rift between our communities needs to come to an end, Michonne. I’m always ready to meet Rick half way. I know you know that as well as I do. Maggie said she might be willing to compromise if other mitigating circumstances demand it, why can’t Rick be?" They slowly walked across the yard towards Barrington House.

"It all boils down to Negan, one way or another. He messes with Rick’s thoughts just as much as he does everyone else’s yet he keeps him alive. I don’t understand him at times, either."

Paul sighed. "Is that all it really comes down to? Just Negan? There’s more behind this." He paused. "Aaron wanted to learn how to fight. He asked me to help him and I didn’t see any reason to refuse. He needs some fine tuning, but he’s good." Paul chuckled to himself remembering Aaron tackling him and knocking him down from his horse.

"Rick stands by his decision to remain isolated. He promised Carl he would spare Negan’s life and stop trying to kill every last one of the Saviors, even if he thought at the time that Carl was wrong. Now he realizes how out of control things were getting."

"Dammit, Michonne." She looked at him seeing genuine anger in his blue/green eyes, a rare thing she had never seen in him before. "Rick is a hypocrite. If I thought he could make peace, love, and understanding by sparing Negan’s life, bring unity under this ideal of stopping the senseless killing, I would support him."

"Doesn’t that make you a hypocrite, too? You spared Alden’s life and those other Saviors, who in turn betrayed your trust, escaped and wanted to continue Negan’s philosophy of taking it all for themselves." Michonne was now getting just as angry.

Paul turned away from her taking several frustrated deep breaths. "What is it don’t you get? They surrendered. In war there are rules. The violence was becoming senseless, it took hold of everyone. I only kill if there is a need. I’m no peacenik and I’m no hypocrite. Rick only now talks about how senseless killing is. I practice it." His eyes had become dark and Michonne could only look away.

"Yet you still believe Negan should die."

"Yes. He has caused too much pain and suffering and I don’t see that he’s planning on reforming his ways in the future. I think even you are smart enough to see that. And if I’m wrong, then I’m
wrong. Until then--." Paul put his face in his hands. "It all gets so confusing even for me anymore."

Michonne could see that he was having trouble trying to rationalize the past with the present and sympathized. She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Negan has this way of getting under everybody’s skin, even at a distance." Her expression became softer. "He knew I had a child, a son, who died when things went down. I don’t know how he figured it out."

"He’s very good at psychologically manipulating people when they least expect it. It’s his greatest talent. I’m sorry about your son. Was he young?"

"Andre wasn’t even three years old." Her face crumbled as tears filled up her eyes. "Now there’s something else."

"What is it? Tell me. Maybe I can help."

She cried for a bit then wiped at her eyes. "It’s not supposed to be anything sad. I haven’t even told Rick yet even though he should be the first to know." She paused. "I’m pregnant."

Paul smiled. "Congratulations. Why the hesitancy?"

"I suppose it’s just the jitters concerning how things have gone down with everyone. Babies do survive. Look at Judith and Gracie."

"They most certainly do." He was feeling better, putting their conversation to the back of his mind. "You must be tired from your ride. We can discuss more about Carl later. For now Ms. Maitlin will put you right."

Michonne nodded. "Okay. I guess I’m just as mixed up about this whole situation as you are, Jesus. Maybe there is a way to make Rick see."

"I’m sure there is. We just have to find it." Together they went towards the house. Michonne felt lighter, always amazed at how Paul seemed to make things better than they really were. In that moment she also realized the great loss it would have been if the stabbing had been fatal.
Chapter Summary

Carl learns the truth about Enid.

"Ya keep sneakin` out like this Rick will find some way to stop ya." Daryl looked at Carl as he and Aaron cleaned their weapons up in their room.

"He hasn`t even noticed that I`m old enough to make my own decisions. I`m eighteen now." Carl roughhoused with Dog.

Aaron sighed. "I know you came here looking for Enid, right?"

"Yeah. Jesus didn`t say anything about her. I didn`t see her. Maybe she was making rounds."

Aaron exchanged a look with Daryl. "You want to tell him or should I?"

"I`ll tell him."

"Tell me what?" Carl now looked worried. He got up and went over to the window hoping to see Enid. He did see her. It wasn`t what he expected to see. She was kissing, of all people, Alden. He turned to run out of the room only barely avoiding knocking down Michonne and Paul. Paul caught him by the arm and held him firmly.

"Guess we don`t need to tell him nothin`."

Carl glared at Michonne. "What are you doing here?" His voice was angry. "Did Dad send you?"

"No, I came on my own."

Paul none too gently shoved Carl back into the room and closed the door. Michonne sat down on the sofa and Paul leaned against the door in case Carl decided to make another run for it.

"Let me out. I need to see her." Carl was now desperate as well as angry.

"Ya were hardly ever here." Daryl almost yelled. "She got lonely."

"I`m lonely too."

"Stop being so dramatic, Carl." Michonne sighed and massaged her sinuses. "There will be others."

"Yeah, you`re too old for the teenage angst bullshit."

Carl took off his hat and threw it across the room almost hitting one of the antique oil lamps.

"Hey." Paul indicated for Carl to sit down. "Careful. Those aren`t so easy to come by anymore."

"I want to at least talk to her." Carl sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You will, but when you`re in a better state of mind. It`s never good to go down half-cocked." If
anyone felt fatherly towards Carl it was Aaron.

Carl took a couple deep breaths. "I know you’re right and I should wait. I have to ask her why.” He picked at his nails for a moment. "I suppose she did what she had to do. She could at least have told me." He got up and looked out the window again. Alden was walking towards where some construction had been going on. Enid was nowhere in sight. "Is he good to her?"

"As far as we know. He doesn’t seem to be the abusive type. He can see sense. I should know, I was the one who captured him. He’s been quite valuable to the community."

Aaron got up and stood beside him. "You never know, Carl, you might meet someone who can change the course of things around here." He turned around and set his weapons aside. "I need to go check on Gracie." He left the room.

Carl turned to face everyone. "Looks like Aaron’s integrated himself pretty good here. Dad’s still pissed at him."

"He’s made himself at home right in this room." Daryl was actually glad that Aaron had decided to live at Hilltop.

"As have you." Paul glanced at a pile of Daryl’s dirty clothes.

"It was your idea."

"Everything’s always my idea."

"All of `em ain’t that great, either."

Carl snickered sensing a sort of good tension between the two. It made him wonder if they had a thing going.

Paul ignored Daryl and opened the door. "I’ve got physical therapy. Toodle-pip." He was gone in a flash.

"Carl, your dad is going to be worried. You need to come back with me."

"Not until I talk to Enid."

"When will that be?" Carl merely shrugged. Michonne looked at Daryl. "He’ll be worried about me, too."

"Why don’t ya stay for the meetin’. Won’t take long. We were expectin’ ya and Rick for somethin’ this important."

"You know how Rick feels. Why he doesn’t want to come here."

"Cuz he’s feelin’ guilty for not killin’ Negan and givin’ Maggie her justice? For bein’ angry at Paul concernin’ the Saviors? Paul says Maggie is sometimes as bad and just as stubborn." Daryl got up and looked out the window. Enid had reappeared and she and Alden were talking over by the house he was helping to construct. He saw Tara come up to them. "Tara is in charge until Maggie gets back. Rick will talk to her, won’t he?"

"Maybe. He’s confused in his mind about a lot of things. You know how anger makes you blind and stupid." Michonne looked at Carl. "Do you really still believe things can be this ideal little utopia?"
Carl was silent for a long time. "I’ve had second thoughts. I was a kid looking for an easy solution. I’ve done some growing up since then. At the time there just seemed to be too much killing and everyone had it in mind to eliminate every last Savior whether they were guilty of anything or not."

"Do ya ever talk to Negan?"

"I have a couple times."

"Right under his father´s nose." Michonne couldn´t help but smile a little, being somewhat amused by the situation. "Rick doesn´t approve, but you know how Carl defies his edicts."

"He seems sorry for what he´s done and says he wants to help out. I´ve told Dad that. He says I´m not to believe him."

"You´re such a damn fool, Carl. He´ll say anythin` to fuck with your mind. Don´t pay attention to him."

"Don´t you think that even the worst of us deserves the benefit of the doubt? Shouldn´t that include Negan? I´m really all mixed up about this. Sometimes Negan is one way, then he´s the complete opposite."

Daryl and Michonne glanced at each other.

"Make up your mind about exactly how you feel." Michonne looked at Daryl. "Since I won´t leave until he´s ready to come with me I´ll attend the meeting. Maybe I can get enough information to convince Rick to come to his senses."

"Ya saw what went down in that graveyard. That ain´t enough?"

"I wish it was." Michonne didn´t want to meet his intensive gaze. "I need to wash up." She got up so quickly that she suddenly felt dizzy. Daryl reached over and caught her, gently helping her to sit back down on the sofa.

"Ya alright?"

"The horse was a bit high-spirited. I´ll be fine."

Daryl nodded. She didn´t see the doubtful questioning look on his face as if he knew there was more to her explanation than an overly energetic horse. "I´ll get ya some water." He looked at Carl. "Stay here. Keep an eye on her."

Carl nodded and Daryl left. He went over to her and put his arm around her shoulders.

Michonne looked up at him and smiled. "I´m alright. Really." Carl hugged his cheek with hers then got up to look out the window. Seeing Alden only made him angry again. For the time being he kept it to himself.
Daydream Believer

Chapter Summary

Paul remembers a time when he was the deciding factor in the outcome of an important battle.

"And we really need to get the harvest started on a couple of the fields while it`s still dry." Alden stood in front of the desk occupied by Tara, while Paul stood off to one side as they met in Maggie`s office. "I thought the meeting would have taken place by now."

"We`re still waiting to hear from our envoy to Oceanside." Tara had pretty much given up upon hearing from the coastal community.

"They may not even decide to show up. They were pretty bummed about how the war with the Saviors ended. In a lot of ways you can`t blame them. If they want to keep to themselves then we should leave them alone." Paul had been through enough negotiations with groups to know when they were no longer interested in trading or anything else.

Tara looked at Paul. "It`s been years. That`s a long time to stay bummed about something."

"Negan is still alive. That`s enough time to hold any grudge that strong." Alden paused. "So, what do you want us to do?"

Tara got up and paced for a moment, deep in thought. She stopped and looked out the window. "Spare anyone you can and get started. How long before the corn is ready?"

"It is ready. We`ll need all hands on deck to tackle that field." Alden tilted his head to think. "At least two days, three at the most, but no longer than that. We have to hope it won`t rain in the meantime."

"I`ll tell Jimmy Whitecloud to hold off on his rain dance. He`s been itching to do one that integrates the Michael Jackson moonwalk."

"That`s so `80`s." Tara could always rely on getting a good laugh from both Paul and Alden. "If Oceanside won`t show up I`ll cancel the meeting and we can just exchange what information we have. I`ve convinced the Kingdom and Alexandria people to help with the harvest and they can take their allotment of food back with them."

"Sounds like a good plan." Alden turned to leave. "I need to get back to work."

"One more thing." Alden stopped. "Watch out for Carl. He saw you and Enid together."

Alden nodded. "Thanks." He left the office.

Tara looked at Paul. "Doesn`t get any easier but I am getting the hang of it."

"You may not need me after all."

"Believe me, I do. Jesus, you`re very much needed around here. Don`t ever forget that." She came
over and placed a supporting hand on his shoulder.

"I’ll be here for you as long as Maggie is gone." He paused. "When she gets back I’m going to recommend that you take my place as second-in-command."

Tara had a somewhat shocked and confused look on her face. "Take your place? Are you going somewhere?"

"No. I’m staying here at Hilltop. I want to do something different that doesn’t keep me tied down to administrative work. There are things I’m better skilled at and would be more of an asset."

"What does that exactly mean? Are you unhappy?"

"A bit. I’m still healing. As soon as I’m healed I’ll be back into fighting form and ready to take on any new enemy that comes this way. That is where my strength lies, Tara. I know it. You know it. I’m sure Maggie knows it." He swallowed hard knowing Tara might feel lost in her new capacity if he would suddenly jump and run.

"Do you really think I can take your place?"

"I know you can."

There was a knock, even though the office door was open. Bertie peered inside. "That main water pipe is clogged up again."

Tara started to leave but Paul indicated for her to sit down behind her desk. "I’m on it. This qualifies as light exercise. Unless you’re ready to be a plumber."

"Not really. Next time." She wrinkled up her nose indicating her distaste at such a prospect.

Paul grinned and followed Bertie out to where the problem was. Looking around was a reminder of how much he hated the responsibilities of doing the more mundane tasks of running the place. Sometimes he welcomed those kind of things, but spending the last few years barely getting outside the fence had taken its emotional toll on him. It was easy for his mind to drift back to a time he felt he was more needed...

...Alexandria, Hilltop, and The Kingdom had gathered their troops together and by information passed onto them from Dwight they marched up the hill to the designated spot to await their destiny.

Paul, in his long leather duster, came up beside Rick. "Could we have gotten it wrong?"

"I don’t think so."

"Rick! Rick Grimes!" A voice boomed from a loudspeaker coming from somewhere nearby. "I’m fucking coming to get all of you, assholes." This was followed by a comical chuckle.

"Come out and fight, Negan. I’m gonna kill you right here and now!" Rick wondered what kind of joke Negan was trying to pull this time. In the end, it was never really a joke.

"Oh, I’m so scared. Good thing I wore my shittin’ pants. But if that’s what you want." There was the sound of gun clicks and the small army of the united communities found themselves surrounded by Saviors.

Paul raised his gun and instantly took out two Saviors and ducked low to the ground as shots
whizzed above his head. As the battle went on around him he had only one goal in mind. He noticed a trench had been dug nearby and concluded it was meant for only one thing. He carefully made his way towards the two Saviors standing guard. It was the place Negan was most likely hiding. With swift martial arts skill he silently took out the two guards. Negan hadn’t noticed and he stepped out of the trench. Paul then slid down into it and when he got near Negan he reached up and grabbed his legs and pulled him to the ground. The battle seemed chaotic with people from both sides either being killed or injured, but he knew how to put a stop to the whole thing.

Negan looked at him in surprise as Paul artfully leaped out of the trench. "Jesus. I’ve heard about you. Why aren’t you dead yet?" Negan shouted. Was that fear Paul saw in his eyes?

"Because your soldiers suck."

Negan got up and took a swing at Paul with Lucille, who ducked just in time. In one swift motion he grabbed the barbed wire bat and shoved it right into Negan’s face, knocking the bigger man down to the ground. His face bloodied, Negan took another grab at Lucille and tried to strike Paul with it again. With his long hair flying, Paul aimed a kick right where Negan had a grasp of the bat, which was close to his face, and knocked the weapon from Negan’s hands. Negan fell to the ground backwards and Paul moved in to swiftly pick up Lucille.

The battle seemed to suddenly come to a halt as the Saviors looked on in surprise at the fact that their leader had just been taken down. It seemed to have sucked out all the confidence within them. The three united communities looked on in astonishment at how such a small man could take out a much bigger Negan with ninja skills rivalsing the best.

"I ain’t ever seen no one do that." The look on Daryl’s face was one of pure amazement.

"Me neither." Rick indicated for the forces to disarm and capture the stunned Saviors.

Paul casually walked over to them, grinning and playfully swinging Lucille from side to side. "He’s all yours." He handed the bat to Aaron for safekeeping...

What happened afterwards was where the disagreements and divisions between the communities began to unravel the peace and trade agreements and what everyone had hoped to be a united front against future enemies.

"Jesus, pay attention to what you’re doing." Bertie tried to stop the water that squirted from the pipe drenching everything nearby.

"Huh? Sorry."

"Where were you just now?" Bertie held the pipe as Paul finished unscrewing it to remove the obstacle that blocked it.

"I was someplace where I was more myself, I guess." He looked up and smiled reassuringly at her.

Bertie returned the smile. "You go ahead and daydream all you want. You’ve earned it."

They continued to work on the pipe in silence.
Paul was walking back from solving the pipe problem when he heard shouting near one of the gardens. Aaron was nearby and they exchanged questioning glances. Wordlessly they went over together to investigate.

"She was mine and you took her away from me! Just like that!" Carl was shouting at Alden. "You saw an opportunity and took advantage of it."

"I haven`t seen you around here lately."

Carl grabbed hold of Alden and threw him to the ground then was on top of him. His hat flew off of his head and rolled towards where a Billy goat had temporarily been tied up.

"Oh shit." Aaron and Paul ran towards them.

Alden threw a punch at Carl who went sprawling then was immediately on his feet. He then charged Alden knocking him to the ground again. Carl jumped on top of him and they rolled around wrestling, getting their clothes dirty in the process.

"Stop it! Stop it you two!" Enid was shouting and came running towards them. Both of them didn`t seem to hear her.

Aaron leaped into the fray and took hold of Alden, while Paul grabbed Carl. He felt the strain on his stitches and hoped he didn`t pull any out.

"Break it up. Right now." Paul`s voice was calm, yet indicated authority. Carl struggled for a bit then settled down.

"Calm down, Alden." Aaron held him fast with just one arm.

Alden was panting heavily then he held up his hand. "Alright, I`m good." Aaron let him go.

"And you? Are you good, Carl?"

Carl twitched a bit then seemed to settle down. "Let go of me, Jesus."

"Not until you stop this." He could feel a bit of moisture on his back in the area of his wound. "Go get your hat. The goat wants to eat it."

Carl ran over and snatched his hat from the goat. Following its nature the Billy goat gave him a good head butt in his ass knocking him off of his feet. "Hey, get this crazy animal off of me."

Enid had ran over to Paul when she saw the blood stain on the back of his shirt. "You need to come
with me to the medical trailer." She glared at Carl. "You better hope this isn`t too serious."

Paul noticed Carl glaring at Alden. "Go check on the fields. Now." Alden knew better than to argue with Paul so he left.

Michonne had been attracted by the noise and went up to Carl. "Come with me. Now." She gazed directly at Carl.

"I don`t want to go back to Alexandria. I want to stay here with Enid." There was a desperation in Carl`s voice.

"After today I have nothing more to say to you." Enid`s tone was angry and disappointed. She gently put her arm around Paul. "Come on, Jesus. I don`t want you bleeding out." She guided him towards the medical trailer.

"I got it." Aaron indicated he would take care of things from that point. He looked at Carl. "Let`s face it. There`s nothing here for you. You`d best go back home."

Carl merely put his hat on and briskly walked away from them. Michonne let out an anguished sigh and followed him.

Aaron went directly to the medical trailer where Enid already had Paul`s shirt off and was removing the bandage which now had a big red spot on it. She examined where the stitches had come out. "I could kill him right now."

"He`ll get over it once he knows you`re with someone else. How`s it look?"

"Not as bad as I thought. Why did you grab Carl the way you did anyway?" Enid went over to get the new stitches to put in.

"Instinct." Paul looked at Aaron who was grinning.

"I`ll see you in a bit." Reassured that Paul was going to be alright he left. About half an hour later Paul emerged from the medical trailer. Aaron was waiting for him on the steps of Barrington House.

"I`ll be fine. Just have to watch straining myself too much." Paul sighed. "What a red letter day this is turning out to be."

Aaron snickered. "You look like you could use some down time, Paul."

"Is that an invitation?"

"Why not?" The two of them headed inside.

"He`s been following Enid all day but didn`t go up and say anything to her." They walked across the foyer and up the staircase. "I think because Alden was all over the place supervising this and that."

They came to the room the three men occupied. Daryl wasn`t inside and his crossbow was gone.

"Must have gone hunting. I didn`t see Dog around." Aaron closed the door and set down all his weapons and gear.

Paul reclined in the center of the bed and Aaron crawled in beside him. They started kissing immediately. Aaron was gentle when he put his arms around Paul.
"I haven’t felt like doing this in days.” Paul could barely speak between the kisses. Having Aaron’s arms around him had an immediate calming effect.

"I promise no rough stuff. Frottage okay?"

"Sounds perfect." Paul undid his pants and pulled them down slightly. He could feel himself quickly getting hard which proved how eager he was.

Aaron sensed his eagerness and had his pants down just as quickly. They rubbed against each other and could feel each other’s hardness through their underwear. It was Aaron who slipped his cock out first, then he reached in and took out Paul’s holding them both in his hands. Paul moaned deep in his throat as Aaron quickly stroked up and down. All the while they didn’t stop kissing and ten minutes into the session they both had come. Coming down from such strong sexual feelings Aaron rolled off of him and sighed.

"That’s better."

Paul laughed throatily. "I once read somewhere that sex is a great healer." He laid there catching his breath for a bit. "Now if I can just get Daryl interested."

"In sex?"

"In anything. There was a moment I thought that maybe he had come around."

Aaron carefully took the bun tie out of Paul’s hair and gently combed through it with his hands. "He will. Give him time." Should he tell Paul what Daryl had confessed to him during their mission to the graveyard? Perhaps it was best just to sit on it for now. "In the meantime I’m here for your relief."

Paul laughed. "I thought it was the other way around."

"That’s probably true, too.” Aaron helped clean both of them off and redid both of their pants. "I could use a nap. Tara have any plans for our guests?"

"Communal dinner tonight but that’s hours away." Paul yawned. "Guess I could use one, too."

Aaron put his right arm around him and snuggled up next to him and closed his eyes. Paul reached over and grasped Aaron’s right hand. Soon they were both asleep.

An hour later Daryl came in and found them that way. He stood at the end of the bed and just stared at them for the longest time. He quietly went to Paul’s side of the bed. A strand of Paul’s hair was lying loose on the pillow. He gently fingered it for a few seconds. Paul stirred slightly but didn’t wake up. Then he noticed Aaron’s eyes were open. Aaron smiled at him and gave him a slight wink.
A revealing conversation during one of Hilltop’s communal dinners.

Daryl tossed Dog a scrap of meat from his plate as he sat with Paul, Aaron, Michonne, and Carl at one of the picnic tables set up for the weekly communal dinner.

"There’s nothing much for me to do at Alexandria." Carl looked at Michonne. "You were right. I do get tired of talking to Negan and listening to his bullshit. I get a lot of grief from Dad about it. Is it so wrong to want to live my own life?"

"Nothing at all."

"People complain that his leadership is too absolute, that he’s made too many mistakes. How does that make him different from Negan?"

"I must admit Rick can be a bit dictatorial at times. I’m sure it’s all to protect you and Judith. I may not be there anymore. I still consider him a friend."

"I need to get away for a while." Carl glanced over at Enid and Alden who were laughing at a joke that Kal told. She acted like he wasn’t even there. Maybe it was time to let her go.

"You would stay here then?" Michonne was starting to agree with Carl’s reasoning. Perhaps it would be best that he and Rick should separate for a while.

"I want to learn new ways of defending myself. Almost getting bit by that walker when I found Siddiq got me to thinking that I just don’t know how to defend myself anymore with this big blind spot on my right side."

"There are ways to compensate for that. But it takes a lot of skill and patience. Do you have that?" Paul wondered if Carl would be up to a new challenge.

"Skill? No."

"That’s a big 'no' on patience."

Carl glared at Daryl. "Nobody asked you." He sat there holding his head in his hands, wondering if anybody understood him anymore.

"I don’t know what to tell you. Your father would be furious if you stayed here."

"He needs to get over his own power trip. These whispering walkers sound dangerous." Carl refilled his drink. "We all need to reunite if we are to defeat them."

"No one’s disagreeing with you on that, Carl. If you can think of a way to bring Rick on board we would all be stronger for it." Paul probably understood that more than anyone else.

"He never listens to me."
"He did concerning Negan." Aaron glanced around the table.

"I do have the right to change my mind about that." Carl looked at Michonne. "Do you think Negan should be killed?"

Michonne knew better than to answer that question. "I stand with your father."

"Right or wrong."

"Yes. As things are now it might be best not to stir the pot up too much." Michonne and Paul exchanged a quick knowing glance. "Besides, we may need you more than you know, especially with winter coming on in a couple months."

"Maybe we could let him stay here for a while. I can teach him on how to compensate for his missing eye. I’ll be starting up my children’s defense classes soon with the smaller kids. I don’t have to move around too much and get yelled at by the medical staff."

There was general laughter at the table.

Aaron looked at Michonne. "You mentioned you had new people. How long are you going to allow them to stay?"

"Rick hasn’t decided. He’s been using them as extra labor since we started harvesting. We have to keep a close eye on their leader. They are a group of five we met on the road one day. They want a permanent place to stay. Rick wants to see how well they’ll work out in Alexandria first."

Michonne held onto her stomach. "Would you excuse me for a moment?" She quickly left the table.

"What was that all about?" Aaron looked a bit confused. "Is she ill?"

"Probably ate too much." Paul knew Michonne confiding in him about her pregnancy had not been a coincidence.

"I guess that means I can stay." Carl looked at Daryl. "What do you think?"

"Don’t care what ya do." Daryl shrugged. "You’re the one that’s gotta explain to Rick if he comes bustin’ the gate down."

More than anything Paul wanted to change the subject. After a lull in the conversation--. "I for one am glad that we start the harvest tomorrow."

"I thought you were a city mouse." Aaron always enjoyed teasing Paul, especially when it came to living the country life.

Paul laughed. "That was another life. I love being a country mouse now. You and Daryl are on walker patrol aren’t you."

"Ain’t gonna pick beans and cabbage."

"Nevertheless, you got the easy job. I have to supervise the harvest crews." There was a tinge of disgust in Paul’s voice indicating he really didn’t want the job. However, he had been forbidden by Siddiq to go out killing walkers, people, or even animals for food. In fact, he wasn’t permitted to raise any sort of weapon at all until the stitches came out.

Daryl reached across the table and squeezed Paul’s hand much to the astonishment of Carl. "It’ll be
alright."

Paul sighed. "I wish Maggie was here. I think Tara would make a great second-in-command for something like the harvest. Maybe even all of Hilltop." It was the first time any of them had heard dissatisfaction from Paul on that account.

Aaron knew he had to stick up for his friend. "Maggie might disagree."

Paul’s face grew somewhat dark. "I’ll make her see my side." He got up. "I’ve developed a light kata routine I do before I go to bed." He lifted his left arm. It wasn’t quite straight or all the way up, but it was over his head. He then left.

"He’s pushing things too fast." Aaron finished his meal.

Daryl glanced over at Carl and noticed he was simply staring at him. "Somethin’ wrong?"

"You reached over and squeezed Jesus’ hand."

"So. What’s it to ya?" Daryl nervously lit up a cigarette.

"I don’t know if it’s anything to me. Just unusual that’s all."

"Carl, there are a lot of things that have changed." Aaron got up. "I better check on Gracie. She’s made a lot of friends here and at the last communal dinner they got into a food fight. Who knows what trouble they’re causing this time around." There was a tinge of amusement in his voice.

Daryl and Carl sat in silence for a long time, Daryl feeding Dog some last minute bites.

"I think Dad misses you. He would like to see you."

"Nah. Ain’t goin’ there as long as Negan is there."

There was a long silence between them again.

"You’re gay aren’t you."

Daryl smoked not saying a word until he finished his cigarette. "Um hmm." He stood up. "C’mon, boy." He walked off with Dog following closely behind him.
The group of children from around ages 4 to 9 had gathered underneath a large white oak tree just outside of the main fence. It was a closed off area with its own fence, connected to the main fence by a gate. There was also a gate that led to the outside. This was more or less an area set aside for teaching the skills for fighting and defense. There was equipment of various sorts such as punching bags and dummies and Paul knew he would be soon using them to get back into his prime. For now he was just happy to be useful again, not one to lie around and wallow in pain.

One of the children, about age 6, came up to him carrying a bouquet of an assortment of wildflowers and handed it to him. "We picked these for you. We love you, Jesus, and want you not hurt again." She then gave him a kiss on his cheek.

Paul took the bouquet from her and smiled. "Thank you, Lily." He sniffed them and set them aside. The gate opened and Carl entered. Paul pointed to a spot for him to stand. "A couple things before we get started." He held his hand out towards Gracie. "This is Gracie. She is new to Hilltop. Her father is Aaron. Say hello to her."

There was a chorus of 'hi and hello, Gracie'. Gracie acknowledged them with a salute almost causing Paul to laugh. Gracie was quite precocious and he had no doubt she would liven up the class quite a bit.

"Now the big kid who is late for class is Carl. He knows almost nothing about the martial arts so we`ll show him what to do. Right?"

"Right!" They all seemed enthusiastic about helping the newcomers.

Carl looked away somewhat embarrassed to be shamed by a bunch of small children. Paul merely shook his head.

"Now let`s show Carl and Gracie the ready stance." All of the children took their positions and did the standard karate 'ready' stance. "Now forward and back stances." In quick but gawky moves the children did the requested stances. "Ready stance again." The children complied. Paul looked at Carl and Gracie. "Now you."

Carl felt ridiculous but he imitated the stances. Gracie was much better at it than he was. Paul knew she would learn fast and catch up in no time. Carl came up to Paul and whispered in his ear.

"Do I have to do this with a bunch of kids?"

"You`re a beginner so the answer is 'yes'." His expression was serious. "Quit acting so immature, Carl, or you`ll never learn to be the fighter you think you are. Hurt these children`s feelings and I`ll hurt you. Got that?"

Carl hesitated then nodded. "Sorry."
"Take your place." Carl did so. Paul’s expression brightened. "Now do the routine of the twelve basic karate stances. Carl and Gracie, watch closely so you can repeat it. Now!" The children went into a small dance of the routine stances. Paul smiled. He knew this was more of what he was meant to do. Later in the day he would be supervising the harvest crews, a job he simply loathed.

"How`d she do?" Aaron had tracked down Paul later that morning as they watched the people of Hilltop gather what they needed to begin the harvesting.

"Great. She`ll be caught up by the end of next week. She has a lot of enthusiasm and thinks it`s fun."

"And the other student?" Daryl felt responsible for Carl`s well-being since he still considered Rick his brother.

"Somewhat of an ass. I think he`ll settle down once he gets used to it. He does want to learn, just won`t be patient with himself." Paul sat down to rest for a bit. The morning had been a bit taxing but at least it was a 'good' tired.

It didn`t take long for everyone to prepare for the harvest so the horses drew the wagons through the gate and into the crop fields. Daryl and Dog would walk the perimeter and Aaron would ride a horse, both lookout for any oncoming dangers whether it be walkers, people, or even animals. 'There`s bears in them there woods!' they had often heard Earl proclaim. Paul stationed himself near the cornfield. He and Tara were comparing notes when trouble already got started between Kal and Alan.

"I still say push it between the rows." Kal stopped pushing the wheelbarrow.

"It`ll just knock the corn off the stalks if you do that." Alan immediately got into Kal`s face. Before they knew it Paul was stepping in between them and separating them.

"It doesn`t matter if it`s between the rows. We`re harvesting. The corn is going to come off the stalks anyway. Have some common sense, huh." Paul then went back over to Tara.

"Whew. You handled that better than I did. I`m always so impulsive."

"That may be. You`ve done better as the years have gone by." Tammy Rose walked by him and patted him on the back on her way to another field.

"Are you sure you want to resign when Maggie gets back?"

"I`m sure. I mean I can still break up fights when needed. I`d much rather protect this place."

"Jesus, are you sure you`re not overreacting? You seem, I don`t like to use the word paranoid, a bit out of sorts."

Paul`s expression became somewhat distant and sad. He looked down and fiddled with his fingers. "You weren`t there, Tara. I was taken by surprise. That`s something new to me. I don`t want it to happen again."

They were interrupted by the sound of a fast riding horse.

"That`s one of our scouts." Aaron, who was nearby, rode over to them.
The rider, who was panting hard, came up to them sweating and covered with blood and walker residue.

"Where’s the rest of your party?" Paul was surprised that he was alone.

"We got ambushed. I barely made it out. We were following a herd of walkers."

"Who turned out to be our newly discovered masked neighbors." Aaron wondered when more trouble with their new adversary would occur.

The rider nodded. "The other four are dead." He almost fell off of the horse. Kal came over to support him.

"Where did this happen?" Tara hoped she would be able to handle the situation.

"In that large field where we battled with Negan all those years ago. The one with the posts."

Daryl and Dog had come over and just heard the last part. "We gotta check this out."

Paul handed his clipboard to Tara. "I’m going with them."

"Siddiq said you shouldn’t be riding. Besides they might still be out there."

"I’m going. Give me a few minutes." He looked over and saw Bertie. "Bertie, come with me."

"Sure." She glanced with uncertainty at the others before following him back inside the gate all the way to Barrington House and to the room he shared with Daryl and Aaron.

Paul opened up the sack he had gotten from Earl. "I need you to help me put this on."

"What is it?"

"My new armor."

About fifteen minutes later Paul came back through the gates this time on horseback. He now wore an almost complete set of body armor that most importantly covered his front and back. Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at him in awe. Aaron and Daryl exchanged glances and nodded, realizing they wouldn’t be able to talk Paul out of going.

"Let’s go." Aaron motioned to Daryl, who had climbed up on a nearby horse, and the three of them with Dog trotting alongside headed down the road.
Daryl, Aaron, and Paul make a gruesome discovery about their scouts. A new mystery has them baffled.

A thick fog rose up across the hills and through the trees as Daryl, Aaron, and Paul rode as quietly as they could. Dog sniffed the ground and instinctively knew that it was not the time to bark. Aaron noticed that Paul was fully armed with his sword and knives.

"You aren’t exactly in fighting shape yet."

"I am more so than people think. I’m just thwarted a bit on the left side." Paul waited for Daryl to express his objection.

"The stitches come out there will be Hell to pay."

"I know. That’s why we avoid getting into a fight." Paul got off of his horse. There was something on the ground he had to take a closer look at. "What the hell?"

Aaron and Daryl dismounted and came up beside him. It was a walker completely stripped of its skin, including the face. Since the brain had been unaffected it still lived. Paul sorted through the clothes that were piled up beside it. "This is one of ours."

Aaron thought he saw more and he was right. "There are three more over here. The same with the skin and face."

Paul took one of his knives and plunged it into the faceless skull. Aaron and Daryl did the same with the other three.

"Not much to take back home." Daryl nudged the skinless walker to make sure it truly was dead. Too many mysterious things were happening all at once, which gave him an uneasy feeling.

Paul sighed with disgust at what had happened. "They are still ours. Let’s put them in those grain sacks that are on your horse."

They completed their task then took the time to look around. The thick fog made it impossible to see almost four feet in front of them.

"I remember something strange about this place. I was too engrossed with the battle with the Saviors." Aaron looked at Paul. "And watching you kick Negan’s ass to really notice it."

The fog rolled a bit thinner for a moment and Daryl spotted something that seemed out of place. "There. What’s that?"

They walked over to it and discovered it was a thin wooden post that had been deliberately put into
the ground.

"There`s another one. Now I remember. There was a whole row of these posts. I didn`t think anything of it at the time. I thought maybe before the world fell someone was intending to put up a fence and never had the chance to complete it."

"Maybe." Paul had to pause and think for a moment. "But I don`t think so. Something tells me there`s another purpose to this."

Before they could discuss it further they heard the sounds of walker growls. The fog made it impossible to determine which direction the growls were coming from. They quickly went back to their horses. Dog was still sitting by them waiting to see if Daryl would give him a command. Since being at Hilltop he had been trained not to bark unless in trouble or to alert for danger if Daryl wasn`t in sight.

"Let`s get out of here while we can." Aaron`s voice was so low Daryl and Paul had to strain their ears in order to hear him.

"Which way?" Paul`s whispers were just as quiet. "They could be anywhere."

Daryl sat perched on his horse listening. Being somewhat of a woodsman he had learned to listen well in the dark or in thick fog. He pointed to his right. "They`re over there."

"We`ll go left and circle back to the trees." Paul pointed in the direction they needed to go and and they trotted away. Just in time since the walkers seemed to appear like ghosts out of the fog.

"They run and hide."

"They are afraid of the dead."

"Riding the horses of doom."

They rode hard as soon as they reached the trees and it was almost nightfall by the time they returned to Hilltop. They learned that the harvest had gone on without them and Tara accompanied them to inform any family members of the scouts that had been killed. The remains had to be stored in a shed for burial the next day.

"I didn`t like doing that." Tara`s voice was melancholy as they followed her back to Barrington House.

"One of the worst parts of the job. I want to get out of this armor."

"You look good in it." Tara smiled, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

Aaron turned to Daryl. "I think he looks hot."

Paul had obviously heard him and turned his head to look at him."Thanks. You know, you two should consider wearing some. At least on your chest and back."

"Nah."

Aaron glared at Daryl. "What do you mean `nah`? I think he`s got a good point. Maybe Paul doesn`t want us to get stabbed, either. You`re just as vulnerable as the rest of us."

Daryl glanced from Aaron to Paul to Tara. "Never had need of it before."
"These people are different than any we’ve encountered in the past. If they can surprise Jesus they can surprise any of us, including you. As leader I’m ordering you to put on some armor."

Aaron and Paul laughed as Daryl snorted.

"You heard the lady. Go turn yourself into a knight." Aaron gently nudged Paul.

"I ain’t gonna look ridiculous. I’ll look like someone from The Kingdom. Carol will make fun of me."

Paul clapped against the armor on his chest. "This is metal, not hard plastic padding for hockey."

"We’ll even give you a cape if you want it." Aaron couldn’t stop teasing him.

"I ain’t no Superman, either."

"Gee, Daryl, I always thought you could leap tall buildings in a single bound." Tara knew she had to join in on the fun.

"Shut up. All of ya." Daryl stomped his foot on the ground, growling and sniffing. They just simply stared at him not saying a word. "Alright. Just on the chest and back."

"We’ll even paint it black. You can be the Black Knight."

Daryl glared at Paul but melted somewhat when his eyes met Paul’s teasing but gentle gaze. In that moment he briefly saw himself kissing him.

"It’s just a flesh wound." Aaron couldn’t resist saying the remark causing Paul and Tara to laugh.

"Monty Python and the Hilltop players." Daryl looked at them like they were nuts. "Guess Monty Python and the Holy Grail is next on movie night." Paul stared at Aaron’s prosthetic arm. "You should talk to Earl about making you some weaponized attachments to that."

"I never thought of that."

Their voices faded as a thick fog rolled in over the fence. Now they were the ghosts as the darkness settled in around the tiny colony.

Chapter End Notes

I want to take this moment to thank everyone for your positive and insightful comments. I am pleased and overwhelmed that you are enjoying this story and hope that you will continue to do so. We have all needed a bit of 'therapy' after the ending of the last episode of the first half of Season 9. Writing this has been mine. I try not to descend into bitterness but my disappointment will always plague me. When greed outweighs quality, good storytelling and good character arcs are sacrificed. The writers of fan fiction understand this. It’s too bad those who deem themselves as 'professional' writers do not. If only we could get paid for the hard work we put into these endeavors. Again, thank you. Paul Rovia will always be alive in our hands because he was unceremoniously thrown out by those who didn’t care about his
character. Tom Payne cared and they didn’t listen to him. We are listening, Tom, and thank you so much for brilliantly bringing someone to life in the limited way in which he was presented. Credit also goes to Norman Reedus and Ross Marquand for Daryl and Aaron.
Twice Kicked Out, Doesn`t Pout

Chapter Summary

Paul gets a scolding. Will there be a new place to live in the future?

The next few days would be used for getting the rest of the harvest in and putting crops in storage or dividing them up between the communities. Siddiq had come from Alexandria to treat some injuries and to check up on Paul. Enid had made some cursory repairs to the stitches, but Siddiq did a more thorough job and gave the man a strong lecture when he found out he had ridden on horseback.

"At least only a few stitches were compromised and not in such a critical spot." They were in the examination room of the infirmary. "I know you`re starting to feel better and stronger, Jesus. You still need to tone it down just for a bit longer."

"I want us to be prepared. I want to be prepared."

Siddiq sighed. Paul had been one of the most stubborn patients he had ever treated. Maybe just change the subject. "What all have you found out about these people? Michonne mentioned they`re pretty elusive." He prepared to put the new bandage on since the stitches had been repaired.

"We think they`re territorial and use the herds of walkers to disguise themselves. It`s how they are able to use the surprise attack so effectively. We`re still not sure why they won`t integrate or contact other communities. If only we could understand their driving philosophy about leadership and hierarchy." Siddiq could tell that Paul was deeply disturbed about what others referred to as the `talking walkers`.

"Here hold this." Siddiq handed Paul the end of the bandage while he secured it in place. "Carl`s told me about the enemies they faced in the past. Some guy who called himself The Governor and these people from a place called Terminus who were cannibals." He cringed slightly at the thought.

"Maggie and Tara have told me about some of that. The closest we`ve come to anyone similar are wandering groups of marauders, but they never attempt to disguise themselves." Paul sighed and rubbed his brow. "If they can surprise me, think about what they can do to those who aren`t prepared."

"I hope you aren`t dwelling on that too much, Jesus. It can happen to the best." Siddiq cut off the end of the bandage. "I want you to lift your left arm." Paul did so completely over his head. "Very good. Are you doing any kind of exercise regimen?"

"Some light kata that`s helped with my flexibility."

"Normally I don`t recommend doing any sort of flexing type exercise at this stage, but you`ve kept yourself in shape, Jesus. That has helped tremendously in your recovery. I don`t see the point in any more physical therapy." Siddiq shook his finger at him. "No more horseback riding until the stitches are out. Clear?"

"Clear." Paul sighed knowing Siddiq was probably right. "The time has come for the better soldiers
to go on missions. Our scouts being killed in such a gruesome manner has brought down morale a lot. People are getting scared and worried. Some are having panic attacks. I can`t sit still and do nothing."

"What is it you are always saying, always quoting Treebeard? 'Don`t be hasty'. Well, follow that advice. Now put your shirt on and get out of here. I have other patients to see."

As soon as Paul was ready he headed over to Barrington House for his daily meeting with Tara. She was sitting at the desk going over the stack of papers that listed harvest inventories and other statistics. She looked up and smiled. "How bad was it?"

"Was what?"

"The scolding from Siddiq."

Paul laughed. "Not as bad as I thought it would be."

Tara looked over another list. "I don`t envy Maggie this job. At least she has a background in farming and can kind of make heads or tails of this stuff."

"I never could. Has everyone left to go back to their communities?"

"Yeah. All except Carl." Tara frustratingly shoved the stack of papers aside. "I need a break. The cobwebs in my head are giving me arachnophobia." She looked directly at him. "I`ve been meaning to ask you about your living arrangements. Are the three of you getting along okay?"

"We seem to have a lot in common. We talk about exploring, fighting, movies and books we liked or hated. It`s taken some getting used to concerning our daily habits and idiosyncrasies. It`s no big deal. It does get a little close sometimes. Why do you ask?"

Tara got up and looked out the window. "Now that the harvest is in we can go back to some construction projects. Siddiq says we need more space for a hospital so that`s the next priority. That would leave the medical trailer open. It has been suggested to me that we modify it into a house for the three of you and Gracie." He could tell that she held some sort of glee about the project.

"Suggested by whom?"

"Numerous people. They want to furnish it with all the luxuries that are available to us. I told them I would talk to the three of you about it, how many rooms, furnishings, and all that."

Paul was somewhat taken aback. "There are people who really want to do this for us?"

"Our best warriors need a place of refuge when they aren`t out there helping to protect this place. You three have left quite an impression on everyone, including me."

"We`re pretty settled in. And it is crowded here."

"Jesus, you told me that morale is low. This would give the people of Hilltop some lifting up."

He looked away from her. "I can`t help thinking that such a place would be better utilized for one of the families."

Tara came over to him and looked directly into his face. "You mean to tell me you three and Gracie don`t constitute a family? Hell, let`s throw Dog into the picture as well." She raised her
eyebrows to emphasize her point.

Paul was speechless for one of the few times in his life. "I`ll have to talk it over with Daryl and Aaron." He was feeling a bit overwhelmed by the idea.

"You have three days. Now get out of here. I`m busy."

Paul threw his arms up in the air. "That`s the second time I`ve been kicked out today." He decided to find Aaron and Daryl and tell them what Tara had just proposed.

"Our own house," Aaron took a moment to contemplate what Paul had said. He leaned on the shovel he had been using to dig out the now dead pumpkin plants. "I know Gracie would love to have her own room. All she does is fight with the other kids over toys. She likes her own space."

"So you would be on board with the idea?"

"Sure. Why not? The people here want to do something nice for us. I think it would be rude to refuse."

Paul found Daryl helping to clean out one of the wells. He had mud all over him. "Aren`t you ever clean?"

"Clean enough. It`s my dirty mind ya like." Daryl took a drink of water from his bottle.

"Tara says they want to refurbish the medical trailer for you, me, Aaron, and Gracie. What do you think?"

Daryl shrugged. "Sure. They can put in a shower just for me."

Paul rolled his eyes. "I`ll tell her we also want a doghouse. I can put you in it with Dog when you`re being an ass."

"Thought ya liked my ass."

Was Daryl actually flirting with him? Paul came up close to him. "Wouldn`t you like to know how much?"

Their eyes locked. Daryl grinned. "Someday."

Paul matched his grin then turned to leave, glancing back at Daryl every so often. Daryl continued to stare at him until he was out of sight.
Paul, Daryl, and Aaron have a candid conversation with Carl. Earl has a surprise for Daryl and Aaron.

Paul waited until after the class was over to address Carl’s lateness for the third week in a row. Daryl and Aaron had been seeking him out and had stayed to observe the children, Aaron beaming as any proud dad would at Gracie’s progress. Afterwards, Aaron sent Gracie to play while they hung around, both sensing that what Paul had to say to Carl they could easily back up.

"Being late all the time not only sets a bad example for the children, it makes me question your commitment to what you want to accomplish. These classes are only twice a week. Whatever is bothering you needs to stay outside of this class."

"Sorry." Carl bowed his head down. "I like and want to be here. I guess my mind’s just elsewhere."

"Is it Enid?" Aaron wasn’t sure since he knew Enid could sometimes be just as moody.

"No. She’s made it plain she’s no longer interested in me." He paused for a long moment. "It’s Dad."

"Figured that, too." Daryl lit a cigarette.

"It’s actually more than just Negan. He’s angry at all of you." Carl looked at Paul. "He’s angry at you because you introduced us to the Saviors who did nothing but devastate Alexandria and humiliate him in the process."

"That’s bullshit. He ain’t got no reason to blame nobody. They found us first on the road." Daryl took a long puff. "Why’s he mad at me?"

"Because when we first came to Hilltop you committed all of us to destroying the Saviors in a trade."

"I ain’t gonna defend my reasons. Paul, Gregory, and no one else knew how many there were."

"None of us knew what we were getting into. He forgets he committed all of us to fighting the Saviors without consulting us. Why is he angry with me?"

"He feels you betrayed Alexandria when you moved here." Carl felt more relaxed talking to these three than he did his own father.

"And do you feel he is angry with you in any way?" Paul knew from experience that Rick’s anger could be extremely unreasonable.

"I guess because I felt we all could just get along. That senseless killing doesn’t get us anywhere. That maybe even Negan is redeemable, something I’m not so sure of anymore."

"Even I can see that Negan won’t change. He’s one of the few people I think is expendable in this
world. And for me that’s saying a lot." Paul sometimes even surprised himself when he said things that were contrary to his usual sense of justice and morality.

"So, in essence, it all boils down to Negan in one way or another." Aaron hated the thought but knew it was the truth.

"I miss Judith and Michonne. It got so bad I couldn’t and still can’t stay in Alexandria anymore. Dad is so unreasonable. It’s as if he keeps holding a grudge and just lets it fester."

"Believe me all of us here can understand how intolerable a situation at home can be." With all the group homes Paul had been in during his youth, he understood that concept quite well.

"I run everything over and over in my head and don’t see a way out." Carl looked at Paul pleadingly. "Please don’t kick me out of your class. I promise not to be late again."

Paul sighed. "Under the circumstances I guess I can let you stay. Break your promise, you are out of here."

"If you need to talk, you can talk to us." Aaron placed a reassuring hand on Carl’s shoulder. "We understand. We’re obviously in hot water with Rick as much as you are."

Carl smiled slightly. "I’ve been feeling really alone in all this. Enid won’t talk to me. I’d talk to Michonne, she’s too close to Dad right now."

"Michonne may have other things on her mind." Paul looked away, hoping no one would notice the knowing look on his face. Daryl and Aaron glanced at him with confused looks. "Might be best to give her a break."

"Would you like to stay here at Hilltop indefinitely?" Aaron knew he wasn’t the replacement dad for Carl. He knew he would like to try.

"Yeah, I would. I like hanging around with you guys. I don’t care if Dad wouldn’t like it, either." Carl seemed to perk up at the prospect.

"You’re old enough so you don’t really need his permission. You need to do some more growing up, Carl. Being a man is accepting the fact that things will not always go your way and instead of acting out, you find a way to move on, think about a solution. If that doesn’t work, keep on going and do better in the future. That’s something I emphasize a lot in my classes. It’s not all physical, you know."

"Think ya can do that?"

Carl nodded. "Yeah. With some help."

"That’s what we’re here for." Aaron and Carl gave each other a fist bump.

"Alright." Carl looked directly at Paul. "I’ll apologize to the children next class session."

"That’s a good start. Tara said she wanted your help in clearing out some of the gardens."

Carl looked at him annoyed, a look of pleading to get out of it.

"Knock that off. Gotta grow up."

Carl’s whole body indicated his resignation. "Right."
"Clearing out dead plants is great at getting rid of all the extra energy. It`s kind of Zen in its own way."

"Daryl likes Zen." Carl left before Daryl could say anything.

"Didn`t know you were a Buddhist." Aaron exchanged a teasing look with Paul.

"I ain`t a Buddhist." Daryl was obviously annoyed. "I understand what`s Zen and what ain`t."

"Buddha say: 'The foot feels the foot when it feels the ground'. Eric was always quoting Buddha."

Then it was Paul`s turn. "Confucius say: 'Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall'."

"Daryl say a bolt through your heads is a good way to get ya to shut up."

They burst into laughter.

"Earl told me your armor is almost ready. Want to go take a look?"

Aaron and Daryl were agreeable to that proposal so they headed off to the blacksmith. Earl greeted them with a nod and without asking he knew what they came for.

"Don`t have your full armor quite done yet. Lot of demand for horseshoes. I do have something for you to look at." Earl reached down and picked up what looked like a chest plate. "This is yours, Aaron. I hope I got the sunflower right." He handed it to Aaron. On the upper left was a sunflower made of metal with a slight tint of yellow for petals.

"Gracie`s favorite flower."

"Vibrancy and happiness. That`s Gracie alright."

"Daryl, I have your back plate." Earl reached down and handed it to him. Etched in the metal was a pair of wings just like the ones on his vest.

"Didn`t know ya were gonna do this."

"It was Jesus`s idea."

Paul and Daryl looked at each other. Daryl smiled a little and nodded. "It`s good. Thanks."

"My pleasure." Paul could only look at him with great affection.
"Oh my God." Bertie stood up from her perch on the sentry post above the gate. She was gazing through a pair of binoculars.

"What is it? Walkers?" Aaron stood below.

"No." She lowered the binoculars and looked at Aaron. "It`s Rick. He`s on horseback. Alone."

Aaron nodded. "Let him in. I`ll let everybody know." He first went to Tara and told her then upstairs where he found Paul lounging on the bed reading a story to Gracie.

"What`s up?"

"Rick is here. Have you seen Carl?"

"I sent him to stack some hay bales by the back fence after class." He looked at Gracie. "Well, Sam I Am, we`ll finish this some other time."

"Green ham sounds yucky. I wish you`d read me the one with all the monsters on the cover." Gracie crawled off the bed.

"I only read Daddy-approved books. Now scoot."

Gracie made a face at him and ran out of the room.

"Gracie, that wasn`t--." She was out of sight before Aaron could finish. "Sorry about that."

Paul shrugged. He slowly got off the bed. "So Rick has finally decided to make an appearance."

"It`s been five weeks since the harvest. Maybe he`s here to thank us in person. Daryl here?"

"I think he and Dog went hunting early this morning. We`re running low on meat." Paul put on his boots and followed Aaron downstairs. Rick was already in Maggie`s office talking with Tara. Their eyes met for a brief moment before Paul looked away. "I`ll go get Carl."

Aaron nodded and went into the office.

"...And from what I can tell our crop yields were better than last year."

"That`s--that`s good." Rick gave a slight nod to Aaron.

"Carl`s on his way. Paul went to get him."

Moments later Paul and Carl entered. "Hey, Dad."

"I`ve come to take you home, son."
Carl sighed and adjusted his hat. "I don`t want to go back to Alexandria right now."

"Maybe the two of you should talk alone." Paul glanced at Tara and Aaron.

"Sure. You can use the office." Tara got up and the three of them left leaving only Carl and Rick, the door being closed behind them.

"It`s good to see you again. Judith misses you a lot."

"I miss her."

"Then come home." Rick seemed calm and collected. "I came here just for you."

"Really?" Carl was now getting angry. "You should be coming to Hilltop more often. You should be visiting The Kingdom. All these little grudges you`re holding are just bullshit, Dad."

"Is it Negan? Is that why you won`t come back? It was your idea to keep him alive, remember?" Rick`s temper was starting to rise.

"Yeah, I remember. I was at that battle. I watched Jesus make mincemeat out of Negan. But you know what, Dad? I was wrong. It was the heat of the moment. I was tired of all the senseless killing. I realize now that Negan deserved to die that day." Carl`s voice got louder as he continued to talk. "Maggie deserved her justice." He grabbed a sheaf of papers off the desk and threw them on the floor.

"It wasn`t Maggie`s decision. Everyone put me in charge and I did what I thought was best. I did it for you, Carl." Rick moved towards him and got in his face. "I`d do anything for you, son. Anything."

"I know, Dad." Carl was now on the verge of tears. He tore away from Rick and stood facing the bookcase. "You just don`t get what`s going down. There`s a new enemy out there, like no one has ever seen before. They almost killed our best warrior. Jesus is going to bear that scar for the rest of his life as a reminder that he`s just as vulnerable as the rest of us."

Rick sat on the edge of the desk. "I`m sorry about that. And if it means anything I`m glad he`s still alive."

"Are you? You blame him for the Saviors. I agree with Daryl, it`s bullshit. Wake up, Dad. There was a time you were on top of everything. Now it`s as if you are somewhere else, not even here. You`re dead to us but alive in some other world."

Rick was uncertain how to respond to Carl`s speech. "I`m gonna ask you again, son. Come home."

Carl tossed his hat off and grasped his head in frustration. "I can`t. Not now."

"Why?"

"I`m starting to learn how to fight again, Dad. Ever since this." He pointed to his missing eye. "I don`t feel like me anymore. I almost got bit on my right side fighting those walkers because I didn`t see it go down. I felt it close. I almost felt those teeth sink into my flesh. I rolled out of the way just in time."

Rick stood there and closed his eyes realizing how devastated he would be if anything had happened to Carl. He knew his world would crumble. He would lose hope. "So, what exactly are you learning?"
"Jesus is teaching me some martial arts stuff." Carl chuckled. "I’m in a class with a bunch of little kids for that." Rick smiled a little. "And when he gets the stitches out he wants to tutor me in private. I’ll be learning the skills to compensate for my blind spot."

"You really want to do this?"

"Yeah, Dad. I think I need to stay. If you love me, you’ll let me stay. I’ll be learning from Aaron and Daryl, too. The three of them are almost inseparable at times." Carl put his hat back on and came up beside him. "They’re going to be a real fighting force. Everyone will need them in the end. Including Alexandria."

Rick hesitated then reluctantly nodded. "Alright. I want you to stay safe, Carl. I guess you’re old enough to know what’s best."

"You need to think about things, too, Dad. Think about what you really should do about Negan. About opening up communication with the other settlements. We are all going to need each other." He reached over and touched Rick’s shoulder. "I’ve got work to do. I love you, Dad." Carl walked out of the office.

Tara, Paul, and Aaron came back inside.

"Get everything worked out?" Tara couldn’t read Carl’s expression.

"No. At least it’s a start. I’d stay longer, but I have to get back. He gave me a lot to think about."

"You know you’re always welcome here. To see Carl or to talk to us."

Rick nodded not looking at Paul. "Thanks." Without another word he left, Aaron escorting him to the gate.

"He’ll come around. You’ll see." Tara noticed Paul sag a little.

"Will he? Rick’s unpredictable. I’m never sure what he’s thinking. I’ll be resting upstairs if you need me."

"Sure." She sat back down and reached for the stack of papers, realizing they were now scattered all over the floor. "Great."
Chapter Summary

Rick runs into Daryl on the road. Paul gets hot and bothered.

As Rick rode away from Hilltop there was a part of him that felt like he had not succeeded, yet another part of him felt that a new beginning was starting to emerge. When a dog ran out from the woods the horse almost spooked. A whistle made the dog stop and just stand in the grass looking at the strange horse and rider.

"Whoa." Rick put his hand on his Colt Python ready to shoot whoever would emerge from the trees. He quickly removed his hand when he realized it was Daryl.

Daryl whistled again. "Dog, stay." He slowly made his way towards Rick. He had his crossbow with him and slung around his other shoulder were a couple squirrels, a few quail, and a turkey. "Hello."

"Good hunting today?"

"Not as much as I would like."

Rick nodded towards Dog. "Looks like you got a new friend."

Daryl shrugged. "Ya come to get Carl?"

"I tried. He convinced me to let him stay." Rick leaned over the front of the horse and stroked its mane. "He seems to think staying at Hilltop will do him some good."

"What do ya think?" Daryl was now standing next to him.

"He`s got some anger in him he needs to take care of. Mostly with me." Rick paused. "He made some good points."

"Mm." Daryl patted his leg indicating for Dog to come up beside him.

"What`s his name?"

"I just call him Dog."

"Dog." Rick laughed to himself. Typical Daryl. "Where`d you find him?"

"On the road. Almost starvin`. Almost ate him myself, he was too scrawny. Didn`t see any harm in takin` him in." Daryl picked up a stick and threw it. Dog hurried to fetch it.

"You always were an old softie underneath that gruff exterior."

"Yeah, I s`pose." Dog brought the stick back and Daryl threw it again. "Ya plan on comin` back?"

"Don`t know. There seems to be a lot of concern about this new enemy. Father Gabriel filled me in on the details. Carl seemed to second that belief."
Daryl looked up at him and met his gaze. "They’re right. These people even creep me out. Wearin’ walker skins and masks like we wear clothes."

Rick sighed. "I have to talk to Michonne." He paused and looked in the distance. "She’s acting strange these days. Like she’s preoccupied with something. She won’t tell me about it."

"Maybe she’s worried. She gets what’s goin’ on, maybe has a reason to be scared."

"I have to wonder what reason would that be. She doesn’t scare easy." Rick noticed the sun was starting to sink towards the west. "I want to get home before sundown. It’s good to see you, Daryl. You don’t come around to Alexandria anymore."

"Ya know why." Dog nudged him to throw the stick again. Daryl made a hand gesture for him to sit.

"I do. Talking with Carl opened my eyes some. Gotta think about things."

"Don’t think about ‘em too long. There’s a storm comin’. C’mong, Dog." Daryl turned and headed towards the gates of Hilltop which were in the distance. Rick continued on down the road.

As soon as Daryl arrived he went directly to the kitchen of Barrington House. Ms. Maitlin, as always, was preparing meals for its occupants.

"Looks like ya got somethin’." Ms. Maitlin gave him an appreciative nod.

Daryl set his booty on the table. "More out there. Gotta arrange a huntin’ party. Saw a deer and a couple boar."

"Just be careful if ya see a bear. Earl says he saw one in the woods a couple days ago." She set some bowls of food and water out for Dog as he went upstairs to deposit his crossbow and clean up. He found a sleepy Paul lying on the bed.

"The return of the hunter." Paul held a pillow close to him.

"Not much out there today. Ya feelin’ okay?"

"Just tired. Didn’t sleep well--again. I need to quit these late day naps. Rick was here."

"Yeah. Ran into him on the road." Daryl took off his vest and shirt. He could feel Paul’s eyes on him and heard an appreciative sigh.

"Maybe he’ll come around and we’ll see him again." Paul adjusted his position as he felt his body begin to stir a bit. Daryl’s face was turned away from him, but the hunter was smiling slightly.

"Goddammit, where did I put that?" Aaron suddenly entered the room.

"How many marbles out of your head did you lose this time?"

"Ha-ha. Take a nap like you said you would."

"Maybe I’m not sleepy anymore." There was a slight seductive quality to Paul’s voice. Aaron could see him looking at Daryl.

"Ah, here it is." Aaron picked up a small music box he most likely was going to give to Gracie.

"I’m gonna clean up." Daryl left the room.
"Ah, damn, there goes the scenery." Paul adjusted his position again.

"I'd help you out, but Gracie is waiting for me." Aaron quickly left.

Paul rubbed the front of his pants and groaned. He then bashed the pillow hard with his fist. "Dammit, Daryl, how do I get through to you?" He squirmed for a bit longer and sat up. "Damn, that bandage itches." He got out of bed and put on his slippers and quickly padded down the stairs to the kitchen. Ms. Maitlin was now preparing Daryl’s turkey.

"What’s wrong with you?" She watched as he quickly poured himself a mug of coffee.

"I’m too horny for my own good." Paul leaned against the counter and drank it down a bit fast.

"Take a cold shower."

"Daryl’s in the bathroom right now."

"That should suit you just fine." She winked at him.

"Don’t I wish." He finished the coffee and poured himself another mug.
Paul has a fright, but receives some good news.

Squish. Paul’s foot stepped on something soft. He stood there for a moment to make sure it was something that didn’t move. Satisfied he took the next step. Another squish. The ground was obviously soft. When he looked down he noticed his feet were covered in water. He looked up and through the dim moonlight he saw tall trees dripping with Spanish moss. He had somehow wandered into a swamp.

Low growls. Walkers. They were coming closer. He dare not call out to his two companions. A mist started to swirl up around him making it difficult to see. He realized the only way to get away from the walkers was to keep moving forward, his sword at the ready. Suddenly a walker burst out of the mist.

"Get out of here."

Another: "Do not belong."

Both walkers charged forward with daggers raised. More swarmed out of the mist from all directions.

A woman’s voice: "Go away."

An old man’s voice: "Leave us alone."

A little girl’s voice: "You die."

"No, no." Paul tried to shove them all away but there were too many. There were walkers. And the whispering ones.

One cried out: "Kill him!"

Another: "Get his skin."

Paul screamed as he was knocked down. He felt the sharp pain of a knife sink into his heart. Walkers were biting where his skin was exposed. There were more daggers digging into him. His heart was beating slower and slower. He could feel snakes slithering across his torso, birds pecked at his head. The mouth of an alligator opened wide and grabbed hold of his head turning it around in the water until the face of a giant catfish stared directly into his eyes. Yet he would not die.

"Help me! Help me!..."

"Help me!" Paul sat up in bed screaming, his heart beating fast, sweat pouring from everywhere as the nightmare took hold of his mind.

Daryl suddenly got up from the cot and ran over to him. He noticed that the sofa was empty and briefly remembered that Aaron was on sentry duty that night.
"Paul!" Daryl shook him until he opened his eyes. "Wake up, man."

Paul was panting so hard and trembling Daryl wondered if he would come apart.

"I`m dying." Paul was near sobbing.

"Sshh." Daryl held him close and rocked him back and forth. "Just a dream, man. Just a dream." Paul huddled close to Daryl burying his face in his shoulder. Daryl stroked and rocked him until he calmed down. "It`s okay, it`s okay. Sshh."

"Hold me."

"I ain`t goin` nowhere." Daryl reached over and turned up the lone chimney lamp. Paul seemed to slowly calm down and relax. "I won`t let go."

"I feel so silly." Paul`s voice was low.

"Why?"

"That I let my dreams get a hold of me like this. I`m a big boy now aren`t I?"

"Big boys have bad dreams. I have `em all the time." Daryl kissed the top of Paul`s head, not really conscious that he was doing so.

Paul slowly moved out of the embrace. "This one was the worst. I was in a swamp. It was dark. Walkers, the whispering things, all came at me out of nowhere. There were snakes and an alligator. The horrible face of one of those giant catfish. All stabbing and biting and whispering..." He clutched himself and closed his eyes. "I can`t get the images out of my mind."

"You`re fine now, Paul. You`re awake. Just a dream." Daryl started to crawl off the bed.

"No! No. Please stay. Stay here and just hold me."

"Ya need to try and get back to sleep, Paul." Daryl`s tone was gentle and soothing.

"I can if you stay with me. Just hold me. Let me know you`re there."

Daryl could still see the fright in his eyes as he gazed at him pleadingly. He looked hesitant and glanced around the room. "Alright. Ya want the lamp on?"

"You can turn it down."

Daryl did so. Paul laid back down and as soon as Daryl was beside him he put his arm around the hunter and snuggled close to him. Daryl didn`t seem to mind.

"Lots of swamps in Georgia. Hunted in `em. Mostly had mosquitoes."

"One of my foster parents took us camping in the Great Dismal Swamp one time. There were lots of birds and fish. I even saw a bear. Butterflies. Lots and lots of butterflies." Paul smiled at the memory. "They would land on me and just flutter their wings. I could feel the tiniest of breezes against my skin. There were so many I thought they would just pick me up and take me away. Take me to a happier place where I wasn`t bullied. Or alone. Or struck with a stick." Daryl`s expression sagged a bit. He didn`t realize that Paul had been abused too. "They were just fluttering in the trees. And the grass." Paul`s voice faded as he drifted back to sleep.

Daryl rested his head against Paul`s, not wanting to go back to the cot.
An hour later Aaron got off duty and found them that way, both asleep. Only Dog looked up when he entered the room then lay back down again curling up in the dog bed. Aaron slept the rest of the night and all three had a bit of a rude awakening when Gracie ran into the room proclaiming that there would be blueberry pancakes for breakfast that morning.

Aaron was just finishing trimming his beard when Daryl came into the bathroom.

"Must have been a pretty bad nightmare."

"One of the worst. He’s fine now."

When they went downstairs for breakfast Siddiq was waiting for them out in the foyer. He pointed directly at Paul. "Need to see you."

"You just gave me a check-up four days ago." Paul’s voice sounded a bit whiny.

"I know. This time I have good news. Today is the day the stitches come out."

"Yay!!" Gracie’s squeal came from behind them. She jumped up and down with excitement.

"What she said." Paul grinned from ear to ear.
Use The Force, Carl

Chapter Summary

Carl gets his first private lesson from Paul.

It was somewhat of a big deal for Hilltop. Since Enid was educating women about breast exams in the medical trailer, Siddiq had to take Paul outdoors in order to remove the stitches. Paul sat on a bench as Siddiq carefully removed the bandage. His shirt was off and some people couldn’t believe how muscular he was for a small man. There were even some younger girls giggling and saying 'too bad he’s gay' as they admired him. Paul didn’t seem to mind. Once the bandage was off he felt a sense of relief as the somewhat cool breeze blew against his bare back. The stitched up scar was still red and a bit jagged. Six inches of a reminder of a day Paul wished he could forget. He could feel the gentle tugs as Siddiq clipped away at the black stitching. Within ten minutes he was done.

Siddiq handed him his shirt. "You might feel some pulling and tugging but that’s just the tissue still healing up a bit."

Paul slipped on his shirt. "Can I start on my rougher workout routines?"

"I don’t see why not. Try not to hit anything against it for another two weeks yet."

"Thank you, Siddiq." Paul looked very humbled by the experience. "I know I gave you some trouble, but I am eternally grateful." They shook hands.

"I’ve had worse patients. Your commitment to getting healed was inspirational. You are the perfect picture of health."

Paul smiled and stood up. He didn’t expect the applause from the other Hilltoppers.

Aaron leaned towards him. "Don’t let it go to your head." They both hugged. Carl stepped forward and gave him a hug. Paul stood in front of Daryl who gave him the warmest hug he had ever received. Hugs were all around and after a while Paul wanted nothing more than to get away. He and Carl headed over to the little niche where he taught his classes.

"Too much?"

"Yeah, a bit." Paul took a long drink of water from his bottle. "We might as well get started."

Carl seemed eager to see what Paul would come up with. He knew it wasn’t going to be easy and Paul would not be easy on him. In fact, he didn’t want him to go easy on him. "I guess I’m ready. I- -." He suddenly yelped at a sudden pain on his right side. He looked down and noticed Paul had given him a rather hard poke with a small stick just under his rib.

"Didn’t see that coming did you?"

"No. Ow!" This time the pain was on the side of his right thigh. "Why are you doing that? No wonder Daryl calls you a little shit."

"Never underestimate the element of surprise. I had to learn that lesson the hard way."
"How the hell am I going to be able to defend myself if I can`t see anything?" Carl practically yelled.

"You have one good eye. You have your senses of hearing, smell, and touch. Those senses are enhanced to compensate for your loss of vision on your right side. You felt that walker close to you right?"

"Yeah." Carl folded his arms somewhat stubbornly. What was the point of this lesson?

"You were distracted, fighting off other walkers. You felt the immediate danger and took care of it."

"Barely."

"It was just enough, which proves you have the instinct within you." Paul began to pace. "The secret to learning anything I will teach you boils down to one thing." Carl shook his head. "I don`t quite follow you. If it`s just one thing, why don`t you just tell me and we can do something else."

Paul seemed unruffled by Carl`s attitude. "You have a disadvantage, correct?" Carl nodded. "Then the whole object of my lessons will hinge on the fact of turning a disadvantage into an advantage."

"Can you really do that?"

"Can you?" Carl had no answer for him. "Look at Aaron. He lost his left arm in an accident. It took out a lot of his confidence. It also gave him more courage. He knows some pretty sophisticated martial arts skills now and a walker can gnaw on his left arm until its teeth fall out. By that time its brain is compromised and that`s a rap on the walker."

Carl laughed at the language Paul was using. "Okay. But Aaron can see out of both eyes. Walkers can`t gnaw on me to their heart`s delight."

"I didn`t say both situations were alike." Paul went over to a box and took out some fencing equipment. "Take your hat off and put on this fencing helmet."

Unsure what Paul was up to he did the requested task. Paul handed him a fencing foil. He then put on the other helmet and did a few practice moves with the foil. "Fencing is a sport that requires you to be on the alert for what the other person is doing while doing the unexpected yourself, knowing they are just as alert."

"I can`t see very well with this helmet on." Carl felt the exercise was a lot of nonsense.

"You`re not supposed to. Your face, however, requires such protection."

"Am I supposed to use the Force or what?"

Paul chuckled. "Sorry, I think all the light sabers got confiscated by the Saviors. Take off the helmet." Carl did so. "First, I`ll teach you the art of fencing starting with the eight basic positions."

Carl sighed. He knew he was in this for the long haul. Deep inside he knew Paul was right and he couldn`t have a better teacher. There was also the fact he wanted to prove to his father how great an asset Paul would be for the anticipated fight with their new enemy.

They had been at it for half an hour before calling it a day. Carl emerged feeling exhausted, while
Paul felt quite energetic.

"Is he gonna learn?" Daryl came over sat down next to Paul at the picnic table where the hunter was cleaning his bolts.

"I think so. If he would just settle down a little more. I wish I had time to get him better prepared."

Aaron came over and plopped down beside Daryl. He was somewhat dusty and sweaty.

"Where have ya been?"

"Riding the five mile perimeter." He took Daryl’s water bottle and dumped some water over himself. "I spotted a herd about three miles beyond it."

"That’s the closest they’ve ever been to us. Our friends?"

Aaron nodded. "I think so. Looked like there were about two dozen/thirty of them."

Eager to get outside the fence Paul got up. "I say let’s pay them a little visit. They tell us we aren’t where we’re supposed to belong maybe they need to hear that message from us." Daryl and Aaron didn’t hesitate and got up. They could tell that Paul was ready for anything and knew that they were now back at full strength. Paul sighed and smiled to himself. The exile was over. The unexpected was something he had always been prepared for. He almost got sidelined--forever--but for now he couldn’t be happier.
Daryl, Paul, and Aaron attack the herd and take prisoners.

Daryl, Paul, and Aaron had hidden their horses in the barn that was close to the graveyard where they had first encountered the strange whispering walkers, but did not go into it much to Paul’s relief. There were still some things he was not able to face at the moment. The herd had not moved much from where Aaron had first spotted it. Earl had worked all night to finish up Daryl’s and Aaron’s armor, so now they wore full armor and had all of their weapons prepared to go into battle. For the moment they were crouched in their hiding place just observing.

"What the hell are they doin’? I can’t figure ‘em out. Is it a lure strategy?"

"Luring any strangers who come upon them out in the open, thinking it’s walkers. Pretty ingenious. They attack just to take human skins." Aaron pointed to a pile of dead walkers whose skins were gone.

"It’s a strange way to survive. Maybe it makes sense to them." Paul shrugged.

There was a shrieking scream from behind them and a walker disguised man charged towards them, a knife raised towards Daryl, who ducked just in time, then was on him. The herd turned towards the noise and started to come in their direction. Daryl knocked his attacker out with a strong punch. They turned their attention towards the oncoming herd, which moved faster than any normal herd of just walkers.

"Separate." Paul indicated the directions each should go.

Aaron went to his right, Daryl his left. Paul took out his sword and recklessly ran towards the oncoming herd. Daryl and Aaron were somewhat perplexed at this move, realizing Paul was going to take out as many as he could alone. Aaron knew he couldn’t allow that and ran around through the trees trying to get on the right side of the herd. Daryl decided his best strategy was a surprise attack from the left. As soon as Paul reached the herd he brandished his sword and in a martial arts dance that seemed more like a ballet he scattered the herd and lopped off heads as they tried to get out of the way.

Some of them came right at Daryl who with a flourish of a knife in each hand, fought more of them off, killing them one by one. Aaron charged out from his hiding place, surprising the ones on the right, kicking and striking with a long knife in his right hand. Earl had fashioned a pike attachment for his left arm prosthesis and he used it with daring accuracy when one of the disguised walkers grabbed Paul by the waist and pulled him down. Another was on top of Paul and Aaron felt that old panic surge from the incident in the graveyard when it raised a knife. Paul was too quick and managed to duck out of the way, bringing his leg up and with his knee knocked his second attacker right in the balls. He delighted at the loud scream of pain. A walker charged towards Aaron, growling and teeth hitting hard together, and bit into his prosthesis until and bolt from a crossbow went through the walker’s head. Aaron then found himself in hand to hand combat with another until Paul lashed through it with his sword.
When the battle finally ended all three were covered in blood and the remnants of walkers. They made sure all around them were dead then made their way back to their first attacker who was still unconscious.

Aaron knelt down and pulled off the mask to reveal a scraggly bearded man most likely in his fifties. "Looks like we got ourselves a prisoner."

The man moaned and twisted his head from side to side as he regained consciousness. Paul held his sword at the man’s throat. "One move and this goes through your skull. Understand?"

The man nodded. From behind them came a scream that sounded like it came from a female.

"Thought we got `em all." Daryl ran towards the piled up corpses. One of the masked walkers staggered from the heap and Daryl immediately grabbed it and shoved it back towards Paul and Aaron. "Got ourselves another one."

Their new prisoner didn’t say anything, panting hard and looking down trying to avoid any eye contact with them. When Aaron tried to remove the mask it ducked, twisting away from his grasp and went behind Paul, bravely knocking the sword out of his hand and holding a knife to his back just below the armor.

"You can’t fight forever." The voice sounded like it came from a young girl. She pressed the knife harder to stab Paul. Daryl grabbed her just in time causing her to nick herself in the shoulder. Daryl shoved his prisoner forward and Aaron grabbed the man and pulled him into a standing position. Paul had already retrieved his sword.

"You will die in our land." The man still whispered even though he had been unmasked.

"Seems to me you’re the one in our land now." Aaron grabbed a bandana out of his pocket and tossed it to Paul who put a gag on the man while Aaron held him in place.

"Ya got somethin` to say?" Daryl gruffly held the female who continued to remain silent.

"Let`s go." Paul led the small party back to the barn to pick up their horses.

They had ridden slowly back to Hilltop keeping the two prisoners on leashes in front of them. Both prisoners had their hands tied and often stumbled down the road, their three captors not all that concerned about their welfare at that point. Two more cells had been built in Barrington House’s cellar and they were locked up there.

"We got the herd taken care of." Paul now stood next to Tara. The strands of loose hair from his bun blew in a strong wind that had suddenly come up. In the distance were the clouds of an oncoming thunderstorm.

"Do we question them now?"

"Let `em stew for a while."

"The man only said we would die on his land." Aaron shrugged.

"Maybe we’ll finally learn something more about them. Good job, musketeers."

A loud crack of thunder echoed in the distance. "Time to get cleaned up." Paul avoided the somewhat stony-faced looks from Daryl and Aaron.
After they had cleaned up and eaten a meal Ms. Maitlin had prepared for them they were accosted by Carl in front of the house just as it started to sprinkle.

"Why didn`t you tell me you were going after the herd? I could have helped."

"Ya ain`t ready to do what we had to do." Carl looked a little let down.

"You can help us. Take shifts guarding the prisoners." Paul knew such a task would help Carl learn patience.

Carl brightened up. "Really? I can do that?"

"Of course you can." Aaron squeezed his shoulder. "Maybe you can get them to talk."

"I know it doesn`t seem like much. It`s safe to say they are the most dangerous prisoners we`ve ever had. We can`t just send anybody." Paul winked at him.

"Alright." Carl was now more enthused than ever. "I`m on it." He went to get a rifle, ready to take on the first shift.

"Do you really think they`ll talk?" Considering how secretive the new group was, Aaron wasn`t sure they would gain much information.

Paul shrugged. "Maybe not right away." It started to rain harder so they went inside.

In their room they carefully hung up their armor except Daryl, who slammed his down on the floor, glaring at Paul.

"What the hell was that all about? Runnin` into `em like that. Ya almost got stabbed again."

"I felt safe enough with my new armor."

"Paul, you`re being reckless. You know better than that."

"Concerning the way I fight I can`t afford to just wait for the right opportunity." Paul closed his eyes. "Now that I know better about what we`re getting ourselves into."

"Don`t do shit alone no more."

"I wasn`t alone. You two had my back."

Daryl came over and shoved Paul down onto the bed. Aaron moved to stand in front of him.

"We`re gonna have a talk."
Chapter Summary

Aaron and Daryl have an honest talk with Paul, but will he listen? Paul interrogates the prisoners.

Paul could feel how tense it was in that small room. Aaron closed the door. No one else was upstairs so they would have the privacy they needed.

"I know what conditions Maggie set for you. You’re not to go out alone and you’re not to be a hero." Aaron removed the pike from his prosthetic and put the hand back on.

"Ya may feel like ya ain’t alone, but ya were tryin` to be a hero."

"I`m not doing anything much different than I have before. I don`t see a problem here."

"Most wouldn`t from where you`re coming from. You just got back on your feet again, Paul. You only feel your new armor protects you better. You`ve said it yourself, these people are tricky and sneaky. You tell everybody else that, yet you don`t seem to take it to heart yourself."

Paul looked away from them. "Someone has to go right into the fray and I`m the only one capable of doing that."

"You`re a little slow of the left side." Aaron had trained long enough with Paul to know the speed of how he used his skills.

Daryl hissed. "Bullshit, Paul. What do ya think we are, chopped liver?"

"No, I don`t think that about either of you." Paul put his arms around himself. "With the extra armor I am protecting myself from any kind of tricks they might pull."

"Dammit, Paul, she still could have stabbed you. You were lucky this time. Not to mention your head is exposed."

"I can`t have my vision impeded, especially the way I fight. You know that as well as I do."

"Okay, that makes sense, Paul. That still doesn`t excuse the fact that you may be tempted into doing something stupid."

"More stupid than what ya just did."

Paul glared at them, fidgeting, feeling like they were trying to put some kind of restraints on him. "Look, you either want me out there fighting with you or you don`t. Because if you don`t like my style of fighting we might as well all go our own way."

Aaron realized they were getting nowhere with Paul, only putting him on the defensive. "No one said that. You just need to start acting like we`re a team."

"If I can do it, ya can do it. I`m the one everyone calls a lone wolf."
Paul sighed in frustration. "We need to send these people a message that we will fight back whether we encroach upon their territory or not."

"I think they already know that."

"All the more reason that we need to show them." Paul stood up. "I`m going to question the prisoners." He pushed himself between the two of them and left the room.

Aaron started to go after him but Daryl restrained him. "Let him go."

Aaron sighed. "He`s got something going on in his head. I`m worried."

"Yeah, me too." Daryl picked up his armor and set it neatly next to Aaron`s and Paul`s. He ran his hand over Paul`s and shook his head and sighed. He would have to keep a closer eye on him. He also knew how stubborn Paul could be and when he was that way he could be completely unreasonable at times.

The two prisoners had been placed into two separate small cells. Paul was grateful that the expansion of the cellar had been completed during his recovery. Carl sat on a stool near the entrance, his rifle resting across his lap.

"Who is your leader?"

Both prisoners only stared at him in silence. The mask still hadn`t been removed from the female.

"They don`t like to talk about anything. They don`t even whisper to each other." Carl snorted with disgust.

"We killed you." The whispering man`s gaze was unwavering on Paul.

Paul took a couple steps towards the bars. "My friends call me Jesus. You know what happened with the other guy." The two prisoners glanced at each other for a moment before returning to staring at him. "You tell us we don`t belong in your territory, so where is your territory?"

"Anywhere we wish it to be." It was the masked female`s turn to speak.

"Even if there may be a community already on it?"

"The world does not belong to you. It belongs to the dead." The old man turned away from facing Paul.

"Do you have a name?" Paul was unperturbed by the statement.

"No." The female.

"No." The old man.

"I`ll ask you again, who are your leaders?" Both prisoners turned away from him, indicating they were not going to answer. "Why won`t you tell me who they are?"

"No leaders, we just roam." The old man seemed to stare right through Paul causing him to shiver somewhat. He didn`t let it bother him.

"Well, someone has to tell you where to roam. What to do. When to do it. Who to kill." The two prisoners only kept their backs to him. Paul sighed and glanced at Carl. "Give them some food in a couple hours."
"Think they`ll eat it?"

"I don`t care if they do or not at this point. I`m tired. I`m going to rest for a while." Without another word he headed up the stairs, not noticing that the female had turned around and glanced at him. He ran into Tara while going inside the house.

"Did you get anything out of them?"

"Not really. I can`t even tell if they`re afraid of us." The thunder they had heard in the distance earlier now sounded closer. The storm was definitely going to hit Hilltop.

"Aaron and Daryl told me you did something reckless when you attacked them."

Paul sighed. "It only seemed reckless to them." He paused. "I don`t want to talk about it. I`m very tired. I didn`t sleep well at all last night."

Tara nodded. "Alright. Keep me apprised of your progress with the prisoners."

"I`ll have Daryl and Aaron question them later. Maybe they can get something out of them. At least I think Daryl will." He laughed slightly.

Tara smiled. "He does have his ways doesn`t he?" She saw him yawning. "Get some sleep. Looks like I`ll have to postpone tonight`s communal meal for tomorrow."

Paul gave her a nod and went inside. Daryl and Aaron were still there.

"Anything?" Aaron could see Paul visibly slump.

Paul shook his head. "You two can question them tomorrow." He laid down on the bed and closed his eyes. Aaron nodded his head towards the door and he and Daryl left the room.
Candid Conversation

Chapter Summary

Aaron and Daryl talk about their past, present, and future.

"Paul is actually sleeping this afternoon." Aaron and Daryl sat beneath a metal awning by the stables watching and listening to the rain as it poured down.

Daryl took a long puff of his cigarette. "He does better in the daytime. Poor man tosses and turns every night. I guess we all do."

"Yeah." Aaron sighed. "Wasn`t so bad when I had Eric beside me. Maybe I should have stayed home more often. Of course, it`s easy to think of the 'should-have-beens' after the fact."

"Guess I`m used to bein` alone. It was lonelier after I lost Merle."

"And your time in the woods? You must have been lonely out there."

"Yeah." Daryl inhaled then blew out a long stream of smoke. He had never felt this relaxed in a long time. "Dog helped. He`s still a dog, know what I mean?"

Aaron laughed. "Yeah. I had a pet monkey once during my travels in Africa. Had to leave it behind due to customs. Besides, Eric hated monkeys as pets."

"Are ya doin` better since movin` here?"

"I am actually. Gracie seems to be adjusting okay, she`s already made several new friends and loves all the animals. She enjoys her classes with Paul and will start school with the other kids in the fall. My time in Alexandria is almost a distant memory now and I haven`t been here that long. Eric will always be in my heart. Now I want new memories." Aaron held his hand out and let the rain falling from the awning wash over it. It was a sensation of washing away the old so the new could come in.

"The worst part is everyone I know bein` scattered. Durin` those days in Georgia we went through a lot. Depended on each other. When those days were gone, a part of me was gone."

"You`ll just have to hope Rick will come to his senses. He has to stop this hiding from the world. I think the Saviors did more psychological damage than anything else. Then there`s Negan." Aaron shook his head. "Keeping him alive and him a prisoner makes me think Rick is punishing himself for something."

Daryl hissed an ironic laugh. "As if he ain`t punished himself enough already. I`m talkin` about Lori and Shane."

"I`ve heard that name Shane pop up every once in a while. From Maggie, Glenn, and Carl. I guess it was one of those things where you had to be there."

"He was crazy. He got what he deserved in the end." Daryl stubbed out his cigarette and sat back and just listened to the rain for a while. "I`m leavin` Alexandria behind, too." He looked at Aaron.
"I'm glad you're here."

Aaron smiled. "At least if I follow you into the woods you won't point your crossbow at me."

"Do ya follow just anyone around?" Daryl's tone was somewhat teasing.

"Not particularly." Aaron's expression became serious. "Daryl, I have something I need to confess to you. I'm almost afraid to say it because it might push us apart as friends."

Daryl's curiosity was aroused. "Friends can say anythin' to each other."

"Remember when you always crashed at our house when working on your bike into the early hours of the morning?" Daryl nodded. "Eric and I kind of got used to you. We knew you were one of us. Being a bit of a softie Eric often wondered if you would have been interested in joining us every once in a while."

Daryl's eyes narrowed. "Ya mean like bein' in bed with ya?"

Aaron nodded. "I was hesitant. I wasn't sure you would have been interested. Then everything happened with the Saviors and that idea kind of went by the wayside."

Daryl looked away and started chewing on his thumb. "I may have been interested."

Aaron's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Um hmm. I get lonely, too. I'd sometimes hear the two of ya goin' at it and wish I was there."

"You were too shy and insecure to mention it, right?"

Daryl nodded. "Had too much shit to deal with. Where I come from, gays were the sick people. I was Darylina to Merle, especially after bangin' someone in the parkin' lot of a bar."

"You don't feel that way anymore?"

"I gotta do what's natural. Somethin' I realized in the woods. It stopped hurtin' when I stopped denyin' it."

"Daryl, that's great!" Aaron rubbed him on the back. "The invitation is still open."

"Yeah?" Daryl raised an eyebrow. "Maybe I'll take ya up on it someday."

"What about Paul?"

"My feelin's for him are real strong. I gotta convince myself that someone so pretty is interested in someone like me."

"Daryl, that's the great mystery of love. I like both you and Paul. I want you to know that no matter what may happen. Remember when you said the three of us should never be alone anymore?"

Daryl nodded. "Yeah. Meant it, too."

"I know how much it took for you to say that. You're coming out of the woods more than just physically." Aaron hugged Daryl close to him. "You should never have to find a reason to go back."

Daryl closed his eyes and fought back some tears. A part of him knew it was time to stop being
such a lone wolf. His time with Rick and the others had allowed him to be himself, something Merle always laughed at or showed disdain for. Merle Dixon was now a long distant memory and he had finally accepted the fact that Merle’s dying was probably the best thing for him.

The wind from the storm picked up and the thunder became louder. Being located on top of a hill meant everything and everyone was a good target for a lightning strike. Together they got up and hurried towards Barrington House and just got inside as a heavy downpour drenched the small colony, their clothes now soaking wet. They went to their room to find that Paul had been awakened by the thunder.

Paul took one look at them. "You’re dripping all over the antique Turkish rug, assholes."

"Well, we’ll just have to take our clothes off then." Aaron removed his t-shirt as Daryl started to unbutton his. Paul’s appreciative smile was not missed by either of them.

"Your clothes are wrinkled for sleepin’ in ‘em. Ya gotta take off yours, too."

Paul sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Wrinkled never bothered you before." He licked his lips. "Should we lock the door?" He removed his shirt.

"Oh, for crying out loud, Paul, I just want to dry off."

Daryl seconded Aaron’s statement with a grunt. Paul merely shrugged, but the sly smirk could not be wiped off his face.
Chapter Summary

Daryl gets rough with one of the prisoners during questioning. Daryl, Aaron, and Paul get a look at their new home still under construction.

Paul and Tara sat on the stairway out of sight of the prison cells as Daryl and Aaron interrogated the prisoners.

"Don`t say much do ya?" Daryl paced back and forth in front of the cells. "Or when ya do it`s all that damn whisperin` shit. Don`t want nobody to know what y`all are talkin` about. Fuck that. Ya ain`t sayin` shit anyway."

"You talk too much." The still masked female prisoner still whispered, just loud enough to reach the stairs.

Paul had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing. Aaron noticed it and grinned slightly.

Daryl took the key and unlocked the cell with the man. He came up to him and got in his face. "Maybe we should kill ya, right here and now. In front of your friend."

"The world belongs to the dead now. Makes no difference."

Daryl knocked him off of his chair. "Ya wanna die? I`ll do ya the favor." He kicked the man in the ass. "Ya don`t wanna talk to us? We ain`t in the mood to help ya." He closed the cell and locked it then went over to the other cell, unlocked the door and went inside. "How about I rip off your mask." He grabbed the prisoner who struggled a bit as he tore off the mask to reveal a young woman in her teens with long dark hair. Daryl was taken aback somewhat.

"Daryl, let`s give it a break for now." Aaron had to tug hard to pull him back and then let go.

Daryl nodded at Aaron and backed away from the girl and moved out of the cell. He closed the door and locked it.

"Come on." Tara stood up and motioned for the three of them to leave. Carl, who was taking his shift on guard duty, stared at the girl who was now looking back at him. He swallowed hard noticing how pretty she really was under the grime and filthy clothes. He sat down on the stool and was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief when she turned away from him.

"Why did ya stop me?" Daryl looked at Aaron when the cellar door was closed.

"She`s just a girl, a teenager by the looks of her."

"Didn`t occur to me that these people might have children in their group." Tara was now more uncertain on how to proceed with the interrogations.

"They`re survivors like anyone else and she`s well trained." Paul remembered that she had almost stabbed him.
"Do we treat her any differently?" The tone in Aaron’s voice indicated he was as uncertain as Tara.

"She`s one of them ain`t she? Don`t see why not."

Paul looked at Tara, then at Daryl and Aaron. A part of him didn’t like how Daryl had talked to the girl, even though he knew it was his way. "We need to step back and think about this. The man we can pretty much do what we need to, within limits of course, to get him to talk. As for the girl, we`ll remain on alert. No need to torture her."

"We`ll keep them both under lock and key for sure." Tara`s expression changed from grim to joyful. "If you guys got some time there`s something I want to show you. Follow me." She led them in the direction of the former medical trailer, which looked like it was being taken apart.

"What`s going on?" Paul had a feeling she was up to something just for them.

They noticed Alden was directing the construction crew and he waved to them.

"We`re finally able to start on your new house now that the hospital has been built. We will be starting on the second story soon. Hey, Alden!"

"Hey, what`s up?" Alden came over to them.

"I was just telling them about your idea."

Alden addressed Paul, Daryl, and Aaron. "We`re converting the bottom part to your living area complete with kitchen, living room, fireplace, workout space, and a guest bedroom. Upstairs on the new level will be your bedrooms--Gracie`s room, each room for you--."

"Wait." Paul held up his hand. "We can all sleep in the same room, just make one big bedroom."

"Enough room for separate beds you mean? Okay. We can put the workout room on the second floor then."

Paul merely shrugged and exchanged looks with Daryl and Aaron. "We`ll figure the bed part out later." Alden only shrugged.

"As leader I now authorize you to start picking out your furniture in the storage truck out back."

"Is there a spare TV? And CD player? Want some videos and music. Gracie loves movies."

"And room for bookcases and all of my books."

They were about to discuss it further when there was a shout from Carl. The four of them ran over to him.

Daryl was the first to come up to him. "What`s goin` on?"

"The man. He pulled some kind of sharp object hidden in his clothing. He killed himself. He did it before I could unlock the cell and get to him."

The four of them followed Carl downstairs. The girl in the other cell just sat there and stared.

Paul pointed to the girl. "Search her." Aaron and Tara entered her cell and frisked her completely. Aaron stood back and looked at him. "Nothing."
Paul, who always had at least one knife on him, stuck it in the dead man`s head. "Get someone to get him out of here." Aaron left.

"What now?" Tara glanced at the girl.

"He`s dead. Why should we care?" Daryl glared a death stare at the girl.

Paul looked into her cell. "You`re alone now. Maybe you should talk to us."

The girl looked at them for a long time. "No."

Paul sighed. "Suit yourself." He nodded for everyone to leave and looked at Carl. "Guard her well. We didn`t find any sharp objects on her. These people may know enough on how to get around such things."

"Gotcha."

Aaron had brought a couple Hilltoppers with him to remove the body. Once that was done they stood in front of Barrington House.

"One thing`s for sure, they die like the rest of us."

Paul just stood there and gazed at the sky. "Her defenses might not be as strong as the man`s. There`s some way to get her to talk. We will find that way. If only we could get more information from deep inside their territory." He stood there not looking at the others contemplating the situation, the wheels in his mind turning.
Paul goes on a mission alone to find out more information about their new enemy.

Paul silently crept out of the room, closing the door without making a noise. Aaron and Daryl were still fast asleep and he did not want to wake them, because this was something he had to do alone. He went to one of the hallway closets where he had stowed his armor, weapons, clothes, and other gear and went into the bathroom where he knew he would have some privacy. The first thing he did was put his hair up in a bun, then got dressed. After that he put his armor and knives on. Earl had designed it so he wouldn’t need any help with the straps. When he stepped out of the bathroom there was a small figure standing in the hallway.

"Gracie. What are you doing up this early?"

"I had to go potty." She looked him up and down. "How come you’re dressed like that, Uncle Paul?"

"I’m going to practice." He knelt down and put his hands on her shoulders. "Don’t tell anyone you saw me."

"Why?"

"Because this is a secret practice. It’ll be just between you and me, okay?" He hated lying to the child but this time he felt it was necessary.

"Okay." Gracie smiled at the thought that she would be privy to a secret.

"Good girl. Now go do what you need to do." He held the bathroom door open for her and then closed it.

Slowly he went down the steps skipping the ones he knew that squeaked. The kitchen was still dark so he used a flashlight to fill up his water and grab some food, taking one of the peaches from a crate that had recently been brought from The Kingdom. After leaving Barrington House he crept in the shadows until he reached the closed-in area where he held his classes. Inside the enclosure was his horse Echo, which had been put there the night before. He opened the gate that led outside the fence and walked Echo into the woods until he was far enough away. Once he mounted him he took off through the woods and across the fields with only the setting full moon as his source of light.

After placing Echo in the barn he made his way on foot to the cemetery. It would be his first time there since his stabbing. He found the spot and knelt down, touching the faint spots of blood that still lingered. His blood. There was no mist this time and he could clearly see the first hint of light in the east. Soon the sun would rise and he would have to move in the shadows. He could easily see a trail that the walkers and whispering ones often used so he would follow that for as far as he could. He made his way over to a group of trees and would hide until the sun came up. His stomach growled so he took out the peach to eat. His mind drifted to that night...
“...Get them out of here! I got this!” Paul wanted to give Daryl and Aaron time to get out. The mist covered cemetery obscured everything. He could see Michonne pulling Eugene through a gap in the stone wall and Rosita slowly crawling through the bent bars of the gate.

“Jesus! Come on!” Michonne could clearly see that he was surrounded. She could also see that he was enjoying himself, doing his dance of kicks, chops, slicing with his sword. Then there was the one he took a swing at and it ducked. There was the slight reflection of a knife being carried by a walker. His mind quickly surmised it was not a walker and the knife was aiming for his exposed back. He moved slightly to his right and felt the knife plunge deeply into him.

“You are where you do not belong.” The hiss of a loud whisper and Paul dropped to the ground. He panted heavily the pain was so intense.

“Paul!” Aaron’s voice. “No, not you, Paul.”

A bolt from a crossbow quickly took care of the walker disguised man. Some of them had managed to flee into the darkened mist and disappear. Aaron was immediately by his side with Daryl close behind.

Daryl ran up to them.”Is he...?"

“He’s still breathing.”

“It was a man. He had a...” Paul arched his back as waves of pain moved through him.

“Lie still. We’ll get you to Hilltop.” Aaron looked at Daryl. “He’s bleeding out fast.”

Daryl tore off his shirt and wore only his vest. "Bind his wound with this."

Michonne was immediately beside them. "I’ll go get the horses." She watched for a moment as Daryl took off the walker mask and held it up for all to see. "What the...?" Michonne had no more time to ponder the mystery and ran to get the horses...

Everything was pretty much a blur after that. He had passed out during the rushed frantic ride to Hilltop and the next thing he remembered was waking up in the medical trailer with IV’s stuck in his arm and a bandage around his upper torso.

“They take prisoners.”

Paul immediately became alert.

“We need to go get them.”

“They are too well guarded.”

“Prisoners may die.”

“We will die in the attempt.”

Paul realized he had not been spotted. A small group of about five weaved in and out of the gravestones. He figured three were walkers and the other two were human. Wherever they were heading he would follow. He had read the scouting reports that a small camp had been sighted and hoped that’s where they were going.

“Go home now. Rest.”
"We must tell others. We must tell Alpha."

"Alpha will know what to do."

Alpha. Was that the leader? He waited until they exited the cemetery before stealthily following them, staying in or near the woods and most importantly staying out of sight, something Paul had perfected over the years no matter the environment. They said nothing, only growling in imitation of the walkers. He estimated he followed them for a mile before they changed direction where he could see a group camped together with some cows, horses, sheep, and a few dogs all roaming around freely. There were racks of skins that were being dried. Human skins. Some of the animals were being cooked as smoke from their fires rose into the sky.

Paul smiled. This was something new, seeing the camp this close. He estimated there were at least one hundred and fifty people. All of them wore the masks and skins of walkers. If there were any walkers they were most likely kept apart somewhere nearby. He adjusted his position so he could get closer to the camp in hopes of hearing them talk to each other.

"We must move on tomorrow."

"We will get prisoners back."

"No. Alpha might say to leave them."

"She will not. One is special to Alpha."

"They will tell them about us."

There was the sound of a foot stepping on a twig behind him. Before he could turn around a hand placed itself on his shoulder.
Why Do Fools Fall In Love?

Chapter Summary

Some stupidity, then some possible foolishness, depending on your point of view.

Paul stiffened barely able to breathe as soon as the hand clasped his shoulder. He closed his eyes realizing in that moment his stupidity of getting too close to the camp. A half-eaten peach was dropped down in front of him. He had been followed. The figure behind him knelt down and he expected to feel the cold steel of a knife in his back.

"Ya gotta hide your trail better."

Paul looked to his right and sighed with relief. "How did you know?"

"Gracie said somethin` about seein` ya in the hallway." Daryl`s voice was low. "That their camp?"

"Yeah." Paul took a moment to relax. Perhaps it was best to get out while they still hadn`t been spotted. "I`ve seen enough for now."

Both of them hid in the shadows as they silently made their way through the woods and eventually the cemetery, finally coming to the barn to get the two horses. Dog had stayed behind to guard them, more or less.

"Dammit, Paul, what the hell do ya think ya were doin` comin` out here alone?" Daryl`s voice was loud now that they could talk. "I know what Maggie told ya."

"I had to. I couldn`t endanger anyone else when I saw the scouting report of a camp being spotted. This is the first real clue we`ve gotten."

"Gettin` a little too up close and personal ain`t ya?" Daryl shook his head in disbelief. "Don`t matter if it`s human or walker, all we gotta do is kill `em. Or do ya think some of them will surrender and join us?" He knew Paul had the tendency to give people the chance to prove themselves to be on the side of their better angels. Sometimes that chance could prove to be fatal.

Paul lowered his head. "I`m not sure at this point. They don`t seem interested in integrating with other groups." He looked up and smiled. "I guess I should be grateful that you came to look for me. Did Aaron come with you?"

"Nah. Just Dog."

"I swore Gracie to secrecy." Paul removed the front and back plates of his armor in order to be more comfortable.

Daryl grinned. "Ya know kids. I got real angry when she said ya went out alone all dressed in your armor."

"Are you still angry?"

"A little. I want to slap ya right side of the head then kick your ass."
Paul laughed. "Never know. Could be fun."

"I came cuz I can`t lose ya, Paul." Daryl sat down on a small bench.

"Why is that?" Paul sat down beside him.

"Hard for me to say a lotta things out loud. Got these feelin`s that keep swirlin` around my head. Kind of new to me." Daryl moved his fingers in and out between each other, the difficulty in expressing himself becoming more and more obvious. Paul reached over and grabbed his hands to still them.

"You aren`t the only one with new feelings that he doesn`t know what to do with." Paul closed his eyes. "I`m in love with you, Daryl."

Daryl didn`t say anything for a long time, nor did he look up at Paul. Paul withdrew his hand and turned away from him, a look of disappointment and heartbreak on his face.

"Don`t pull away." Daryl could sense Paul withdrawing from him and it was like a stab going directly to his heart. "Paul, look at me."

Reluctantly Paul turned his head to look directly into Daryl`s sky blue eyes. "Why? I know you don`t love me. I shouldn`t keep torturing myself with hope."

Daryl suddenly grabbed Paul and pulled him towards him. His lips were on the younger man`s so quickly, Paul wasn`t quite sure what had happened for a brief instant. When he realized he was being kissed he kissed Daryl back with enthusiasm, their arms going around each other. They sat in that embrace kissing each other`s lips, necks, and faces. Paul stopped to catch his breath, unsure if what just happened had occurred.

"I do love ya, Paul."

Paul`s lower lip trembled slightly as he smiled and wiped away a couple tears. "Do you really mean that?"

"Yeah." Daryl pulled him closer and they kissed again. After a while they sat there in a tight hug.

"I`ve dreamed about this moment so many times in so many ways."

"My dreams never included ever fallin` in love with nobody." Daryl just wanted nothing more than the feel of Paul`s warm embrace. "I ain`t sure it`s happenin` right now."

"It`s happening." Paul laughed slightly. He kissed each of Daryl`s fingers. "Maybe we should get back home. This isn`t the safest place for a romantic interlude."

"At least it`s a barn. Ain`t one of them hokey romance novel places like a waterfall or a flower garden."

Paul snickered, his chest shaking slightly. He wrinkled his nose. "What am I going to do with you? My gruff earthy well-muscled redneck." He lightly pinched Daryl`s arm.

"Kiss me one more time then we go home."

Paul needed no more encouragement in that department. They kissed again, hands exploring, then parted when Dog barked. Both immediately stood up and peered through the gaps between the barn`s boards. They could see nothing.
"Can`t be sure if we were followed or not from that camp." Daryl moved over to another window just to make sure they hadn`t been detected.

"Didn`t sound like anyone followed us."

They both looked at Dog who just sat there with his tongue hanging out and wagging his tail.

Daryl looked down at the canine. "Ya jealous?" His answer was another bark.

"Is that a 'yes'?" Daryl shrugged. Paul sighed. "Never had a dog jealous of me before."

"Better get used to it. Might have to chase ya out of the room." Dog cocked his ears as if he understood what Daryl had said.

"Away from your nice soft bed by the fireplace." Paul opened the gate of the stall to get the horses.

Dog whined. "I think he understood ya."

"Don`t you know that dogs are sneaky like that? They understand what you say to them. I once read somewhere that a dog can have the understanding of human language on the same level as a two to five-year-old."

Daryl looked at him and laughed. "That`s bullshit. Where do ya read stupid stuff like that?"

"It`s not bullshit. I bet I could find it in one of the books in Barrington House."

"Ya believe everythin` ya read?" Daryl led his horse out.

"No. I recall reading it in some psychological journal." Paul secured his armor plates to the back of Echo`s saddle.

Daryl rolled his eyes and shook his head. "T`ve fallen in love with a silly fool."

They exited the barn and mounted their horses.

"Who`s the more foolish, the fool or the fool who falls in love with him?" Paul yanked on the reins. "Yah!" He was quickly galloping across the field.

Daryl swore under his breath. "C`mon, Dog!" He kicked the horse`s sides and was just as fast at following Paul on their way back to Hilltop, Dog running right behind them.
Questions Answered

Chapter Summary

Paul interrogates the prisoner again and finally gets some answers.

Aaron had taken to task both Paul and Daryl upon their return. When they told him they had found a camp and gained some new information he seemed to calm down somewhat. He especially scolded Paul for going off by himself. He did, however, notice a change in how Paul and Daryl related to each other. They seemed closer and he wondered if something else had happened. Aaron would have to find out later. For now he had been tracked down by Alden for advice on their future home. Daryl had been asked to lead a hunting party so Paul used the time to check on the prisoner. Carl was just getting off guard duty when Paul approached the cellar door. "She won`t eat and sometimes just mumbles to herself."

"She`s scared." Paul had removed all of his armor and weapons and now wore his regular clothes. He even had taken his hair down, a soft breeze blowing it slightly. "I`ll try questioning her again." He went down into the cellar. "Leave us." The guard nodded and left. Paul then scooted the stool right up next to the cell. He could tell that the girl was frightened, her fresh tray of food untouched. "You must be hungry." His voice was gentle and kind. "It`s good food. We grow it here ourselves. We had a good harvest this year so it tastes wonderful."

The girl, who had been huddling in the corner, slowly got up and approached the food. She put her hand on the apple and picked it up and inspected it. After a moment she took a bite. "We have some of the best apple trees outside the fence. Do you have apples where you come from?"

"Sometimes." The girl`s voice was so low he had to strain to hear her.

"I saw one of your camps. You must move around a lot, find apple trees in the wild."

The girl was obviously warming up to him since his demeanor was friendly rather than aggressive so he decided to continue with that tack. "We eat what we find."

"That`s good if that`s something that works for you. There is an advantage to growing your own food. You`ll have plenty of one thing, not so much of something else. You can and do adapt. I noticed that you have cattle, sheep, and even horses. You must never run out of meat. I take it your people never grow hungry." Paul`s voice had now become more chatty and friendly.

"Sometimes we do. When the animals die." She had now become more relaxed and was eating more. "We`ve had that happen here, too. Not a pretty sight, especially when the dead get there first." He laughed slightly. He even noticed her smile a bit. "Your people live among the dead. Why is that?"

"We don`t want to harm them. They are part of us as we are of them. Humans are animals and the world died to change everything."
"So the apocalypse is seen as a way to correct things." Paul paused noticing she had become completely relaxed in his presence, even somewhat trusting. "Do you have a name?"

"We don’t have names. Do you?"

"My name is Paul, some call me Jesus." He flipped his hair back and comically rubbed his beard. This caused the girl to giggle. "I saw a picture of Jesus once. He wore all these robes and glowed."

"Well, the only robe I sometimes wear is a bathrobe and I most certainly never glow." Paul smiled, enjoying the fact that she seemed intelligent.

The girl was charmed by his demeanor and giggled some more. "We do have names, but nobody uses them." She frowned for a moment and met his steady unwavering gaze. "Lydia."

"Lydia. That’s a very pretty name. Tell me, Lydia, how many of you are there?"

She shrugged. "Lots."

"Do you have a leader?" She seemed not to understand his question. "Is there someone who tells you what to do?"

"There is Alpha. And Beta." She turned away from him. "No names. No leader."

"Okay. How is it determined that someone is Alpha?"

"The strongest one is Alpha." Lydia got up off the floor and came right up to the bars. "Are you going to kill me?"

"No. We can keep you here, safe. Are you afraid of the others in your group?"

"The men, they can sometimes hurt, but it is what we do."

Paul wrinkled his forehead not sure what she meant. "I see."

"I’m tired. I want to sleep."

"I’ll let you if you answer one more question. What do you call yourselves?"

Lydia turned away from him and moved some distance from the bars before looking at him again. "We are The Whisperers." Her voice had gone back to whispering.

Paul sat there and took a deep breath. "Alright. Thank you for answering my questions. I may have more later on."

"You’re okay." He got up and put the stool back in its place. "Paul."

Paul only smiled and nodded. Without another word he left, sending the guard back down.

"Did she talk?" Tara was waiting for him when he came around to the front of the house.

"Yes." He paused for a moment to contemplate their next move. "We need to get Rick and the others on board. I think it’s time we visited Alexandria."

"That’s a good idea, except for the fact I don’t think Rick would welcome us."

"I don’t quite know what’s brewing with these ‘Whisperers’ as they call themselves. I’m not even
sure if they care whether we took prisoners or not. There’s something about what this girl said that makes me uncomfortable. Like she knows something special and is keeping it a secret. I want a twenty-four hour guard kept on her. We can allow her some exercise in the yard as long as she is kept tied up."

"Do you think she’ll attempt to escape?"

"No. I can’t help think that someone may try to come after her. Send a messenger to The Kingdom. We must present a united front."

"What about Oceanside?"

"Forget about them for now. I’ll inform Daryl and Aaron about our plans. " Paul went into the house passing Alan on his way out.

"Oh, you’re back. Everyone thought you had finally been killed." Alan said that in too smooth of a voice that made Paul feel a bit uncomfortable.

Paul glared at him, his eyes dark and penetrating. "I wouldn’t listen to fake news if I were you."

Alan continued on his way, Paul watching him for a long time before going inside the house. He found Carl in the kitchen getting something to eat.

"Did you get her to talk?"

"Some. I still have more questions. They’ll have to wait." Paul poured himself a cup of coffee. He sat down across from the younger man. "I’m afraid that it’s crucial we get your father and Michonne on board."

"He thinks as long as no one is making any threats everything is fine. It’s not how he used to be."

"The war with the Saviors changed him. I can understand him not wanting to get hurt again, but these Whisperers…” Paul shook his head. "He’s got to be made to understand just how much of a threat they are. I’ve asked Tara to send for a delegation from The Kingdom. Maybe as a united front we will get through to Rick."

"He’s obsessed with keeping Negan in his cell and taunting him about how we’re rebuilding society as he sits there rotting."

"I came here to ask you if you wanted to come with us."

Carl sighed. "I don’t know what difference I’ll make."

"It could be a lot. Are you in?"

Carl thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "I’ll go."
At The Gates Of Alexandria

Chapter Summary

A group from Hilltop and The Kingdom arrive at Alexandria. Will Rick be willing to listen?

Those representing Hilltop and The Kingdom made a pretty good sizable group as they traveled by horseback and wagon down the road that led to Alexandria. From Hilltop were Tara, Paul, Aaron, Daryl, and Carl and from The Kingdom were Ezekiel, Carol, Jerry, and Dianne. Dianne rode up beside Tara.

"Are things going smoothly at Hilltop?" Dianne and Tara had become close friends while she had been at Hilltop.

"If it was just me, they wouldn`t, but I get good advice from my three musketeers." Tara grinned a bit humorously.

"What?"

"Jesus, Daryl, and Aaron. Too bad they aren`t wearing their armor on this trip. They look quite impressive."

Dianne looked behind her and smiled as she saw the three of them riding together. "Will Maggie be coming back soon?"

"We expect her sometime later this week. And none too soon."

"I was glad I was able to help out when I did. Are you nervous returning to Alexandria?"

"Somewhat. Not sure what kind of reception we`re going to get from Rick just showing up like this."

Dianne placed a reassuring hand on her arm. "We`ll certainly do our best to help you." She leaned closer to Tara. "There`s been some strange reports around The Kingdom."

"What kind of reports?"

"We think it`s our whispering walker friends. They`ve been sighted quite frequently pretty close to us." Dianne shivered. "Gives me the willies. King Ezekiel thinks they are either getting bolder or they have something specific in mind. We hope it`s not a plan of attack."

"I can spare some people from Hilltop. Our scouts are getting pretty experienced at watching them."

"I`ll mention that to King Ezekiel." She noticed Jerry signaling to her. "My turn to guard the flank. Later."

"Later." She watched Dianne ride off and noticed that King Ezekiel was in deep conversation with Paul.
"I do not understand why they wish to hide themselves among the dead. It is a sad commentary indeed that they are so desperate to survive that they shun those who wish to fulfill the very destiny of what we define as life."

"They see other people as animals. There were those who believed that before the fall of the world. Most were considered religious fanatics or isolationists."

"Do they wish to eradicate all of us or merely leave us alone? That is the question we must all endeavor to answer."

Daryl leaned over towards Carol. "Seems pretty clear to me."

"How`s that?"

"They wanna be with the dead and want everyone else dead. We defend ourselves. Period."

They could now see the gates of Alexandria in the distance. Everyone grew silent, uncertain what to expect once they got there. Rosita was the sentry at the gate when they finally reached it.

"What`s going on? Are you attacking us?"

"No." Paul rode up to the front of everyone. "We want to talk to Rick and Michonne as well as address the Council."

Rosita bent down to talk to someone for a bit then looked at them again. "I can`t guarantee anyone will talk to you."

King Ezekiel rode his horse over to stand beside Paul. "Please do us this honor. We the citizens of The Kingdom stand by our good friends of Hilltop. Our only desire is this offer of goodwill to discuss a new enemy that is near our gates, all of our gates, including the good people of Alexandria."

Rosita`s attention was drawn to someone climbing up the ladder of the sentry post. Seconds later Rick appeared and looked at the gathered newcomers in silence. He noticed that Carl was with them. "Let them in." He climbed back down.

The gate was pulled back and everyone rode inside. Rick stood in front of the other citizens of Alexandria including Michonne, Father Gabriel, and Eugene. Paul was the first to dismount and the others followed suit. Paul and Rick exchanged somewhat lukewarm glances. Tara and King Ezekiel stood directly in front of Rick.

King Ezekiel bowed slightly to Rick. "We do not expect you to welcome us. Will you at least hear us out?"

Rick glanced at Carl, who looked away from him. Michonne came and stood beside him. "I think that`s a reasonable request." She looked at Rick. "We can say no or yes after we hear them out."

Rick nodded. "Alright. We can at least do that. We`ll assemble in one hour." He nodded for a couple people to guide them to the stables so the horses could be taken care of.

"Can you get a read on what he`s thinking?" Aaron glanced at Daryl as they walked away from the stables.

"Nah. He`s shut himself out, even from me."
Paul sighed. "He still hates me."

"That’s a strong word." Aaron knew out of all of them Paul was probably the most uncomfortable.

"I know. But it’s what he feels for me."

They noticed Michonne walking up to them. She hugged each one of them. "It’s good to see you here."

"I’m glad at least one of you is glad to see us." Aaron noticed the dirty looks from a couple walking by the group.

"How are you doing?" Paul clasped her hands and looked at her in his knowing way.

"Okay, considering." She leaned closer to him. "I still haven’t told him. I will soon." Paul only nodded. She looked them all over. "You three look like you’re ready to take on anyone and everyone who opposes us."

Aaron grinned. "You should see us in our armor. Even Daryl looks impressive."

Michonne laughed. She noticed that Paul had somewhat withdrawn from them and was walking away. "Is he okay?"

"Just nervous bein’ around Rick. He knows Rick blames him..."

"Rick really doesn’t know who to blame. Jesus is just a convenient excuse."

"Maybe he’ll see reason this time." Aaron knew that there were times Rick could be reasonable. He hoped this was one of those times. "Is there a place where we can refresh ourselves a bit?"

"Our community recreation hall. There’s food and water, a place to clean up. We just recently built it."

"A recreation hall. Sounds like fun."

"I’m gonna look around. Been a long time since I was here." Daryl had earlier noticed Paul heading in the direction of the brownstone and wondered why he would be going there of all places.

"We refurbished the church as our assembly hall. I’ll send someone to find you when we’re ready."

Daryl nodded and left. Aaron gazed in the direction he was going. "Why would he be going there?"

"Where?"

"Towards the brownstone. He’s the last person in the world I would think he would want to talk to."

"I saw Jesus going that way earlier. We haven’t banned anyone from talking to Negan if that’s what you’re worried about."

"Yeah, but why would they need to hear what Negan would have to say on anything? I doubt you keep him informed on current events." He and Michonne walked slowly towards the recreation hall.

Michonne laughed. "Who knows what Negan hears from anyone nowadays? Rick doesn’t even talk to him all that often anymore."
Aaron shrugged. "I guess they`ll let me know in due time. You don`t happen to have any beer in this recreation hall of yours do you?"

"On tap. And cold."
A Conversation With Negan

As Paul passed the woman who had brought Negan his meal he stumbled a bit right into her, making his apologies. Once she had continued down the street he tossed the keys to Negan’s cell up in the air and caught them, a slight smile of triumph on his face. Daryl had seen it but followed at a discreet distance, waiting for Paul to unlock the outer gate. Once Paul was inside, Daryl stealthily made his way over and listened behind some shrubbery.

"Well, look who’s here." Negan looked up from his plate. Paul stood there staring at him, a smirk on his face, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "Long time no see." He came up to the bars and grasped them. "Jesus." Negan studied Paul for a moment. "Where’s Lucille? The last time we met I believe you shoved her in my face and took it."

Paul shrugged. "I don’t know."

"Why are you here? To gawk at the prisoner?" Negan made a couple model poses before clinging to the bars again. "Have you come to be my savior, Jesus?"

"I just had to see for myself that you were still rotting in here. How long has it been? Three? Four years maybe?"

Negan chuckled. "Still cocky as ever. Look at you with that sword." Negan widened his eyes. "Is that your old pair of knives I see strapped to your legs? You know," he snapped his fingers, "I remember those from way back. Changed your hair, too. Rockin’ the man bun. I like your style." He winked playfully at Paul, the shit-eating grin never leaving his face.

"Too bad your charm never had any effect on me. Negan. Is that your first or last name?" Paul relaxed and leaned against the wall.

Negan shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"No, just curious." Paul looked around the cell. "Rick seems to be taking good care of you."

"Ole Rick can’t live with me, can’t live without me. But enough about him. How are things at Hilltop with the widow?" Negan brightened. "But wait, she ain’t there right now."

Paul wrinkled his forehead. "How do you know?"

Negan pointed to the one barred window. "People talk. Right by this window. Forget I’m even here. You wouldn’t believe the things I hear—the gossip, the romances, the intrigue." He eyed Paul steadily. "All the things that go on at the other colonies. Rick may be a bit of an isolationist right now, but he keeps in touch. In fact, I hear a lot about you, Jesus."

Paul laughed. "I’m sure."

"You know something, I heard the damnedest thing. That you were stabbed," he thumped the back
of his chest, "right in the ole ticker." Negan looked around frantically. "Maybe you`re a ghost and you`re haunting me and I ought to be scared. Oh my, I forgot my shittin` pants." Negan laughed to himself.

Paul rolled his eyes. "I knew this was a waste of time." He turned to leave.

"But that strange walker who was really a man missed you by that much." Negan pinched his fingers together. "I can imagine the thoughts going through your head as you were sprawled on the ground bleeding. Dying. Did your entire life pass through your mind?"

"No." Paul`s answer came a bit too quickly. "And I didn`t."

"Didn`t what?"

"Die."

"If you had how many people would have paid tribute to you then forgotten all about you? I wouldn`t have had the privilege of your unexpected visit, and we wouldn`t be having this nice conversation about the life and death of Paul 'Jesus' Rovia and that would have been a shame because if you had died--if you had died--I would have mourned you."

Paul took a couple deep breaths. "Really? Why?"

"Because I can respect a man who has the fortitude to take the world by the horns and make it his own. Something I do all the time."

Paul rushed towards him. "I am nothing like you."

"Really, now?" Negan shrugged. "Maybe you aren`t. Because I don`t scare easy. I heard you made yourself some fancy new armor to go with your fancy sword and fancy knives. Ready to head out into the fray damn the torpedoes and not care who else may die in the process. Tell me, Jesus, do you lead your friends into unnecessary danger? Do you ask them to die for you?"

"Leave my friends out of this." Paul`s teeth were tightly clenched.

"Oh--oh, there it is." Negan winked. "There it is. Your friends. The ones who would do anything for you. And you would die for them, too. You almost did. You were having a field day with the ninja moves--walker here, walker there, swing the sword here, duck and ow!" He slapped his hands together. "Right in the ole back where you couldn`t see. Surprise!" Negan chuckled, the grin never leaving his face.

Paul could feel himself getting angry. "I wasn`t that surprised. I saw him at the last minute."

"That may be so. Yet, he still got ya. The invincible Paul 'Jesus' Rovia, savior of the good people of Hilltop, Alexandria, and The Kingdom. He still punched a hole in your back because you were too distracted to realize that those funny acting walkers might really be people."

Paul`s nostrils flared slightly. "You--."

"I knew that thought had occurred to you afterwards." Negan laughed in that knowing egotistical way that he knew annoyed people. "Now you`re all paranoid that another one might try and take you out again, maybe even succeeding." He noticed Paul not looking at him. "Oh. Oh, no. It did happen again didn`t it? But you got lucky. Let me guess. Your friends. Ready to die just like you."

"Don`t you ever shut up with your damn long speeches?"
"I thought people liked to hear me talk. I like to hear me talk. You talk all the time." Negan shrugged. "I can talk because I’m all locked up safe in this cell. You are out there in the dangerous world, unsure where the next surprise might be coming from."

Paul ran up to the bars and looked Negan in the face. "I’m prepared for what`s to come. Are you?"

"I`m always prepared. I don`t need armor, knives, or a sword."

"You don`t have Lucille, either, you son-of-a-bitch."

The gate opened and Daryl came in. "Hey, what`s goin` on, Paul?"

"Why look who`s here. It`s my Daryl. Must be my lucky day."

Daryl grabbed Paul and pulled him away from the bars. "Come on, Paul. Let`s go." He had to practically drag Paul away, but he managed.

"Give my regards to Rick, Daryl." Negan couldn`t help crowing and bellowing at them as the two men went out the door.

Daryl quickly locked the gate. "Dammit, Paul, ya should have stayed away from him. Why did ya go see him?"

"I don`t know." Paul slumped slightly.

"Who are you, Jesus?" Negan was now yelling from the window.

Daryl put his arm around him. "All he`s gonna do is push your buttons. C`mon." He led Paul away as fast as he could.
Chapter Summary

Daryl and Aaron try to calm Paul down after his meeting with Negan.

Aaron noticed Daryl lead a slightly distraught Paul into the recreation hall and hurried over to them.

"What is it? What happened?"

"He`s been talkin` to Negan." Daryl went over to the bar and poured Paul a drink.

Paul shook his head. "I just had to see him." Daryl set down a glass of rum in front of him.

"Come on. Take a drink. Get a hold of yourself."

Paul took a small sip and looked somewhat less flustered. "He`s right."

"He ain`t right about nothin`. Don`t let him get to ya."

"Negan`s good at doing that, Paul."

"I heard it all until I heard enough."

Paul looked at him. "You were listening the whole time?"

"Followed ya."

"Why did you feel like you needed to do that?" Paul seemed somewhat angry. "I don`t need a babysitter."

"I just did. Don`t go gettin` all pissed about it."

"I am pissed about it." Paul threw his drink across the room and quickly walked out of the recreation hall.

Daryl started to get up but Aaron indicated for him to sit down. "I`ll go."

It didn`t take long for Aaron to find Paul, who was standing in the graveyard next to Sasha`s grave.

"Hey. You okay?"

Paul closed his eyes. "I`m not so sure anymore."

Aaron put his arm around him. "I know something`s wrong if you let Negan get to you like this. How have your workouts been going?"

Paul seemed hesitant to reply. "When we were fighting those Whisperers and Lydia pulled a knife on me, I should have been able to prevent that. I wasn`t moving fast enough and could feel a drag on my left side."
"You knew you weren’t quite in fighting shape yet you took such a stupid risk?"

"What if I never get it back?"

Aaron sighed and scratched his head, wondering if what he would say next would bring Paul back to his senses. "Let me tell you a story. I remember a man who used to go out beyond the fences to explore and recruit people for his community. He specifically targeted survivors that he thought needed some help and were good people. He helped fight battles, took sentry duty, hunted for supplies—you name it he did it. He loved exploring and he could kill walkers like nobody’s business. He saw another man fight off walkers and asked to learn some new skills. One day he was working on a construction project and had a bad accident. It injured his arm so much it had to be amputated. He thought he would never be good enough again and he was fairly alone in the world except for a little girl who depended on him for everything."

"But he wasn’t alone, Aaron."

"Let me finish. This man had basically lost all confidence the day he lost his arm. The other man taught him that he could still fight and do so much more. Therein lies the problem. The one-armed man has never gotten a chance to repay his newly found friend and teacher." Aaron quickly pulled a move on Paul knocking him to the ground.

Paul was up on his feet, dragging a little on his left side. He lost his balance, stumbled and fell back down. "Fuck this."

"You’re a little heavy on your left. Get up." Aaron struck a basic martial arts defensive position. "Show me what you got, maggot."

Paul grinned. "I got more than you know."

"Really?" Aaron knocked him over again. Paul was immediately on his feet and struck a few blows at Aaron. "Forget punching bags and dummies. I’m the one who is going to whip you back into shape."

"You better try real hard."

"There’s no other way." They placed a few kicks with each other. Aaron took a swing and Paul dodged it and rolled over. Aaron was on top of him and pinned him to the ground. He then slowly moved down and placed a kiss on Paul’s lips. Paul returned it and in the process he kicked up his legs and Aaron flew over his head. Paul was on his feet again grinning from ear to ear as Aaron sat there panting.

"See? You’ll be back into fighting form within a week."

"Hey, hey, what’s going on?" Rosita came running over to them. "Why are you two fighting?"

"We aren’t fighting." Paul gave her an innocent look.

Rosita crossed her arms. "Sure looked like it to me."

"We’re playing." Aaron got up and put his arm around Paul.

"Fighting or playing I was sent to find you. Rick and the rest of the Council are ready to see you."

Paul brushed himself off. "Give us a minute. We’ll be there." Rosita nodded and left. "You still think I’m out of shape?"
"More than you know. We work out every day for the next week, Rovia. And don’t be late."

Daryl passed Rosita on his way to the graveyard. "There ya are." He looked at both of them. Strands of Paul’s hair had come loose and Aaron was sweating a bit. "Have ya been fightin’?"

"No." Aaron could only laugh and roll his eyes. Daryl only shrugged. Together they headed over to the meeting hall, which had once been the old church that the Saviors had burned down.

"Who’s all on the Council now? Do you know?"

"Rick, Michonne, Siddiq, and Father Gabriel, who’s the chair. I don’t know who took my place."

"As long as they listen to what we have to say."

"And more importantly get involved. I just hope Rick is in a listening mood."

"He’s never forgiven me."

"He should. If only he’d get his shit together."

"Maybe this time he will."

They rounded the corner and saw the meeting hall in the distance. Tara and King Ezekiel stood out front and waved to them.

"Here goes nothin’." The other two knew Daryl was most likely joking. They hoped he was anyway.
The Alexandria Governing Council

Chapter Summary

Will the delegations from Hilltop and The Kingdom be able to finally convince Rick and the others about the Whisperer threat?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a considerable group of Alexandrians assembled and five new faces that Aaron didn’t recognize. They stood off in one corner mostly observing and listening. Aaron noticed that Eugene had taken his place on the Council.

"This meeting of the Alexandria Governing Council will come to order." Father Gabriel banged down a gavel. Those assembled in the room quieted down and both groups from Hilltop and The Kingdom sat down in chairs placed in front. "We welcome our guests from The Hilltop Colony and The Kingdom. We are assembled here in a special emergency session to address the threat of a possible new enemy. Please stand if you wish to address the Council."

"If I may." King Ezekiel stood and glanced at the others.

Father Gabriel nodded his head. "The Chair recognizes King Ezekiel from The Kingdom."

Ezekiel continued. "Mr. Chairman and esteemed members of the Alexandria Governing Council. First of all we come here in good faith and in peace as a united front in hopes of convincing you of the dire consequences that would be visited upon you and your good people and to warn you of the threat which so disrupts our peaceful lives. To be ignored would be folly upon us all."

Paul stood up. "I wish to speak."

"The Chair recognizes Paul 'Jesus' Rovia of Hilltop."

"The Hilltop seconds King Ezekiel’s statement. We already have had skirmishes--."

"At whose instigation? Yours?" Rick stood interrupting him. "We already know about your calls of alarm, Jesus. We were almost destroyed because we got involved in something that should have been none of our business in the first place."

Daryl stood up.

"The Chair recognizes--."

"Yeah, whatever." Daryl waved Father Gabriel off. "It ain’t his fault, Rick. It was mine if ya want to blame someone. I committed y’all to gettin’ rid of the Saviors."

"Mr. Dixon, if you will not follow proper procedure you will be asked to leave."

Aaron tugged on Daryl’s vest and indicated for him to sit down. Daryl glared at the Council members as he did so.
"Daryl’s right, Rick. And I’m sorry for all that happened, for all that died. All of us paid the price in one way or another." Paul regretted a lot of things that had to do with the Saviors. There were moments he believed that Rick had every right to blame him.

King Ezekiel raised his staff in the air. "The Saviors had us all enslaved. They crept upon us in the darkness of night and no more than fed us to the dogs of fate than to the walkers." He turned to address everyone. "We all fought back for our freedom, though our losses were great. No one died in vain and we honor them by surviving and fighting all who encroach upon us." He put his arm around Paul. "This man here, who has nothing but goodwill and kindness in his heart, almost lost his life to these new heinous fiends who dress as the dead. He is a warrior with a heart of steel and the mind as sharp as a shark’s tooth. Yet he went out in the dead of night to find two good citizens of Alexandria, one who now sits upon this good Council." King Ezekiel faced the Council again. "Surely you do not deny this deed so selflessly given."

"For which we are grateful. And for saving Rosita’s life." Rick was sincere in his feelings in that respect.

Carol stood up and nodded.

"The Chair recognizes Carol from The Kingdom."

"I’m not as eloquent a speaker as my husband. I am a former citizen of this community. The threat of this new group is quite real. Both Hilltop and The Kingdom have sent out scouts to spy on these people. There have been several small skirmishes of no consequence with our scouts. I worry that there will come a time when our scouts may be captured and something worse will happen to them. I also ask you to reconsider your judgement and your harshness towards Jesus. His actions are for the safety of all of us and he may be the only one left standing between defeat and victory."

Paul turned to face Carol then the Council. "Please. I have no desire to make this about myself. However, as someone who has engaged in combat with these people I’d like to say that they are merciless. They care not about who we are or what we are about. When I interviewed a prisoner we took she told me they consider us animals. They slaughter all who encroach upon their territory and want only our skins and our faces so that they may cloak themselves among the walkers."

"Do they call themselves anything?" Michonne had often wondered about them since the night in the graveyard.

"They call themselves The Whisperers."

Tara stood up.

"The Chair recognizes Tara Chambler of Hilltop."

"Probably because they whisper to each other." There were titters of laughter. "What they whisper about nobody knows for sure, but it’s about preserving a way of life that’s real bizarre to us. We’re still learning more of the details." She handed Father Gabriel a notebook. "I took the liberty of writing down all we know."

"Please study it. We’ll answer any more questions you may have." Paul nodded his thanks to Tara.

Father Gabriel passed the notebook to Rick. He opened it and flipped through it. "Alright. I think we can at least promise you that." He glanced at the other members of the Council who nodded their agreement. "I recommend we continue this meeting tomorrow."

"Second." Michonne gave Rick a nod of assurance.
"This meeting is adjourned." Father Gabriel banged the gavel.

There was a murmur of voices as people left the hall. Rick came up to Paul. "If you are wrong about this, I’ll have your head, Jesus." Without another word he left.

Paul stood there feeling the full weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Ya ain’t wrong." Daryl now stood beside him.

Michonne came up to them. "We’ve prepared a guest house for all of you to stay the night. There’s food, water, and the recreation hall is open to all of you."

Aaron smiled. "Thank you. Come on, let’s go get settled in." Ezekiel, Carol, and Jerry followed Michonne out. "Paul, come on."

"I never thought Rick would ever hate me so much." Paul’s voice was quiet.

"I’m gonna have a talk with him."

"No. Let me." Carl had been quiet for most of the time since their arrival. He knew he could no longer let his father get away with his attitude towards Paul anymore.

"Both of us will." Daryl leaned over and kissed Paul’s head then put his arms around him. "Ya look like ya need some rest."

Paul rested his head on Daryl’s chest. "I am tired."

"Didn’t sleep much again did ya. I saw ya tossin’ and turnin’. “ He then put one arm around Paul’s shoulders and led him out.

Aaron looked over at Carl whose eye seemed to almost bug out. "What the hell was that all about?"

"What was what all about?"

"Daryl putting his arm around him and kissing him."

"My guess is they’ve come to a new understanding. Let’s go. It’s hot in here." Aaron then left, Carl not far behind still with an astonished look on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year to everyone! There’s a lot more story to tell and I am working on it quite diligently. I’m not a reader of the comics so I am basing a lot of things on what I’ve read in summaries, in other words, I do the homework. I sincerely hope I am interpreting things right in some instances. I’ve also been studying the images from the TV show of The Whisperers and will do my best to translate their gruesomeness when the time comes. One of the great things about fan fiction is you can dig into the details a bit more and add to the story and character arcs that don’t translate well to a TV show or comic book format. Makes it all that much more fun to read and to write.
Daryl, Carl, and Michonne have a heart to heart with Rick.

After having a couple drinks at the recreation hall Daryl was practically carrying Paul into the bedroom of the guest house. "Come on, Paul, ya need to go to bed or I`ll knock ya on the side of the head."

"No. Have to remain alert." Paul slumped some more as Daryl held him up.

"Bullshit." Daryl closed the door of the bedroom and guided Paul over to the bed. "Two drinks and you`re buzzed. Shit."

"Will you sleep with me?" Paul was now flirting with him.

Daryl shook his head and smiled slightly. "When the right time comes." He shoved Paul down onto the bed and took out the string that tied the bun and gently stroked Paul`s hair, the silkiness never ceasing to amaze him. "Now go to sleep." He lovingly kissed him on the lips.

"Kiss me again, you fool." Paul closed his eyes, his voice barely audible. He drifted off to sleep.

The bedroom door opened and Aaron quietly entered the room. "I hope I wore him out a little with our mock fight."

"It`s Rick that`s got him all upset." Daryl peered out the window and noticed the sun was getting low in the west. "Time to go talk to him."

"I`ll watch over Paul." Aaron put a reassuring hand on Daryl`s shoulder. Daryl nodded and left.

It had been a long time since he had walked the streets of Alexandria. He knew his way to Rick and Michonne`s house blindfolded. Carl was already there. When he climbed up the steps he could hear some laughter from the kitchen, especially Judith`s giggling. It would be good to see her again. He knocked on the door, forgetting that Rick told him it would always be his home.

Rick answered the door with Judith in his arms. "Look who`s here!"

"Uncle Daryl!" Judith stretched her arms out. Daryl took her from Rick and hugged her.

"How`s my little Asskicker?" Judith playfully punched him in the nose. "That`s the way to do it." He gave her a piggyback ride all the way to the kitchen where the smells of cooking wafted into the hallway.

"Glad you came for dinner." A smiling Michonne was stirring a pot of stew and Carl put some biscuits in the oven.

Rick looked his daughter directly in the eye. "Judith, you want Uncle Daryl to eat with us?"

"Yes!"
"Ain`t gonna argue with no Asskicker." Daryl set her down.

They ate a sumptuous meal and after Judith was put to bed Rick, Michonne, Daryl, and Carl sat out on the porch enjoying the late summer nighttime breeze.

"I heard Jesus went to visit Negan. Why?"

"Does it matter?" Daryl`s voice was slightly angry.

"I don`t like him having free run of the place while he`s here."

"Then lock him up. If ya can keep him there." Daryl sighed. "Paul just wants ya on board with us. We all do."

"Jesus likes to step over the line--."

Michonne glared at Rick. "I was there too, Rick. So were Rosita and Eugene. Jesus took the risk because he cares for all of us here in Alexandria just as much as he does for the people of Hilltop and The Kingdom."

"Takin` a knife in the back for his efforts don`t mean nothin` to ya? What`s got into ya, brother?"

Rick was silent for a long time. "I can`t get over what the Saviors did to us, Daryl. Negan humiliated me. It was Jesus who introduced him to us in the first place. I could have lost everyone that means anything to me. Carl. Judith. Michonne. You."

"Dad, remember Hershel saying we choose what we risk our lives for and saving lives is reason enough. He also said no one dies needlessly. That things happen the way they do because we can never foresee the outcome. I also remember him saying no one is to be blamed in the end because we are all human and make mistakes."

"I never have forgotten anything Hershel said to me."

"In a way you have, Rick. Jesus may never have known Hershel personally, he does know him through Maggie. Jesus has a lot of Hershel`s wisdom within him. His compassion, too. Sure he makes mistakes. Are his any worse than yours? If you should be mad at anyone it should be Gregory. And he`s dead now."

"Ya can`t afford to sit back and watch things no more." Daryl lit up a cigarette.

"These Whisperers haven`t attacked any of our communities. Don`t they just want us to leave them alone?" In his mind Rick knew that confronting the new group would only make things worse. He wanted nothing more than to avoid that at all costs.

"Nobody knows that, Dad. Our best defense is to unite like we did against the Saviors. I think even Negan could see the logic in that."

"Read the notebook that Tara gave us. There are some pretty disturbing things about these people. Dressing up like walkers is the least of it."

"I wish you would apologize to Jesus, Dad. Quit clinging so much to the past. What`s done is done."

"Did Jesus ask you to say that?"

"No." Disgusted, Carl stood up. "I`m going to pack some things I forgot." He left, frustrated at how
stubborn his father was being about the whole situation.

"Paul is helpin` him, Rick. Makin` sure no walker will try again to take a bite outta him on his blind side. Ain`t ya always sayin` ya did everythin` for Carl?" Daryl looked at him directly in the eye.

"Yeah." Rick looked at Michonne. "I`ll read that notebook. How do I know he`s not exaggerating things?"

"Why would Jesus have reason to do that, Rick? He didn`t exaggerate getting stabbed."

"We all thought he was a goner. Paul is strong and fought to hang on cuz he`s got a lot to live for. We`re gonna need him. Them Whisperers are tough and smart. Paul`s got the brains to figure `em out."

They all looked at each other in silence. Michonne glanced at the distant stars and sighed. "What if there was something so much worth fighting for that you would do anything in the world to make sure there was a future?"

Rick looked at her somewhat puzzled. "What does this have to do with forgiving Jesus?"

"Is he really all that unforgivable? Let go of your anger, Rick. There isn`t any place for it anymore."

"All it`s gonna do is fester and make ya go crazy circles in your mind. We gotta have ya with a clear head for what`s comin`."

Rick stood up and went to the edge of the porch. He stared up and down the streets where people were out and about enjoying the late evening air before going to bed. There was a time he thought he would never see that kind of thing again after the attack by the Saviors. They had rebuilt everything and preserving that life was more important than it ever had been before. Any future threat would need to be taken care of immediately. This time the foresight and the wisdom came from a man who had always been on the side of the good people surviving to see another day. Did he dare take the chance that Jesus was right? "I`ll sleep on it."

It was at that moment that Michonne knew it was now time to tell Rick her secret.
The Purple Hyacinth

Chapter Summary

The Council reconvenes. Rick has a lot to say.

Paul was the first to awaken that next morning when a beam of sunlight lit up his face. He wiped his eyes and when he stretched out his right arm it struck a body. He looked over and noticed that it was Daryl. He stretched out his left arm and struck another body. Aaron was on his other side. Both were still sound asleep. He wondered why the three of them were in the same bed then remembered that there was limited space in the guest house. He smiled. The more he thought about it, the more he realized it wasn`t that bad of a situation. The smell of fresh brewed coffee coming from the kitchen made him wake up even more so he scooted off the end of the bed and after doing his business that`s where he headed. Carol and Ezekiel were already up and both were fixing breakfast.

"There`s our sleepyhead." Carol smiled. "You look quite rested, Jesus."

"I don`t even remember going to bed." Paul sat down at the center island. Ezekiel poured him a fresh mug of coffee and Paul added a bit of fresh cream.

"Daryl gallantly escorted you to the bedroom. Aaron watched over you with devoted loyalty."

"All of us still with our clothes on." Paul had mumbled into the coffee mug.

Carol laughed. "Give it time, Jesus, give it time."

"Damn do I have a hangover." Tara entered the kitchen. Her clothes were all ruffled, her hair all askew. She looked at Paul. "Look at that. His hair is always nice and smooth like he just stepped out of a fashion magazine. That`s the last time I play pool and down shots of whiskey between games."

"I feel like a dirt clod and need a nice long hot shower." Paul took a good gulp of the coffee. They heard a noise from the hallway and Daryl and Aaron entered. Daryl went over to Paul and leaned down. They kissed lovingly on the lips. Carol first exchanged a look with Aaron, then with Ezekiel.

"'Doubt that the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move his aides, doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love.' Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2." Ezekiel never missed an opportunity to quote The Bard.

"And still you smile." Carol playfully nudged him.

"And still I smile."

Tara let out a groan. "Shakespeare in the morning I`m hungover. That`s as bad as opera any time of the day." She flopped down on the sofa. Carol brought her a mug of coffee.

"If I remember correctly, Georgie left a copy of Wagner`s *Die Walküre* the last time the twins were at Hilltop. `Ride of the Valkyries` at top volume would be the epitome of musical appreciation."
Paul had his usual smirk on his face.

"And if you play it, I will have to banish you to the ruins of the Sanctuary."

There was general laughter. After they had eaten breakfast and cleaned up, Rosita showed up at the door later that morning.

"Good morning." Rosita was in a cheerful mood. "I hope you all slept well." She was carrying a potted plant.

"Our slumber was undisturbed."

"I came to deliver you a message. Rick wants you to meet with the Council again and hear more details about the Whisperers. Oh, and this is for you, Paul." She handed him the potted plant. "It`s from our greenhouse."

"A purple hyacinth. Who is it from?"

Rosita shrugged.

Everyone looked at each other and smiled.

"That`s great news." Aaron looked at the plant and exchanged a shrug with Daryl.

"This afternoon after lunch." Rosita removed a dead leaf from the plant.

"We`ll be ready." Paul finished off his mug and poured himself another.

"If it means anything to you, I`m on your side. I`ll do my best to emphasize what Eugene and I went through and witnessed."

"All we can do is owe you our thanks." Ezekiel had Paul`s back all the way. Their friendship had been a long a complicated affair and he knew he could never abandon him in a time of need.

Rosita nodded and left.

"Jesus knows the meaning of flowers. What does this one mean?" Carol looked directly at Paul.

"Forgiveness." Paul sniffed the bunched up flowers on the end of the stem and then set the pot down on the island.

The Council had been called back to order without preamble or ceremony. Tara and Ezekiel summarized the reports from their scouts mostly addressing those assembled in the seats. Aaron and Daryl told more details of their encounters, their dead scouts, the camp, and subsequent attack. The Council had mostly been silent as they listened. They seemed interested when Eugene and Rosita told of their first encounter and how frightened they were.

"Even when we hid we just knew they would find us. Eugene even entertained the crazy notion that the walkers were evolving."

"Of which I surmised incorrectly and most idiotically."

Paul had been the quietest throughout the entire proceeding, looking down or away as everyone told their story. Every so often he could sense Rick looking at him. When Rosita finished she sat down.
"Anyone else wish to speak?" Father Gabriel scanned the assembled crowd.

"I would like to say something." Rick stood up.

"The Chair recognizes Rick Grimes."

Rick came around from the other side of the table and stood in front of the gathered crowd. "For a long time we’ve been avoiding the real issue here. There’s no doubt in my mind now that these Whisperers pose a significant danger to our way of life. Even more so than the Saviors. With them we could predict their moves, their thoughts; they were out in the open about all of what they were about. We’ve encountered a lot of enemies. We’ve always beaten the odds. I don’t even know what the odds are anymore." He came over and stood in front of Paul. "I wanted us to be safe and I thought hiding behind our walls would keep us that way. I should know better because walls do come down. I could blame Negan, I could blame Maggie. I blamed you instead. You introduced us to this new world. I thought what we encountered would end us. It didn’t matter if Negan was dead or alive. I just wanted to blame someone for making me want to uncontrollably kill, for separating us and breaking us apart." Rick paused unsure if he could say what he wanted to say next. "Jesus, please stand up."

Paul glanced at the others but their expressions were unreadable. Only Daryl gave him an almost imperceptible nod. He slowly stood up. "What is it, Rick?" His voice was soft as he first looked down then met Rick’s eyes.

"I sometimes go half-crazy and half-cocked wanting to protect my family. My mind gets clouded by thoughts and feelings I sometimes don’t understand. I just want to lash out. I lashed out at you. I don’t know if I would have had the courage to go out into the danger that was so mysterious and unusual, something that defied all logic. You have that courage. I need to look up to that. We all do." Rick paused and looked at Paul directly in the eyes. "I guess what I’m really saying is that I’m sorry. I was being unfair. Most of all I was wrong. About you. About everything. I am truly sorry, Paul."

Paul blinked back a couple tears and bit his lip. "That’s the first time you ever called me Paul."

"I’m more used to calling you Jesus and probably will continue to do so." Rick chuckled. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"I most certainly can."

Rick held out his arms. Paul stepped forward and the two men embraced causing everyone in the room and those waiting outside to applaud and cheer.

"All hail Rick Grimes and Jesus!" Ezekiel could not help himself he was so moved. "We are all now healed within our souls!"

Rick and Paul continued to embrace smiling and laughing. Carl and Michonne came up to them and embraced them as well.

"Thanks, Dad."

Rick and Paul separated. "Thank Michonne. We’ve got a future to protect. You’re going to be a big brother again."

Carl stood there his mouth open in astonishment. Then he broke out into a broad smile and tossed his hat up into the air.
A Walk Around The Lake

Chapter Summary

Daryl and Paul have a private conversation.

There were very few lights that had been set up to illuminate the night. They were just bright enough so one could see some details and dim enough for privacy. Paul and Daryl enjoyed the fact that they had some privacy as they walked around the perimeter of Alexandria’s lake holding each other’s hand.

"So you actually set this lake on fire and all of those walkers just walked right into it."

"Yep. Dumped a bunch of gasoline and lit it up with a rocket launcher."

"Lucky Abraham found the rocket launcher in the first place."

"Them damn Saviors almost took it. First time we ever seen `em. Got a little stab in the back of my shoulder for the effort." Daryl sighed. "Seems so long ago now. I hardly recognize this place."

"They`ve built it up marvelously. A lot of the seeds came from us." They found a small dock and decided to sit on the edge for a while. "I feel like the weight of the world is finally off of my shoulders. I didn`t expect Rick to do that." Paul rested his head against Daryl`s chest as Daryl put his arm around him.

"About time he came to his damn senses." Daryl reached into his pocket to light up a cigarette then thought better of it. He knew Paul didn`t like the smell. "Don`t wanna think about it. Just wanna be with ya tonight, like this." He leaned down and they kissed.

"I`ve waited so long, Daryl. I wanted to give up a lot of times. I knew you were afraid of what you are."

"I was. Had a lot of time to think in the woods. Always seemed like somethin` was goin` on or I was runnin` away from somethin`. Can`t run away from yourself."

"No use trying, either. I ran, too, Daryl. Not so much from myself. From the world, other people. Then one day the world ran away from me. From everyone. Until it wasn`t there anymore." Paul watched as the reflected light on the water shimmered, almost hypnotizing him.

"We got this world now, Paul. It belongs to us cuz we fought for it."

"I don`t think the Whisperers believe that. I think they believe the world belongs to the dead because the old one didn`t work. They were dead in that world so they stayed dead in this one. It just seemed easier than trying to readapt by rebuilding civilization from the ruins of the old. All they know how to do is fight and we are the intruders. We don`t belong and they don`t want us to belong."

Daryl squeezed Paul`s hand. "When I took that mask off the one that stabbed ya, I thought I had found somethin` way over my head. I`m good at figurin` people out. I couldn`t figure him out."
"Good at figuring people out, huh? I remember a certain chase, a truck, and calling me an asshole--.
Paul smirked loving to tease Daryl about the first time they had met.

"Was right about that." Daryl grinned. "Still think ya are, but you`re a good asshole. It`s the bad
assholes I don`t like."

Paul doubled over in laughter. "You`ve fallen in love with a good asshole, huh? How do you figure
that?"

Daryl shrugged. "Guess it`s another mystery I gotta figure out." He looked over all he could see of
Alexandria, his eyes falling on the brownstone. "Do ya think they`ll kill Negan?"

"I don`t think he`s worth keeping alive or worth killing." Paul paused and gazed up a the starlit sky.
He could see lightning flashing behind some distant storm clouds. "I think I went to see him
because I knew he could tell me what`s wrong with me."

Daryl looked at him somewhat confused. "I don`t follow ya, Paul."

"He could see through my bullshit and affirm what I thought was going on. Paranoia is the
symptom of something deeper. I was cocky and so sure of myself. I let it go to my head and my
guard was down. It made me realize I`m just as vulnerable as everyone else. I`m no one special."

"You`re wrong, Paul."

"Why am I wrong, Daryl? I`m not immortal. I let 'Jesus' go to my head instead of remaining Paul
Rovia."

"I don`t see no 'Jesus'. Never have. I didn`t fall in love with 'Jesus'. I saw a kind soul that helped a
good friend believe in himself again. My heart sunk when I saw Aaron`s arm and it had to be
amputated."

"I forgot you were there when it happened." Paul stood up. He indicated with a nod that he wanted
to continue their walk. "What happened to you, Daryl? Why did you go out and hide in the woods?
It had to be more than what happened with Negan. If that wasn`t the case, you would have left
right away."

They clasped hands again. "Guess that was part of it." Daryl paused. "Everythin` was startin` to
unravel. We all separated. Carol was havin` trouble. She ended up with Mr. Fancy Talk."

Paul snickered. "It`s his way."

Daryl hissed a laugh. "Rick was becomin` more isolated. It all happened so fast. What Negan did to
me. Rick wantin` me to lead the Sanctuary. Too many reminders."

"You could have stayed at Hilltop."

Daryl shook his head. "Nah. Abraham and Glenn are buried there. Didn`t need that reminder,
either."

"So basically you needed the time and space to process everything."

"Yeah, I`d come to Hilltop and see ya helpin` Maggie. I knew somethin` wasn`t right cuz I`d leave
and ya were still on my mind. Aaron saw me one day and confided that ya were helpin` him,
teachin` him how to fight."
They stopped and faced each other. "And before you knew it you realized you were falling in love."

"That’s about right." Daryl reached up and ran his fingers through Paul’s hair, glad that he was not wearing it in a bun that evening. Then his hand gently stroked Paul’s beard. Paul kissed the palm of Daryl’s hand. "I think I would have just gone back into the woods if our story had ended that night in the cemetery, Paul."

Paul embraced Daryl hard against himself. "Then you would have been truly lost, Daryl."

"I don’t ever wanna be lost again. I love ya, Paul. With all my heart."

"I know you don’t just give away your heart to anyone, Daryl. It is gold and at the same time more precious than gold."

Daryl held him close and they kissed hard, their open mouths exploring, tongues going deep. "It’s yours, Paul."

"I don’t want to own you, Daryl. It’s because you are a free spirit is why I’m in love with you."

"I give it to ya freely, Paul. I’m the kind that only falls in love once. And I have."

Paul closed his eyes wanting to savor every word. "I’ve had so much disappointment. Most of it has been my fault. I could never let anyone in because I knew the only thing that would happen is I would get hurt. I learned that lesson early on and the hard way in the foster care system. I would be kind, I would be helpful. What do they say? No good deed goes unpunished? That was me. Every hurt, every slight was another brick in that fortress." He turned and stared across the lake. "Then I stopped feeling altogether. I would still be kind, be helpful. I learned to expect nothing back in return."

Daryl gently grasped his arm and turned him around. "What changed your mind?"

"Some monster poked a hole in my back. Since I almost died I decided I had to give someone one more chance. In a way that’s grown to two people now. I’m finding I also have feelings for Aaron."

"I think both he and I need more time. I ain’t ever been in a three-way before." Daryl chuckled slightly.

"Never know. It could be real fun."

Daryl held out his hand. "Come on. Let’s go home. It’s been a long day."

Paul took his hand and they walked down the street as distant thunder gently pushed them along as if to guide them to an unknown future full of promise and dread.
Watched

Chapter Summary

The groups from Hilltop and The Kingdom leave Alexandria. Paul worries about Hilltop’s security.

Aaron had come back to the guest house drunk after a night of playing some vigorous poker with DJ, Jerry, and Dianne. He found Paul and Daryl huddled together in the bed, their arms around each other in their sleep. The only things he took off were his boots and prosthesis before lying down next to them, putting his arm around both, with Paul in the middle. Daryl was the first to awaken that next morning and noticed that Aaron was there. He gently shook Paul awake.

"Aaron made it back." Daryl smirked as Paul opened his eyes.

Paul glanced over at Aaron. "He probably came back drunk."

Aaron stirred into wakefulness. "Oh my head." He sat up and looked over at Daryl and Paul.

"Good morning!" Paul yelled as loud as he could.

"Yeah, great day for a ride!" Daryl couldn`t help yelling as well. Both of them now smirked.

Aaron grabbed his pillow and bopped both of them with it as hard as he could. "Very funny." He groaned again wishing he hadn`t done what he just did.

"What?" Paul continued to yell.

"Keep your voice down, Rovia."

"Damn I miss Dog. Shouldn`t have left him at Hilltop."

"Fuck you, Dixon."

Paul and Daryl broke out into a fury of snickers.

"I guess we leave to go back home today." Paul crawled out of bed. "I get the shower first."

"Ya always get the shower first."

Now it was Aaron`s turn to smirk. "When have you ever been interested in a shower?"

"Shut up." Daryl hit Aaron with his pillow causing him to hold his head and moan.

After the three of them got ready for the day they went out into the living room where Carol and Ezekiel were having breakfast. Daryl went directly over to the coffee pot and poured himself a mug.

"Carol, we have accomplished great things together in this endeavor. Wouldn`t you say so, Paul?"

"Yes, I think we can finally progress." Paul and Aaron dug into some food laid out for everyone.
"Let`s hope it lasts now that Rick has finally come out of his funk." Carol had known Rick long enough to understand his moods.

"The peace between the communities will give us a chance to win if they attack us." Paul went over to the coffee pot where Daryl was still standing. They kissed then he poured himself and Aaron a mug each. "I am ready to go home."

"Yeah, I wanna see how they`ve made progress on our house."

"You`re not living out in the woods anymore?" Carol was somewhat taken aback at what Daryl had said.

"Got no reason to. Got a better reason at Hilltop." He put his arm around Paul.

Tara entered the room. "Damn their liquor is strong here."

"I remember when I could handle two hangovers in a row. Now I can barely manage one. Of course, I`m living with a couple clowns now." Daryl and Paul went into a series of snickers.

An hour later all of them were ready to hit the road. Paul, Daryl, and Aaron had put on their weapons. Carl was also on a horse ready to leave with them.

"You`re responsible for my son. Take care of him."

"We will." Paul suddenly hit Carl somewhat hard in his blind spot.

"Ow! Hey!"

"How many times do I have to tell you that you need to get a feeling for your blind spot? Expect the unexpected especially when you least expect it."

"See what I have to put up with, Dad?"

"He`s got a good point, Carl." Rick looked directly at Paul. "I`ll form some scouting parties right away. Together we`re going to beat those assholes."

"Maggie should be returning soon. She`ll be glad to know you`re on board now."

Rick nodded. "Message me when she gets back. We`ll talk."

Everyone else said their goodbyes and the parties from Hilltop and The Kingdom were soon on their way out the gate. At about ten miles out they came to a crossroads and parted ways to each of their individual communities. When they arrived at Hilltop they were greeted warmly by the others, the warmest being Aaron and Gracie. Dog barked excitedly and followed them as they put away their horses.

"Did you enjoy staying with Tammy Rose and Earl?"

"Grandma Tammy Rose and I made cookies. We ate them all so you don`t get any. I wish I could have gone with you, Daddy."

"The road is a little more dangerous these days. I missed you a lot. You should have saved me some cookies."

"Just teasing, Daddy. There`s a lot for you, Uncle Paul, and Uncle Daryl." They headed for the house holding hands and playfully swinging them high in the air.
After refreshing themselves with some food, Paul went outside the house alone that night and climbed up on one of the sentry posts by the gate. A man named Darius was on watch.

"Nothing going on."

"Maybe it just looks that way. We still have one of their prisoners. I get the feeling she is somewhat important and even they won’t let that go." Paul suddenly shivered.

"Cold?"

"No. I just had the feeling that we’re being watched." He knew it was just how Daryl described it to him. He stared out into the darkness, trying hard to see through it. For an instant he thought he saw a light, then it was gone. "Damn. Tomorrow we’re going to start reinforcing the sentry posts with those metal plates we’ve stored out back."

"Do you think it will stop them?"

"I don’t know. It’ll give us better protection when they do attack. We need to do it while they are biding their time. Something we can’t afford to do." He scanned the darkness again. "Keep alert." Paul climbed down the ladder.

"Sure thing. Goodnight, Jesus."

"Goodnight." As soon as he reached the bottom Aaron and Daryl were there. "They’re watching us from the woods."

"Should we go out and take a look?"

"No. We need to avoid close contact with them as much as possible since we can’t tell who’s human and who’s not. No more needlessly risking our lives." Paul headed back to Barrington House.

Aaron and Daryl stared at each other, Aaron nodding slightly, indicating that Paul was probably right to be cautious. He hoped Daryl felt the same way and wouldn’t do something stupid on his own, which he had the tendency to do when those close to him were in danger.
Chapter Summary

Hilltop is happy to see their leader return to them.

The day was windy and everyone at Hilltop basically had to tie things down or were running around catching things that kept blowing away. Some of them did it enjoying the change of pace, most complained since windy days were the least productive. Paul and Aaron actually found it stimulating as they worked out in Paul`s gym/class area. Both were shirtless as Aaron put Paul through the paces, especially strengthening his left side. Every day Paul had improved and was feeling more confident and secure.

"I need a break." Paul held up his hand. He sat down and wiped himself off with a towel. "Seen Daryl around?"

"I did earlier." Aaron just sat there and enjoyed watching Paul`s muscular chest and arms as he panted. He flexed his own arm. "I think I need to lift some weights." He moved his left shoulder up and down. "Strengthen this shoulder, too."

"I`ve done some weight training off and on. Maybe should get back into it for a bit." Paul licked his lips. "I love a hairy chest."

Aaron laughed and rubbed his. "Here`s one just waiting for you."

They heard the sound of the alert horn. Moments later Daryl coolly came into the enclosure. "Shit. I should stay and enjoy the scenery." The cigarette in his mouth bobbed up and down.

"Next time you get to take your shirt off, too." Aaron tossed Paul his shirt and after they had dressed themselves went to see what the alert was all about.

Bertie looked down at them from the sentry post. "It`s the twins. I think Maggie and Hershel are with them."

The van was allowed through the gate and parked in front of Barrington House. The three of them stood together as the side door opened and Maggie stepped out. She held out her hand and Hershel took it and jumped down.

"Oh my God." Maggie excitedly took one look at Paul and threw her arms around him. "I am so happy to see you looking so well." They hugged for about a minute. She then hugged Daryl and Aaron for the same amount of time. Tara emerged out of the house and came up beside them and she hugged her as well.

"Welcome home." Paul had never been more glad to see her.

After trading some food and vinyl records, the twins went on their way. Paul and Tara spent most of two hours updating her on everything from the harvest, to tracking down the Whisperers` camp, their prisoner, and the condition of Hilltop in general. The healing of the rift between their community and Alexandria was the most welcome news of all.
"Was that Carl I saw out there earlier?"

"Yeah, I think he wants to move out of his home like most kids his age. Jesus has been training him."

"He’s insecure about a lot of things due to his eye. He saw how I was able to train Aaron because of his arm, he’s hoping I can do the same for him."

Maggie shook her head. "I just can’t get over how strong you look, Jesus. Are you in game shape?"

"Almost." Maggie’s eyes widened. "Nothing big. I just have to retrain my muscles on my left side. Aaron’s been helping me."

"That’s a relief." She turned to Tara. "You took very good care of things while I was away. I’m impressed."

"I had a lot of help." Tara and Paul exchanged a look that Maggie noticed immediately.

"What is it? Something wrong?"

"We can discuss it later. You need time to get settled in. Were you able to help Georgie’s group?"

"I think so. They learn fast. I’ll tell you about it when we have more time." She noticed Paul looking away from her.

"I’ll be interested in hearing about it." Tara wondered how he would break the news to Maggie that he was resigning. Maybe she could help him out.

Maggie looked at Paul. "Jesus, aren’t you interested?"

"Yeah. Sure." He glanced out the window. "I’m already late for a training session with Carl. We’ll talk some more. I promise." Paul quickly left the office.

Maggie stared after him for a long time before looking at Tara. "I know something is going on. What is it?"

Tara fidgeted in her seat for a few moments. "I don’t exactly know how to tell you this, Maggie."

"Just tell me."

"Jesus doesn’t want to be second-in-command of Hilltop anymore. He wants to resign and is recommending me to take his place."

Maggie sat there in silence for a long time trying to process what she had just heard. "Did he say why?"

"On that he’s been pretty vague. I know he doesn’t like doing the administrative stuff. He doesn’t want to leave Hilltop. As to what he wants to do--?" Tara shrugged.

"He’s one of the best right hands anyone could ever have. I didn’t realize he hated it so much."

"I know he’s been unhappy being cooped up inside the fence. I think he’s afraid you’ll lose your temper."

Maggie laughed slightly. "Well, I am Irish. When and if you see him tell him I forced you to tell me and that I want to talk to him--calmly."
Tara grinned. "Alright."

Maggie leaned back in her chair. "Who knows? You may work out better in the long run." She got up and paced. "These Whisperers sound like they’re pretty crazy the more we learn about them. Almost makes me wish I hadn’t come back."

"They’re creepy, kooky, mysterious, and spooky in my book."

"Tara, I do love your way with words." The wind rattled the windows. "Looks like my first task is getting started on winterizing Hilltop. There was a bite to that wind today. Did Rick say if he was coming here or do I have to go there?"

"He wanted us to send him a message when you got back. Are you ready to talk with him?"

"I think so. I’ll always be sore about Negan. A part of me thinks this new threat is worse. If they can almost take out our best warrior who knows what they are capable of doing."

They heard the sounds of rapid footsteps in the foyer then a shout. "That’s mine! Give it back!"

"Uh oh." Maggie rushed out of the office.

"Give it back, Hershel!" It was Gracie who was doing all the shouting.

"No. I want it!"

In Hershel’s hands was a stuffed toy that Maggie had never seen him with before. "Hershel, give it back to Gracie."

Hershel snorted then threw the toy on the floor. Gracie moved to pick it up. "Thief!"

"I am not!"

"Send an army of toddlers and small children after the Whisperers. They’ll never bother us again." Tara’s quip caused both of them to laugh.
Hunter And Hunted

Chapter Summary

Daryl and Dog encounter some Whisperers while hunting.

Food was always essential no matter the season and hunting was always a huge part, especially during the time of the year right before autumn was to begin. There used to be a time when there was something called a 'hunting season'. It usually fell in the autumn months due to the fact that summer was the main breeding season for most animals and they were in abundance. This was Daryl’s favorite time of year and in every spare moment he took advantage of using his hunting skills to the utmost. He had taught the men and women of Hilltop his basic hunting techniques and several parties had already gone out to stock up on meat. However, he preferred to hunt alone, with the exception of Dog, and at the moment he was stalking an elusive buck.

Daryl ducked when he heard the sound of walkers. Usually he would leap out and take care of them. Caution being the better part of valor was to be the name of the game until he was certain they were nothing but walkers. He signaled for Dog to remain quiet.

"We find food today."

"The hill people take more."

"Alpha will take hill people when she returns."

"Shit." Daryl kept his voice low. He wasn’t quite certain what to do. Should he take them all out? That might risk an attack if an entire hunting party did not return. Then again maybe no one would miss them. Did he dare take that chance?

"They send hunters."

"We kill the hunters."

"Hill people die."

"We take skins of hill people."

Daryl estimated there were at least twelve figures clustered together. How many were walkers and how many were Whisperers he could only guess.

"Do you see him?"

"Yes. The winged one."

The group of Whisperer/walkers came directly for him moving faster than before.

"C’mon!" Man and Dog took off at a run. The Whisperers of the group left the walkers behind and ran after Daryl practically keeping pace with him. He glanced back and could see at least five of them in hot pursuit.
Being a woodsman for as long as he had he knew the woods quite well. He would have to outrun them and find a place to hide until he could develop a strategy of some kind. Daryl didn’t like the fact that killing them would bring more into the woods and closer to Hilltop. He didn’t like leaving them alive, either. He remembered a cave that was nearby and if he could duck into it perhaps they wouldn’t be able to trace him.

Daryl ran faster dodging into the thickest of the trees until he came by a small creek. He waded through it until he saw the cave and signaled for Dog to follow him inside. He crawled back into its darkness just far enough to remain hidden.

"Where did he go?"

"You lost him."

"He can’t get away."

"He is here somewhere."

Perhaps if he could lure them into the cave and take them out one by one. He knew it would be easier to take them on in a confined space because they weren’t walkers. He could see Dog in the dimness looking up at him waiting for his next command. He smiled slightly when a thought struck him.

"Dog, outside." Dog hesitated but he trusted his master enough to obey. The canine stood just outside of the cave. "Bark." Dog went into a series of barks. Daryl then signaled for him to come back into the cave.

"The dog gives away the master."

"There by the cave."

Daryl readied his crossbow and at the first sign of the first Whisperer he let a bolt fly taking him out easily. Two more came into the cave and he took out his knives and charged forward, leaping as he plunged the blades into their heads. The other two jumped on him. Dog came out of the cave and grabbed one of them on the ankle, growling and pulling.

"Let me go." The man was so frustrated he spoke in a normal voice causing Dog to become even more ferocious. With his free foot he kicked Dog who went sprawling. The canine had torn out a good chunk of flesh in the process. Daryl took advantage of the distraction and kicked the man off. He plunged a knife into the man’s chest. The last one pointed at him.

"Tell your people to prepare to die when the time comes." He ran into the woods.

Daryl got up and ran after him. He had already disappeared into the color turning leaves of the trees. The group of walkers they had been with approached him. He retrieved his bolt, whistled at Dog and went in the opposite direction of the walkers. Hiking back to where he secured his booty of turkeys, some pheasants, and some quail. He decided the buck would have to wait for another day.

It took him two hours to hike back to Hilltop. He entered through the back door of Barrington House where he found Carl and Aaron enjoying some of Ms. Maitlin’s pie and coffee.

"What the hell happened to you?" Aaron saw how bloody and dirty Daryl was.

"Them damn Whisperers are gettin’ too close. They’re huntin’ in the nearby woods."
"Does that mean they’re expanding their territory?" Carl was just as curious as Aaron.

"Found a group of five of ‘em. Killed four, the other got away." Daryl looked at Ms. Maitlin. "Wasn’t a total loss. Got some birds for ya."

"Oh great. That just means I’ll be covered in feathers for the rest of the day. Guess I’ll have to talk Bertie into helping me." Ms. Maitlin had a sharp tongue. She had a great deal of respect for Daryl and his hunting skills.

"I’m gonna get cleaned up. Paul around?"

"I think he’s been avoiding Maggie most of the day. Who knows where he is."

"Little sneak could be anywhere." Daryl left the kitchen with Dog not far behind.

As soon as he got upstairs, he cleaned off Dog first then set out some food and water for him while he cleaned up in the bathroom. It was then he noticed a slight injury on his shoulder. He had been fighting with the Whisperer with such fierceness he hadn’t even felt it. Adrenaline had kept him from feeling any pain. It wasn’t too deep of a wound. It was deep enough to make him think that they could get to him as easily as they could either Paul or Aaron. When he returned to the room Aaron was there and he showed it to him.

"You better have Enid look at it. Don’t want it to get infected."

"God knows what’s on their knives. They got to me and I didn’t even notice."

"I hate to think what other surprises they have in store for us. They must be getting bold if they’re getting this close."

"Gonna be a hell of a fall and winter." Daryl left to go to the house that was now their new hospital. Then again maybe in a couple months the snows would slow them down.
**Widow's Walk Hideout**

**Chapter Summary**

Maggie and Paul discuss his resignation as second-in-command of Hilltop.

Maggie had searched high and low all over Hilltop, asking questions of everyone she saw, even going outside the fence where the fields were being cleaned off. She couldn’t find Paul anywhere. Some people said they had seen him around. They never could tell her where he had gone off to. She decided to search in the inside of Barrington House again. There was one doorway in the center of the third floor that opened into a small stairway that led up to the tower known as the widow’s walk. She silently opened it and slowly went up the narrow staircase. One stair creaked and she winced. It was enough noise, however, to cause a head to peer over the edge.

Maggie stood there and folded her arms. "You are the most elusive person I have ever known."

Paul sighed. "Okay, you found me."

Maggie came up the rest of the way. "So were you avoiding me on purpose?"

Paul looked away from her. He hesitated to reply. "Yeah." He had been sitting on the floor and returned to his previous spot.

Maggie came over and sat down beside him. "I don’t bite and I won’t bite your head off."

"I know you must be angry at me thinking I’m quitting on you just like that."

"I’m not angry." She peered out the window to check out the view and was surprised at how far she could see. "I am confused. Jesus, how long have we known each other?"

Paul smiled. "Years now. You were one of the first people I felt comfortable opening up to in a long time."

"I remember that time we sat on the steps of your trailer. You even came out to me." She linked her arm with his.

"I wasn’t ever really in the closet or anything. I was never one to broadcast it like some like to do."

"You were responsible for me leading this place. I wasn’t sure I could for a long time. You were always there for me. I’ve always been grateful for that." She leaned into him giving him a side hug.

"I hope I was being helpful. I always want to be." Paul rested his forehead on his knees, a part of him not wanting to face her.

"Something has changed hasn’t it? Are you not feeling comfortable about your leadership ability? I know you don’t think you’re the leader type. You couldn’t be more wrong."

Paul looked up at her, his sweetness somewhat endearing. "Maybe I am a good leader, Maggie. Just not in the capacity you want me to be."
"Or that you want to be." She nudged him. "Am I right?"

Paul was hesitant. "Maybe."

She was now getting frustrated with him. "Jesus, stop all this elusive bullshit. I`m listening. Okay?"

He sighed. "I want to resign my position as second-in-command because--," he looked away from her, "--because I`m not fit for the job."

"What do you mean?"

"I`m not cut out for the duties that keep me inside the fence. I was happy to help you out at first. As time went on I gradually grew more and more unhappy. I`d go out less and less on runs. That was something I really enjoyed. Just exploring the world without anyone interfering. Meeting other survivors, the good ones and the bad ones, not so much the bad ones." Both of them laughed. "At least I could have fun eluding them or outsmarting them. I got bored being stuck here."

"I guess that makes sense if you have the heart of an explorer." She put her arm around his shoulders the way a mother would a child, sensing he needed that kind of comfort not having a lot of it in his life.

"Not being out there made me weak, Maggie. It almost got me killed." Paul looked directly at her, his expression one of pleading mixed with the realization that his life was becoming more and more precarious.

"Maybe I can give you more to do here, maybe I can--."

He squeezed her hand. "No, Maggie. I have to be out there." He held up his arm and waved it over the view from the windows.

"Why?" Maggie folded her arms. "Why is it so important for you to be out there? If I`m going to accept this resignation I am owed an explanation and it has to be a good one. Not just one about being bored."

Paul turned away from her. "The encounter in the graveyard with the Whisperers threw me off my game. I realized I was overconfident and when that happens a lot of mistakes can be made. I made a big one and barely came back from it. I had a lot of time to think while I was in bed healing. Our defenses are weak, Maggie. So are the defenses of Alexandria and The Kingdom barely has any left anymore." He looked at her hoping she understood what he was getting at.

"Go on."

"The war with the Saviors depleted a lot of our best trained people in all the communities. In fact, hardly anybody was trained in the first place. Look how many King Ezekiel lost. He was deluded into thinking they could be invincible. He lost a lot of his knights and Shiva. Rick was out to get every last one, especially Negan. Carl had his heart in the right place, just at the wrong time. No one trains his people nowadays."

"What about here at Hilltop? I know you hold classes--."

"For children. And they learn fast. They aren`t soldiers and neither are the people here. The ones that are capable of fighting have gotten lazy. We`ve gotten too complacent. With this new strange enemy out there who behaves in ways we barely understand they will come to our gates someday and we won`t be prepared."
"Then train them, Jesus."

"That’s what I want to do. I can’t do it being bogged down with all the duties, administrative or not, being stuck inside a fence where the most stressful thing is a noise complaint about a kazoo." This caused Maggie to chuckle. "They are out there. Who knows what they are getting ready for? We cannot get caught with our pants down. I want to fortify this place with people who are prepared and arms that go beyond a gun or a knife. Alexandria and The Kingdom, too. Tara is more fit, and proved herself while you were away."

"So, in essence, you will be this place’s general. I know that word doesn’t sound right." Maggie wrinkled her forehead and laughed slightly.

"I really don’t like that word, either. Warrior in Chief." Paul cringed and rolled his eyes. "Maybe just Jesus, or plain ole Paul Rovia." He squeezed her hand. "So, do you accept my resignation or not?"

"I must admit you present a good argument, Jesus. And I do believe you are right about a lot of things. And you have recommended a good replacement." Maggie stared out the window for a few moments as if trying to see beyond the trees and meadows, trying to visualize the new enemy. "Alright. I accept."

Paul hugged her. "Thank you."

She hugged him in return and patted him on the back. "I’l make the announcement to everyone at tomorrow night’s communal dinner." They moved apart. "Do you think this is a fight we can win?"

"I don’t know. I’m sure as hell going to give it my best shot."

"I’ll hold you to that. What’s the first thing you’re going to do?"

"Try to get more information out of our prisoner. She’s holding back. I got her to talk before. Let’s invite her to the communal dinner, under restraint of course. If she thinks we’re friendly enough and believes we’re sincere about not hurting her, she’ll fill in a lot of blanks." They both stood up.

"Alright. It’s all in your capable hands. Now let’s go. It’s kind of dizzying up here." She started to descend the stairs.

"Not for me." Paul grinned as he followed her.
"You`re not feeling feverish or anything are you?" Paul examined the wound on Daryl`s shoulder before changing the bandage. The memory of the Saviors` tainted weapons immediately came to mind.

"Nah. Feel okay. Hurts a little."

They were alone in the room. The sun had set hours ago.

Paul cleaned it with some saline before putting on the bandage, then he kissed it. "There. The boo-boo will heal now."

Daryl hissed and snorted. "Damn, you`re a nut."

"Would you rather I kissed you here?" Paul placed a long lustful kiss on Daryl` s lips.

"Yeah." Daryl had to catch his breath the kiss was so sweet. "What did Maggie say?"

"She accepted. There`s going to be an announcement at tomorrow night`s communal dinner." Paul laughed slightly. "I feel free somehow."

"Ya ain`t the type for all that day to day stuff." Daryl put his shirt back on but didn`t button it. "Where`s Aaron?"

"The last time I saw him he was with Alden by our soon-to-be-ready home."

"I`m lookin` forward to movin`. Gettin` cramped in here." He leaned over and lightly nibbled on Paul`s ear lobe.

"It is. We need more private time together."

Daryl put his arms around Paul and just held him, burying his face in his shoulder. "I hate these damn Whisperers, Paul."

"I know. I`m going to interview our prisoner again in a couple days." He put his arms around Daryl and rubbed his back. Whenever Daryl was with him the hunter tended to lower his tough persona and be himself. "Now that I`m not distracted I can work on a strategy to defeat them."

There was a knock on the door and it opened. "Oh. Sorry. Am I interrupting anything?" It was Tara and she had to cover the grin on her face.

"We`re just needing some comfort." Paul motioned with his hand. "Come on in."

"Maggie told me what happened today. I wasn`t sure you really meant it when you said I could take your place. I thought you were just being, you know, nice or something. We used to disagree
so much on a lot of things."

"I`m sure we still will disagree, Tara. You are a capable person. I`m not one to let disagreements interfere with a person`s ability to do something," Paul now sat beside Daryl on the bed. They had their arms around each other.

"Still, I just wanted to thank you." She came over and hugged Paul.

"You`ll do just fine." Daryl winked at her.

Tara gave Daryl a hug, too. "I`ll leave you two alone now. I still think I interrupted something."

Paul rolled his eyes as she left. He looked at Daryl. "Well, did she?"

"I don`t know. Were we doin` somethin`?"

"You!" Paul playfully poked him in the chest. Daryl lightly shoved him. Paul then tackled him on the bed and they wrestled for a moment, Paul ending up on top of Daryl. He bent down and they kissed, their mouths and hands exploring, their legs entwining. All they wanted to do in that moment was make out as moans of pleasure emitted from both of their throats.

"Hey, guys, you should see what Alden`s done--." Aaron stopped in his tracks in the doorway. "Whoops."

Paul looked up. "We were just--."

"Making out. I can see that. Sorry. I have to go find Gracie and put her to bed anyway." He left.

Paul rolled off of Daryl. "I think it`s hard for him."

"In what way?"

"Aaron and I had sort of a thing going on the side during training."

"Yeah, I know." Daryl shrugged. "So."

"I sometimes wondered if he was developing feelings for me. It started out as an understanding. Two lonely gay men, sometimes wondering if we were the only gay men around. It was a joke, of course. We would get together and just have nothing but sex. Both of us had all that sexual tension and when we would work out it would just build up until we had to release it in the only way we knew how."

"Aaron told me that`s all it was. He told me that before the Saviors he and Eric were gonna ask me to join `em."

"Really?" Paul seemed intrigued. "Didn`t know he was into threesomes. Would you have seriously considered it?"

"Don`t know. I was still real insecure at the time. I did find both of `em cute. I`d be watchin` Aaron walkin` down the street and just admire his tight little ass." Daryl grinned and chuckled, blushing slightly.

Paul burst into some giggles, loving to see Daryl blush. "He does have a nice ass." He ran his finger up and down Daryl`s leg. "Both inside and outside of his pants." He and Daryl shared another long series of kisses.
"Maybe in time I might have developed feelin`s for him. Some guy called Paul Rovia was more on my mind." They made out again for a while, this time rolling around on the bed until Paul was underneath Daryl. "What makes ya think he was havin` feelin`s about ya?"

"It was just a moment, it passed so quickly. That`s why I`m not sure."

Daryl rolled off of him and adjusted his position to he could sling his arm around him. "Tell me anyway."

"We had just finished a training session and I was sitting there resting. Usually we would just talk about the shit going on in our respective communities, how unreasonable we thought Rick and Maggie were being, stuff like that. There was a lull in our conversation and I glanced over at him and he was just looking at me with the gentlest, kindest expression on his face. I had never seen that before. He looked away before I could ask him about it." Paul snuggled up to Daryl.

"Would it be so bad if he was feelin` somethin`?"

"I don`t know. He knew I was in love with you. Maybe that`s why he didn`t take it any further."

Daryl leaned over and they started kissing again, his hands moving up inside Paul`s shirt, feeling the hardness of his lean muscular chest. Paul`s hands massaged Daryl`s ass outside of his pants. They heard a bit of a ruckus in the hallway. It was a child`s voice and crying about not wanting to go to bed. Paul sighed in frustration, feeling a bit surly about all the interruptions. All he wanted was Daryl by his side and some down time with him.

"Sounds like Gracie don`t wanna go to bed."

"Yeah. I was fussy like that at that age."

"Just that age?" Daryl now felt secure enough he could tease Paul about anything. "Ya know how hard it is for me or Aaron to get ya to go to bed?"

"Maybe I don`t want to go to bed alone."

"Bullshit. Why were ya all alone in the trailer?"

"Who said I was? All the time." An impish grin manifested on Paul`s face. Daryl quickly bent down and kissed him, causing them both to snicker and make out some more.

Dog came into the room whining and scratched on the side of the door.

"Dammit," Daryl grumbled. He quickly got up. "Alright, I`ll take ya out." He and Paul exchanged hopeless looks. Daryl resignedly threw his arms up in the air as he left the room, then winked at Paul.

"Flirt!" Paul sighed as he gave up on anything else happening between them that evening. After a minute or two he picked up his book on the nightstand.
The Fruits Of Gregory`s Stash

Chapter Summary

Maggie and Aaron have a talk, then Aaron and Daryl, all the while enjoying a part of what used to be the good life.

Maggie softly closed the door of the children`s room and crept down the hall. She noticed that the lantern on the balcony was turned on so went to see who was sitting out there. It was Aaron and he was alone. She sat down and sighed.

"I swear Hershel is the worse kid in the world to put to bed."

"And all this time I thought the honor belonged to Gracie." Aaron was drinking some whiskey from a plastic cup, the bottle of fifth on the small table next to him. He also was smoking a cigar. The almost full cigar box was next to the bottle of whiskey.

"Where the hell did you get all of that?" Maggie picked up the bottle. It was Jack Daniels.

"I was in the attic looking for some furniture for our new home and found a box marked 'my good stuff'. I think it was in Gregory`s handwriting. I opened it and there were three bottles of Jack Daniels, a bottle of Kraken rum, and a box of cigars."

Maggie took out one of the cigars and sniffed it. "Cuban."

"How do you know?"

"Daddy looked after some rich guy`s race horse and he would sometimes bring him Cuban cigars."

"Your father smoked?"

"No. He enjoyed a good cigar every once in a while. Jesus most likely found a box on a run." Maggie admired the view of the night-time torches. She sighed. "It`s good to be back home."

"A lot of people missed you."

"Couldn`t be helped." She watched him in silence for a bit. "Why are you out here all by yourself?"

"No reason." Aaron looked away from her.

"You gotta be drinking for some reason. Not good to drink alone."

"Why?"

"It means something heavy is bothering you." There was always a stack of plastic cups and Maggie took one. "Do you mind?" Aaron indicated it was okay so she poured herself some whiskey. She took a sip. "Smooth. One thing I can say about Gregory, he had good taste in booze."

"I`m surprised he didn`t open up a bar on Hilltop."

Maggie grinned. "So, what is bothering you?"
Aaron hesitated before he spoke. "I was thinking about Eric. On nights like this before the fall we would find an isolated spot and make love under the stars. We had an old beat up pickup, throw in some sleeping bags in the back. Have a few drinks." Aaron shook his head. "All memories now."

"Are you lonely?"

"In a way I suppose I am. Earlier tonight I walked in on Paul and Daryl making out. I felt something I never thought I’d ever feel. Jealousy."

Maggie looked confused. "I never thought you were jealous of them."

"I didn’t either. Before they got together they both told me they were in love with each other. I had no real problem with that. Tonight seeing them like that--." Aaron swirled his drink around in the cup. "I felt a slight twinge, just for an instant."

"Do you have feelings for either of them?"

"I didn’t think I had any deep feelings. Paul and I--you know, mostly just for fun." He finished his drink and poured himself another, took a few puffs of the cigar. "Eric has been gone for a long time now. Wandering out there somewhere with the rest of the dead. Every time I see a group of walkers I think I’m going to find him. Finally get that chance to give him mercy."

"It’s odd. I sometimes think when someone is a walker they aren’t really dead, that they are still alive somehow. I know that sounds ridiculous." Maggie laughed nervously.

"Yeah, it is." He took a long drink. "I want so much to keep Eric in my heart. Just having sex is one thing. Attaching feelings to that--ah, hell, both Paul and Daryl are sexy as fuck. Paul may be small, he’s also strong and sturdy. And Daryl? He’s as macho as you can get."

Maggie burst into laughter. "I can appreciate that from a woman’s perspective." She then became serious. "You won’t ever lose Eric in your heart, Aaron. He’ll always be in that special place. Maybe your jealousy isn’t really that at all. You long for what was lost. If you do have feelings for both Jesus and Daryl, he would rejoice that you were able to find love again."

Aaron wiped away a couple tears. "I came here to Hilltop to start a new life. Gracie loves it here, she has friends, and she especially loves the animals. Things here are simple, uncomplicated. The people that I am closest to in the world live here. I can easily say that I am happy for the first time since I lost Eric. In a way, I came here to bury his ghost. For good."

Maggie reached over and clasped his hand. "Then it wasn’t jealousy you felt. Daryl and Jesus are just taking the time they need to build a foundation. You happen to be gracious enough to give them the space to do so."

"You may be right. Perhaps I just miss the times I had with Eric and was reminded of how good they were." Aaron stared at the flickering lights of the torches, his mind somewhat in a haze from the liquor.

They turned at the sound of footsteps and Daryl came out on the balcony. He looked at Aaron. "Where’d ya get the cigar?"

"Found some of Gregory’s old stash. Want one? They’re Cuban."

"Yeah. Only ever smoked a Cuban once in my life."

Aaron reached into the cigar box and handed him one. Daryl gave it a good long sniff.
"If you two are going to smog up the balcony I’m leaving." Maggie stood up. "He’s got some good whiskey, too. Goodnight."

They wished her goodnight. Daryl sat down in the chair Maggie had vacated. Aaron poured him a plastic cup of whiskey and handed it to him.

"Paul asleep?"

"Nah, he was readin’ a book. When he does that he wants to be alone for a while."

"Alden said our new house will be ready in two or three days. To be honest, I can’t wait to move. That sofa isn’t the most comfortable." He reached over and lit up Daryl’s cigar.

"Did we ever reach a decision on the bedroom arrangements?" Daryl relaxed and put his feet up on the railing, enjoying the taste of Gregory’s good stuff.

"It’s still a small house. If we want a workout room we can’t have separate bedrooms for all of us. There’s Gracie’s room, of course. That would leave only one bedroom for the three of us unless someone wants to camp out in the living room."

"Lots of places on Hilltop to hide if we get on each other’s nerves. ‘Course, we’d never find Paul." Daryl hissed a laugh. "We could probably all sleep in the same room."

"How about the beds though. In the storage truck I found those single beds we got from the abandoned convent. Some full beds and one king-sized bed. You know how beds are a commodity here, so the less we use the better."

Daryl was silent as he thought for a moment. "Might be a tight fit. I think all three of us could fit on the king-sized bed."

"Cozy on a bed has never been a problem with us." Aaron smiled slightly. "We’ll run it past Paul."

"Yeah." Daryl quietly returned Aaron’s smile.
Paul watched in silence as Lydia slept on the cot, every once in a while crying out due to a dream. He slowly approached the cell. "Lydia. Wake up." His voice was loud.

She stirred slightly before turning over and staring at him. "Is it morning?" Since there were no windows it was difficult to tell if it was day or night.

Paul pulled up the stool and sat down. "Yes." He waited a couple minutes staring at her the full time until she woke up completely. "I have more questions for you."

"Okay." Lydia seemed to like Paul and was willing to talk to him.

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"Isn`t that kind of young to be doing what you do?"

Lydia shrugged. "Don`t know. We just do it. It`s our way."

Paul sighed unsure of what to ask next. "Our way. That`s something I`m trying to understand about your people, Lydia. Tell me more about what your way is."

"I don`t understand."

"I think you do." Paul now seemed more serious than the last time he had talked with her. "Who are you? Really?"

"Lydia."

"I thought your people didn`t have names."

"Some do. Some don`t."

Paul knew she was being evasive. "Tell me about the men in your group."

Lydia turned away from him. "They are the ones who do things."

"Do things. What sort of things?"

"Things with women. They like to have sex with us. Sometimes they will beat us. Squirt all over us."
Paul furrowed his brow. He became uneasy, fidgeting on the stool. "Squirt all over you?" He closed his eyes as the full meaning of that statement sunk in.

"And squirt inside us. They do it all the time whenever they want. Doesn’t matter if we want it or not."

Paul turned away from her, taking a couple deep breaths. "Lydia, do you know what rape is?"

"Rape? No. What is it?"

Paul suddenly got up. "I have no more questions for you right now. The guard will bring your breakfast." He practically ran out of the cellar almost knocking the tray out of the guard’s hands. He made sure no one was around the back of Barrington House when he stopped and leaned hard with his back against the bricks, closing his eyes until he got a hold of himself.

"What’s wrong, Paul? Don’t you like it?"

A voice from his past whispered in his head.

"Come on, Paul. It’s what you want."

Paul held his hands over his ears. "No! Shut up!" He sobbed slightly. "Shut up."

"Jesus?" Eduardo looked at Paul. He carried a pitchfork with him as he made his way towards the stables. "You okay?"

"Just leave me alone." Paul hurried away wanting no one around. He headed for one of the storage sheds which was one of his hiding places. Once inside he closed the door and found his spot behind some boxes and just sat there holding his knees and rocking back and forth.

"I’ll make you sticky and wet, Paul. Until you reek of sex."

"Shut up, Alex." Paul could no longer suppress a sob.

"I’ll squirt all over you--squirt all over you--squirt all over you--." Paul angrily knocked several boxes down with a kick. Suddenly the door was jerked open and Tara stood there. She could see Paul balled up on the floor his eyes red from sobbing.

"Jesus? What are you doing here? Did you knock down those boxes?"

"Making noises. That’s all he wanted me to do. He wanted me to scream."

She slowly approached him. "I don’t know what you’re talking about." She knelt down beside him. "You seem upset about something. Weren’t you going to question Lydia this morning?"

"I questioned her." Paul’s voice was almost inaudible.

Tara reached out to touch him but he recoiled from her with an abrupt jerk. "Okay." She stood up. "I just remembered there’s something I need to do." She hurried out of the shed, closing the door behind her. She knew both Aaron and Daryl were on sentry duty and Maggie was in the fields outside the fence making sure the cleanup was done correctly. She turned around when she heard the shed door open. Paul came out looking a little more in control of himself.

"Tara, I’m sorry." Paul wiped a couple tears away.

She approached him unsure of what to do. "Why are you apologizing? You didn’t do anything wrong. Is there something I can do for you?"
The time that the Savior Dean had grabbed him briefly flashed through his mind. The sound of his voice calling him a 'beautiful man' in that suggestive tone. "I should have let you shoot him."

"Shoot who? Jesus, you`re not making a lot of sense here."

"That Savior. Dean. I should have let you shoot him then and there."

"It was you who insisted that he had surrendered."

"That was before he grabbed me. As soon as he stopped pointing the gun at my head I should have let you shoot him."

A look of confusion crossed Tara`s face. "Jesus, something has upset you a lot." She took a couple steps towards him. "Why don`t you come with me into the house. Ms. Maitlin has made a fresh pot of coffee. You look like you could use some." She reached out her hand towards him. "Come on. Take my hand."

Paul hesitated for a moment then grasped her outstretched hand. When he got closer he allowed her to link her arm with his. "I`ll be alright."

"Someone hurt you a long time ago didn`t they? I mean, really hurt you."

"You could say that. Both before. And after."

They went through the backdoor and right into the kitchen. Paul immediately sat down. No one else was there and Tara poured them both some mugs of coffee. She sat down at the table across from him. "I don`t know who it is or what happened to you. Or what triggered it. You need to tell someone, Daryl or Aaron maybe."

"I`m not sure I can."

"You will find a way." Tara slightly smiled at him. "Your new home will be ready tomorrow. Be honest with each other no matter how bad it is. They love you and will understand." She stood up slightly and kissed his forehead. "The pain you feel will be more tolerable. Do you believe me?"

Paul nodded. "Yes, Tara. I do." He drank the rest of his coffee in silence.
Lives Of Our Days

Chapter Summary

Daryl, Paul, Aaron, and Gracie move into their new house. Paul tells Daryl and Aaron about something painful in his past.

WARNING: This chapter contains brief descriptions and references to sexual assault. The act is NOT depicted, only talked about as well as reactions from other characters.

"Need any help?" Bertie accosted Aaron as he came through the door of their new home carrying boxes and bags full of their clothing and personal items. Dog eagerly followed them.

"Gracie needs help with her suitcases."

"Let me take care of it. She must be excited to be moving into her new house."

"If she jumped up and down anymore there will be a hole in the floor of the children`s room."

Paul entered carrying a box of his books. His mind seemed to be elsewhere and he wasn`t as talkative as the others expected him to be.

Aaron looked at him somewhat worriedly. He knew when Paul was this way something weighed heavily on his mind. "You know, I thought you would be more resistant to having someone live with you. I mean, you always lived alone in your trailer and didn`t like anyone else around."

"There were a lot who tried to take advantage of my kindness and goodwill. Then there were a couple boyfriends..." His voice trailed off and he seemed to suddenly close himself off even more.

At that point Bertie and Gracie entered with suitcases in hand so Aaron couldn`t ask anything more. Daryl had been busy scooting furniture around and exchanged a confused look with Aaron.

"If you don`t want to talk about it we understand." Aaron glanced at Gracie whose eyes were as big as her smile. "You need to take a look upstairs, Gracie. You have your own room now." He knew the prospect of getting her own room would make her a very happy little girl.

"Can I go see it now?"

"I`ll take her up." Bertie held out her hand. "Come on, Gracie." The two went upstairs, Gracie skipping over a few steps she was in such a hurry.

"It was over a long time ago." Paul set the boxes he was carrying down and just stood there still in his daze.

"This an old boyfriend?" Daryl wasn`t sure what exactly the tone of Paul`s voice meant. It seemed to indicate there was something different about this particular boyfriend.

Paul didn`t reply. Instead he went over towards the bookcases with one of the boxes and set the box down.
Alden quickly ducked his head through the door and tossed Aaron the keys. "Welcome home, fellas. I hope you like it."

Aaron looked around. "You did a lot of work refurbishing everything. A full kitchen with appliances. Bathroom. Even a laundry room/mudroom."

"Home Depot is a great place to salvage. Just let me know if you need anything else."

"Thanks." Aaron gave him a wave and Alden left.

Dog burst into a spate of loud barking causing Paul to jump slightly.

"Shut up, Dog." Daryl stared at Paul, wondering why he had jumped. In fact, Paul had been acting strange since the afternoon of the day before. He went over to him. "Kind of weird havin` our own place ain`t it."

"I guess it is if you aren`t used to it." Paul avoided looking at him and focused on his books.

Aaron had gone upstairs to make sure Gracie was getting settled in. It was too quiet in the living room and Daryl didn`t like the fact that Paul wasn`t as annoyingly chatty as he thought he would be. When Paul grabbed a handful of books and suddenly dropped them Daryl was immediately by his side to help him. He noticed that Paul had started to sob.

"Hey, man, what`s goin` on? I thought ya liked this place." Daryl put his arm around Paul.

"That`s not it." They didn`t see Aaron quietly coming down the stairs. "Just something else on my mind."

"Was it that boyfriend?" Daryl knew that Paul was sensitive about unpleasant personal situations and felt he was treading unknown territory. He wanted to know what bothered Paul to the point that he seemed to shut down completely.

Paul stopped what he was doing and just sat on the sofa. "Yeah." He paused for a long time. "Alex was already here at Hilltop when I arrived. For a long time we were the only gay men around." Daryl sat down next to him. "Hard times do all kinds of things to us." He turned away from Daryl. "Maybe I shouldn`t talk about it."

"Ya gotta talk to someone. Ya look like you`re about ready to run away from us again."

"Do I? Maybe I do." Paul still didn`t look at Daryl. He remembered what Tara had said to him. "I need to be honest with you about something. I`m afraid if I tell you, you won`t want me anymore. Aaron either."

"That ain`t ever gonna be true. I thought we got past that kind of thin`." He put his arm around Paul`s shoulders.

"Alright." Paul took a couple of deep breaths and swallowed hard. "Alex always wanted a lot of kinky sex, liked to tie me up sometimes. At first it was sort of fun." Paul paused. "Then one day it turned quite dark. He tied me up with zip ties instead of rope, knowing I could get out of ropes too easily."

On the stairway Aaron winced, not wanting to hear more. His love for Paul and concern for his well-being made him stay to listen further.

"Sounds like he was some kind of psycho."
"That`s not all he did." Paul buried his face in his hands. He was now sobbing harder.

"What did he do to ya?" Daryl could feel the anger build up inside of him. Paul turned away from him. "Paul. What did he do?"

Paul looked up his blue/green eyes wide pools of pain and regret. "I told him to stop, to untie me. He wouldn`t do it." He became more hesitant. "This isn`t easy for me."

"I know. I`m right here for ya."

Paul took a deep breath, not really wanting to continue his story, the memories still strong. He had already started and he felt he owed Daryl the truth. "I begged and pleaded with him. He only laughed and slapped me hard in the face."

Aaron almost collapsed on the stairs as he sat down hard and buried his face in his hands. He had a feeling he knew where the narrative was heading.

Daryl hugged Paul closer to him. "Go on."

"He kept doing more I didn`t want him to do. He proceeded to masturbate all over me several times, delighting in the fact he could `squirt all over me` and I could do nothing to stop him or fight back. I continued to plead with him to stop. He just kept laughing." Paul paused trying to hold back his tears but not succeeding. "Then he raped me."

"Oh my God." Aaron realized he was also crying. Paul and Daryl looked up at him. "I`m sorry. I didn`t mean to eavesdrop." Aaron quickly came over and sat down on Paul`s other side.

"It`s okay. I`m glad you know."

Aaron put his arm around Paul`s waist. "That had to be so horrible for you."

Paul put an arm around each of them, taking the comfort from them that he so desperately needed in that moment. "More than you know."

"He ain`t here at Hilltop no more. Where is he?"

"Dead. We were on a run together. He sort of got caught in a small herd of walkers."

"Sort of?" Aaron cocked up one of his eyebrows.

Paul looked directly into Aaron`s eyes. "Let`s just say I didn`t see much use in trying to rescue him. There were about three or four that had him down. I had some much needed medical supplies in my backpack and felt that was more important." Aaron rested his head on Paul`s shoulder. "I coped by going out on more and more runs, hardly ever staying here. I was able to come back to myself again being outside the fence."

"Good thin` that SOB is dead. I woulda killed him myself."

"I don`t know what I would do. Abandon him in the wilderness maybe. I know how badly that can go." Aaron shrugged. "Maybe even I would have killed him if I had witnessed what he was doing." He looked at Paul and studied him for a moment. "You now look relieved."

"I do feel better knowing that you know." He allowed himself to be held in their silent embrace of warmth, comfort, reassurance, and support. Most of all and most importantly--love--for a few moments longer before extracting himself. "Come on. We`ve got a lot of work to do if we want to
make this place a home." He gave them a bit of a smile. Together they began to unpack boxes and suitcases.
Chapter Summary

Paul, Daryl, Aaron, Gracie, and Dog get more settled in. Dog gets nervous about something outside the fence.

The first night in their new home had been a peaceful one. All three were exhausted from unpacking and rearranging the furniture to their liking. They also had shared the same bed for the first time. Paul was in the center with Daryl on his left and Aaron on his right. Both of them had put their arms around him as if they were protecting him, which resulted in the best night’s sleep he had ever had in his life. Considering the last two days of reliving the most unpleasant experience of his past he felt a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders since it was the first time he had told anyone. A good night’s sleep also meant a new perspective on the day ahead and as Paul quietly slipped out of bed he actually smiled when he looked down at his two sleeping boyfriends. He firmly believed that this time he was truly loved and the fact that it was actually by two men at the same time boggled his mind somewhat. He wanted to put the experience with Alex in the past where it belonged. There was a new better future now and he could not afford to linger on unpleasant things he could not change. He would only see it as something that served to make him stronger. He had slept with boyfriends after Alex and enjoyed it. He would continue to enjoy it. Paul 'Jesus' Rovia was loved. That was the foundation that mattered.

Paul put on his bathrobe and after taking care of his business in the bathroom headed downstairs to prepare breakfast. The people of Hilltop had generously filled their pantry and fridge with food. He took out some eggs and placed them in a bowl, a loaf of bread, and some bacon to slice. He looked up when there was the patter of small feet coming down the stairs. Gracie, her hair a mess of tangle, appeared rubbing her eyes.

"Hey, sleepyhead." Paul couldn’t help greeting her with a smile.

"What ya doing?"

"Fixing breakfast. Want to help?"

"Sure."

Paul always enjoyed Gracie’s company. Her antics in helping to move in had been the tonic he needed to bring himself back to himself again. They had formed a somewhat favorite uncle and niece type of bond. "See that loaf of bread?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think you can put the slices in the toaster and toast them for me?" He opened up the wrapper. "Let me set the knob here on the toaster and all you’ll have to do is push down the lever and wait for the bread to pop up. When it’s done, put the toasted slices on this plate." He set the plate beside the toaster. "Think you can do that?"

"You got it, sergeant sir."
Paul grinned realizing she had picked up one of Eduardo`s favorite phrases.

"Hey, punkin." Aaron emerged into the kitchen.

"Don`t bug me, Daddy, I`m fixing breakfast." Gracie`s determination to not be bothered was something Aaron had gotten used to.

Aaron laughed and came over to stand beside Paul. "I hope you can cope with a smarty pants assistant."

"I put up with you and Daryl don`t I?"

"Very funny." Paul slid the bowl of eggs in front of him meaning he was to break the eggs and prepare them for scrambling. Aaron moved the stool closer to the counter. "You look great this morning. Feeling okay?"

Paul smiled. "Haven`t felt better. It`s something I will always have to deal with. I don`t have the time or the inclination to allow it to dominate my life. Just telling someone is a good start. I already feel like a great weight is off of my shoulders." He leaned over and pursed his lips so Aaron could give him a good kiss. It was somewhat awkward since Aaron was much taller.

"You`re too short, Uncle Paul."

"Oh yeah? What about you? You`re the shortest person here."

"Not if I stand on a chair. I`m doing that right now." Two slices of toast popped out and she removed them from the toaster.

"Put two more back in."

"I know what I`m doing, Daddy."

Paul and Aaron laughed. "I`m glad someone does." Paul reached for the toasted slices to butter them while they were still hot.

Aaron looked around the kitchen and the living room. "Our own home. Let`s hope it lasts."

"Alden did a remarkable job. I hardly recognize anything from it being the medical trailer." Paul picked up the bacon and sliced it, putting the slices on a griddle.

"Hey." Daryl came into the kitchen with Dog trotting right behind him.

"Hey yourself, Uncle Daryl. Are you going out to play with your squirrel nuts?"

"What was that?" Aaron had a somewhat shocked look on his face.

"I asked Uncle Daryl--."

"I know what you asked." Aaron glanced at Paul who was holding his stomach he was laughing so hard. Aaron glared at Daryl. "What did you say to her?"

"Nothin`." Daryl was now somewhat defensive.

"What`s all this about `squirrel nuts` then?"

"She asked me the other day what the squirrels were doin` and I said gatherin` nuts for the winter.
What did ya think I said?"

Paul`s belly laugh had gone down to snickering as he prepared more bacon. Aaron nudged him a bit hard. Daryl patted his leg and Dog followed him outside, as he put an unlit cigarette in his mouth. As soon as he was gone even Aaron burst into laughter.

"I needed that. Get busy with those eggs."

After breakfast they got dressed and Aaron took Gracie over to Barrington House where the former parlor had been transformed into a schoolroom. Maggie, who was in her office, called to him on his way out.

"How was your first night?"

"We did okay. I think we`ll like the extra space a lot."

"You three deserve it. I told Tara that when I got back."

Aaron came into the office. "The three of us are getting very close."

"I`m just glad to see all of you happy. It seems like since dealing with the Saviors all the sadness just suddenly bunched up all at once. I still miss Glenn. Having Hershel has softened the blow some. I see his father in him every day."

"I wish I had had the chance to have known him better. I`ll never forget--that night." Aaron`s look became distant. "Well, I got sentry duty this morning." He waved to her and left.

For a moment a wave of sadness moved through her. There was no chance to let it linger since Tara entered for their morning briefing.

Outside Daryl and Dog were walking around the inside perimeter of the fence. Dog seemed to want to sniff every nook and cranny as Daryl patiently watched him as he puffed on a cigarette wondering what could be so fascinating to a dog about a bunch of weeds. He suddenly became alert when Dog started to growl.

"What is it? What`s wrong, boy?" Dog growled some more and started to bark. "Probably some dumb animal. Settle down."

Dog suddenly charged towards the fence and barked more wildly. Daryl put his hand on one of his knives and went over to investigate. He could see nothing. No squirrel, no struggling bird, no snake--nothing. Dog leaped up against the fence pawing at it like crazy. Daryl saw a crate and got up on it so he could see above the fence. Still he saw nothing. He stepped down and patted his leg and whistled. Dog reluctantly went with him looking behind him every so often. Daryl walked over to the nearest sentry post.

One of the Hilltop women was on duty that morning. "Hey, ya see anythin`?"

"A couple pheasants. A doe and her fawn. No walkers or people. Why?"

"Maybe nothin`." Daryl headed in the direction of his new home. He knew Dog didn`t behave the way he did for no reason. Once inside he grabbed his crossbow.

Paul was in the kitchen unpacking a couple boxes and looked at him. "Something wrong?"

"Don`t know." Daryl headed back outside. He whistled for Dog and they went over to the main
gate.

"Hunting?" Aaron was on the platform above.

"Nah. Gonna walk the perimeter." The gate was opened and Daryl and Dog headed out to investigate.
Chapter Summary

Carl finally gets Lydia to talk to him.

Tara came out of Barrington House and noticed Paul walking across the yard carrying a box. He obviously had been in the storage trailer.

"Okay, I’ll bite, Jesus. What’s in the box?"

"Dishes. See what it says on the side? Pier One Imports. It was unopened from the warehouse. Took a look inside and knew these were the dishes for us." He wiggled his eyebrows.

"Cool. You seem to be feeling better today. You were so upset I was worried."

Paul set the box down on the ground. He didn’t look up at her right away. "You were right, Tara. About being honest and telling someone else. It made me realize I don’t need to go on with my life seeing myself as a victim of something bad. It’s not how I want to define my life." He noticed she was carrying a rope. "What’s that for?"

"Maggie has decided that Lydia is to be tied up during her exercise period. Don’t ask me why."

Paul sighed. "I’m done trying to figure out her more unreasonable decisions. Anyway, gotta go if I want to finish all the unpacking today." He bent over to pick up the box. Suddenly he found himself embraced in a hug from Tara instead. "What was that all about?"

"I just felt you needed it."

He smiled and shook his head. "I did. Thanks." He picked up the box and went on his way.

Inside the cellar Carl was bored as he usually was when guarding the prisoner. That late morning it was another staring match between the two of them. Carl sighed. "Alright. I’m getting real tired of this. You never talk to me or anything."

"Don’t trust you."

"What? You’re actually saying something to me?" Carl nervously shifted his position.

"Yeah. What happened to your eye?"

Carl looked away from her. There was a long pause. "An accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"I don’t want to talk about it."

"Okay." Lydia walked around the cell for a bit. "Is it night or day?"

"Day."
"I never can tell since there are no windows."

The cellar doors opened and Tara came down carrying the rope. "Is it almost time for her exercise?"

Carl shaded his eye from the sudden bright light. "Yeah."

"She needs to be restrained with this from now on." Tara tossed him the rope. "Maggie`s orders."

"Is this really necessary?" Carl caught the rope and looked at it as if it had been a snake.

"You`re to be her guard. She`s not to go near the fence or any of the buildings." Tara paused noticing the contemptuous look on Carl`s face. "I`m just doing what Maggie told me."

"Even if you think it`s wrong?" Tara didn`t reply. Carl sighed. "Okay." Tara left and Carl opened up the cell. "Sorry." He restrained her hands behind her back with the rope, then indicated for Lydia to exit the cell as he guided her up the steps.

Lydia blinked and wanted to cover her eyes the sun was so bright. There was a slight breeze with a bit of a chill to it. Still it felt good to breathe the fresh air. "It`s so bright out here."

"Here, put on my hat." Carl realized she was almost blinded so set his hat on her head.

"Thanks." They noticed Maggie conferring with Tara in the yard.

"She`s the leader isn`t she." Carl nodded. "I thought that Jesus guy was."

Carl laughed. "Nope. He holds a lot of sway around here though."

"He was nice to me. Not like the other one with the tattoos and wings on his vest."

"Daryl doesn`t exactly have a gentle personality with those he considers enemies. I suggest you stay out of his way."

Lydia laughed. "You`re really funny."

Carl grinned. "It`s good to see you laugh. Come on, let`s go over by the gardens. They`re already harvested so there isn`t much to see." He nudged her in that direction.

"You have a lot of animals don`t you." Lydia looked around amazed at the setup of the gardens and animal pens.

"We`re mostly a farming community. It`s quiet and restful if that`s what you like."

Lydia seemed sad. "Where I come from we`re always on the move. Never resting."

"I don`t get anyone who never settles in one place. Doesn`t make sense."

"It does to us."

"If you can`t find food during a harsh winter, a lot of people die." He pointed to one of the flower gardens which was now bare.

"Isn`t that the whole point? Dying?" Lydia was now walking beside him.

"We all die. Eventually. The point is living while you are still alive. Why do you think the people
who survived after the walkers fought so hard?"

"They shouldn`t have to fight the dead ones. They are our salvation." They stopped walking.

"Our salvation." Carl couldn`t believe he would ever hear anyone say that about the walkers. "Boy, is that screwed up thinking."

"Wanting to live in a dead world is screwed up thinking. We live to die."

"What about your babies? You don`t think they live just to die when they haven`t even experienced anything yet."

"We don`t have any babies. Or children."

Carl chuckled. "You have sex don`t you? Sometimes children are the result of that, that`s just human nature."

"We have sex. The men have sex. The women just--."

"Just what?" Carl wasn`t sure if he wanted to know the answer.

"The women submit. Sometimes we don`t like it. That doesn`t matter. That`s just how it is." Lydia was looking at him as if she was being perfectly serious and logical.

"If you`re saying what I think you`re saying--you mean to tell me the women are raped all the time?"

"What is rape?" The expression on Lydia`s face was purely innocent. Carl`s, however, was disturbed and troubled.

"I think it`s time we got back to your cell." He nudged her in the direction of the cellar.

All of a sudden the alarm bell that hung from the front gate was rung.

"Herd!" The sentry rang the bell and called out to the community repeatedly.

"Come with me. I have to get you to a place of safety." Carl hurried her across the yard as people around him went into action.
The Test

Chapter Summary

The Whisperers make a threat. Daryl thinks he has found a spy.

Paul entered the house and noticed that Tammy Rose was still busy hanging curtains. He didn’t have time to assist her when the alarm was called. He immediately grabbed his knives and was back out the door running over to the sentry platform at the front gate and quickly climbing up the ladder, strapping on his knives. He noticed that Maggie and Tara were climbing up the opposite platform and standing next to Aaron.

"Are they people or walkers?" Kal had not seen the Whisperers up close until now.

Paul took some time to study the approaching herd. "I’d say both. They’re a small group. I doubt they’re here to attack."

They watched as the herd slowly moved towards them and then stopped about ten feet from the gate. The ones that were walkers were herded around fairly easily.

Maggie cupped her hands and shouted to them. "We know who you are. What do you want?"

One of the masked walkers stepped forward. He didn’t remove his mask. "We come for those you have taken as prisoners."

Paul placed his right hand on one of his knives. "Are you the one they call Alpha?"

"No. We only want the prisoners."

"The man killed himself. The girl stays." Maggie was not going to be intimidated by these strange people.

"She belongs with us." The Whisperer snarled when he spoke.

Watching from behind the blacksmith shop Carl and Lydia huddled against the wall.

"Don’t let them take me. Please."

"Sshh. It’ll be alright." Carl assured her with a nod.

"It’s not up for negotiation. Leave us or we will kill you."

"No." The man pointed directly at Maggie with a threatening gesture. "We will kill you. If you will not hand her over to us, you will pay the price when Alpha comes." He indicated for the others to turn around.

"Well, that was anticlimactic." Kal watched them walk back down the road.

Paul looked at him his expression one of annoyance mixed with impatience. "What do you want? More mindless killing?" He climbed down from the sentry platform and met up with Tara and Maggie.
"Someone tell me what that was all about." Tara crossed her arms, completely confused by the exchange.

"They`re testing us. They didn`t come to attack, just to make threats." Paul looked around. "I don`t see Daryl anywhere."

Daryl had watched the entire exchange from his position outside the fence. He and Dog had just finished investigating the spot Dog had been barking at.

"Are they gone?"

Daryl quickly whirled around his crossbow aimed and ready. Alan took a few steps back, his arms raised.

"What are ya doin` out here?" Daryl`s voice was gruff and threatening.

"I was checking my snares in the woods when I heard walkers and voices."

Daryl looked at him distrustfully. He slowly lowered the crossbow. "Ya ain`t been around here long have ya?"

"Maggie cleared for me to live here right before she left."

"I ain`t noticed no new snares in them woods. You`re lyin`." Daryl gave him his death glare.

"I just started putting them out today. I heard more meat was needed so I--."

"Shut up." He stared at Alan for a while longer. "Get back inside the fence."

Alan backed away from Daryl and then ran towards the front gate where he was let inside. Daryl whistled for Dog to follow him and they went in the opposite direction. Later on he entered through the workout area. He noticed Paul searching nearby.

Paul looked up and saw him. "Where were you?"

"Walkin` the perimeter. Saw the whole thin`."

"Was there a problem?"

"Found that Alan guy outside the fence. Claimed he was checkin` snares in the woods. He lied."

"Why would he lie?" Paul seemed confused by what Daryl said.

"Don`t know. How long has he been here?"

"He arrived just before Maggie left. She approved of him so no one asked questions. He`s a good worker, mostly on construction. He got into it with Kal, that`s the only trouble he`s caused."

"Ain`t no snares in them woods but mine."

"You`ll have to tell Maggie. I`m still busy unpacking and hanging curtains." Paul chuckled.

Daryl hissed. "Get to it woman."

Paul leaned over and kissed him on the lips. "Later, honey." Paul couldn`t help but smirk knowing it would annoy Daryl.
"Don`t go callin` me that honey shit."

They kissed again and Paul headed back home.

On his way back Daryl noticed Carl taking Lydia into the cellar prison. He also noticed Alan was watching them. When Alan saw Daryl looking at him he quickly looked away and walked off as if he had somewhere else to go. He felt Dog nose him.

"Ya hungry again?" Dog barked once. "Alright." They went in the direction of the stables. After putting some food down for Dog Daryl left to find Maggie. He saw her giving some instructions to a couple scouts that were about to head out the gate. He remembered their names to be Darius and Dante.

Maggie looked up when she saw him. "Didn`t see you around when we had our visitors."

"I was checkin` somethin` outside the fence. Alan was out there, too."

"Alan." Maggie looked at him somewhat confused. "He`s afraid to go outside the fence by himself."

"He was out there alright." Daryl lit up a cigarette. "Lied to me about puttin` out snares. Think Dog got a whiff of him by the back fence."

Maggie was silent as she processed what Daryl had just told her. "What if he`s a spy for them? What do we do?"

"Don`t let him know we`re onto him. Watch him close. See what he does."

"He seemed so legit. Like he wanted to be here. Makes me look like a damn fool." Maggie shook her head.

"Ya ain`t. Don`t know what most of `em look like. How were ya to know?"

"Kind of wish I hadn`t come back. Thanks." Maggie headed towards the house.

Daryl watched her leave coolly puffing on the cigarette his mind a whirlwind of thoughts. The Whisperers were becoming more and more baffling by the minute. One day they would quit with their threats and skirmishes, of that he had no doubt.
King Ezekiel And The Fair

Chapter Summary

King Ezekiel arrives at Hilltop to discuss a fair between the three communities.

A few days later Maggie had the unexpected visit from King Ezekiel. Only Jerry accompanied him. She and The Kingdom’s leader met privately in her office.

"To what may I owe the pleasure of your visit?" Maggie poured them both some coffee from a pot that sat on a hotplate behind her desk.

"When springtime was nigh and before all of our troubles plagued us, remember Carol and myself proposing the idea of a fair for all the communities in hopes of uniting us?" Maggie nodded. "All of our harvests have proven abundant and to celebrate we should have this fair as a gathering of thanksgiving for our good fortunes. Do you not agree, Maggie of Hilltop?"

"I remember at the time we weren’t so certain Alexandria would be on board so we tabled the idea."

"You must admit that all has improved between communities. A new enemy may soon arrive in force at our doorsteps at any unsuspecting moment, yet none of us have come together as we should. A festival to enlighten and uplift our spirits would cause our souls to unite." Ezekiel’s enthusiasm always seemed to rub off on everyone and Maggie was no exception.

She pondered his words for a moment. "I gave the idea a lot of thought while I was away. It wouldn’t be too late in the season would it? I mean, October begins in a couple days."

"The perfect time of year. The weather is still wonderfully warm enough for the communion of our warmest thoughts and feelings, yet chill enough to huddle together around bonfires in intimate camaraderie. We shall bring forth the rite of good fellowship at The Kingdom as originally planned."

"I know Rick has wanted to talk things over with me. It’s been a while. Maybe he just doesn’t know how to break the ice." There was a knock on the office door. "Come in."

"Just me." Tara entered, surprised to see the new guest. "Oh. Your Majesty. I didn’t realize you were here."

"Come and join us, fair maiden. We discuss bright things of delightful adventures to be." King Ezekiel made a grand motion with his arms.

Tara wasn’t certain so Maggie indicated for her to sit down.

Outside it was Paul who saw Jerry in the stables as he brushed down his and King Ezekiel’s horses. "King Ezekiel is here?"

"To talk about the fair." Jerry leaned towards him conspiratorially. "I would have brought you some cobbler. There wasn’t time."
"That`s alright. I thought the idea of the fair wasn`t meant to be."

"Apparently not. He`s in with Maggie right now."

As a habit, Paul started to go in the direction of Barrington House, then remembered he no longer was second-in-command. "I`m sure she`ll fill me in if she thinks it`s necessary. Need any help with the horses?"

"Nope. Just me and His Majesty."

"You should be careful on the road these days, Jerry, especially if King Ezekiel is with you. The Whisperers are watching."

Jerry looked at him with an expression of concern. "You`ve seen them?"

"They threatened us. Directly. Demanding we return our prisoner." Paul grasped Jerry`s arm. "Our friends are most likely their enemies, too."

"Hey, Jesus." Jerry`s voice was gentle. "Thanks. You`ve always been good to us. You don`t know how distressed everybody was at The Kingdom when you got stabbed. His Majesty doesn`t let on about it in front of the others. He was real bothered by it."

"He should be more bothered about how low his security forces are, Jerry. I don`t think The Kingdom could withstand an attack, even a small one. I dread thinking of what the consequences would be." Paul looked directly into Jerry`s eyes, feeling his warning would never be enough.

Jerry could barely meet his gaze, knowing Paul was right and would put the safety of the people of The Kingdom equal to those at Hilltop or Alexandria. "If anyone can make him understand you can."

Paul nodded and went on his way. He headed in the direction of his home until he saw Maggie, Tara, and King Ezekiel exit Barrington House. Maggie signaled for him to come over.

Paul bowed. "Your Majesty. I hope this fine weather finds you well today."

"I am in excellent health, good Jesus. Maggie and I have been in much discussion of reviving the idea for the fair. We wish to be on our way to Alexandria to discuss this with Rick and their governing council."

"We need someone to escort us there. Would you be willing to go along with Jerry?"

"I would." There was a hesitancy in his voice. "However, may I suggest that you have more than just me and Jerry. You two are the leaders of your respective communities. It would be wise for more security to prevent anything from happening to either or both of you."

"An excellent suggestion, Jesus. Do you not agree, Maggie?"

"Most definitely. We`ll leave in about twenty minutes. I`ll let you decide the security team." Maggie indicated to the keepers of the stables to prepare some horses and a wagon.

Paul went over to seek out Daryl and Aaron and told them of Maggie`s and King Ezekiel`s plans.

"Do we need to wear our armor?" Daryl was more than willing to let Paul take the lead on such matters.

"I don`t think so. We`re not exactly going into battle. I`ll only take my knives and sword."
"I'll let Gracie know I'm leaving. She can stay with Tammy Rose and Earl. They're kind of her surrogate grandparents. She loves staying overnight with them."

Paul asked two others to accompany them to take up the rear. Tara was in the stables talking to him as he prepared Echo. He wore his long leather duster with his knives strapped to his legs. Carl came running up to him.

"I hear you're going to Alexandria. Can I come along?" Carl's panting breaths meant he had ran fast and hard.

"Not this time."

"Why? It's not my first time, you know."

Paul looked at him sternly and nodded to Tara who poked him hard on his right side. "Did you feel that before she did it?"

"No."

Paul finished securing the saddle and climbed up on top of Echo. "Your job here is to help Tara keep Hilltop safe and guard Lydia. Those are very important responsibilities."

Carl scuffed his boot on the ground and looked down. "Yeah, okay."

"Good. We'll be back sometime late tomorrow, Tara."

"Stay safe." She watched as he rode off to join the others at the gate before heading back to Barrington House.

Carl merely stared at the group and kicked at the ground hard. He hated the idea of having to stay put, but the thought of keeping Lydia safe overturned his anger. In that moment he realized he was starting to really care about her.
The parties from Hilltop and The Kingdom arrive at Alexandria.

After the arrival of Maggie and King Ezekiel and their security escorts at the gate, the Governing Council of Alexandria convened in a special session to discuss the October fair. The main concern was the possibility of the Whisperers attacking.

"Shall we let these masked devils rule our lives? Even though they challenge our durability and solidarity, they shall not bully us into determining our destiny." Ezekiel gestured wildly as he spoke, much to the amusement of the others.

Paul stood up.

"The Chair recognizes Paul 'Jesus' Rovia."

"His Majesty’s passions echo our beliefs as well. As long as we are practical and diligent in keeping track of their movements from our scouting reports, I don’t see any reason not to go forward with this fair."

After some more statements and debate the Council approved as long as things remained peaceful. Afterwards Maggie found herself standing beside Rick outside the Council hall.

"Good to see you back."

"Wasn’t sure if you’d be glad to see me or not. My feelings towards Negan haven’t changed. I still want him dead."

"Maybe this ain’t the time to dis--."

"When, Rick? When will it be the time to discuss him? I intend on seeing him after tonight’s meal."

"Alone?"

"Yes. Alone." She looked at him with stubborn determination.

"You don’t plan on doing something stupid do you?" There was caution in Rick’s voice.

"I don’t know what I’l plan to do, Rick. If I do kill him will it make all that much of a difference to you?"

Rick didn’t answer. He saw Michonne waving to him and with a nod to Maggie went over to see what she wanted.

Paul came up beside Maggie. "You holding up okay?"

"So far. Told Rick I’m going to see Negan. This may be my only chance."
"Just don`t ruin our chances for the fair. I really think it`s something we need."

Maggie lightly tapped his cheek. "You worry too much, Jesus. Talk to you later."

Paul watched as she walked off. Aaron and Daryl came up beside him.

"She`s gonna see him ain`t she."

"Yeah."

"Are you going to stop her?" Aaron doubted Paul would, however, he wanted to be certain Paul wouldn`t try anything stupid either after what happened on their last visit.

"When could I ever stop Maggie from doing anything she was determined to do?" Paul sighed, hoping this trip wouldn`t end as a bust.

"Thirsty?" Daryl put his arm around Paul.

"I could use a drink." Aaron pointed in the direction of the recreation house.

They walked in that direction and when they entered it wasn`t as crowded as it was at night. They got three mugs of cold beer and sat down at a corner table.

"They have to bring some of this home brew to the fair." Paul took a generous gulp from his mug. Aaron and Daryl hoped he wouldn`t get too buzzed from drinking so fast. Paul had developed a particular liking for Alexandria`s now famous draught.

"I`m actually looking forward to it. I wasn`t sure Rick and the others would be as enthusiastic."

"We all need to be a family again." Why he momentarily felt lonely in a crowd, Daryl couldn`t understand.

Aaron could see the faraway look on Daryl`s face. "You miss those times don`t you?"

"Yeah. We were all strugglin` together to survive. Brought us close."

Rosita entered and when she saw them she immediately came over to them. "It`s always good to see you guys." She gave a hug to each of them.

"Join us." Paul indicated the empty seat at the table. "We`re buying."

"Can`t refuse that offer." Rosita signaled that she wanted a beer and it was brought over to her. "Almost like old times, someone waiting on me."

"We`re slowly getting back to a new kind of normalcy." Aaron signaled for a refill.

"Actually I`m glad you`re here. We`ve been going through the boxes that we took from sheds that weren`t destroyed in the Savior attack and found three that belonged to you and Eric. I put them in the brownstone apartment next to mine where the three of you are staying."

"I was in such a hurry to leave I forgot about them."

"One was marked `private` so I made sure nobody opened it."

"Must be all of those nudes of you and Eric that you told me about." Paul winked playfully at him.
"I was joking when I said that." Aaron winked back at Paul and grinned.

"Or drunk." Daryl gulped down some of the beer as he got a couple brief dirty looks from Aaron and Paul.

"If you`re there I`ll stop by your place before I head towards the kitchens. Eugene and I found a whole bunch of the best booze in a liquor store the Saviors missed. I`ll give you a couple crates-in case you get thirsty." Rosita gave them a sly grin.

"Hoarding booze for survival. Sounds a lot like what I used to have to do for Gregory."

Rosita gulped down the rest of her beer. "Gotta go. I`m supervising the cooking for tonight`s meal and have to compile the list of cooks."

"See you later." Paul looked around the room. "We really need to open up a bar at Hilltop. Eduardo used to tend bar before the world ended."

"Be a good place to relax and unwind. Will it be difficult to clear it with Maggie?"

"It might. Hershel was an alcoholic." In his mind Daryl recalled the encounter Rick had told him about when he, Glenn, and Hershel had a run-in at a bar with some drifters.

"Then there`s Earl and Tammy Rose." Paul remembered helping a drunken Earl back to his trailer on many occasions. "I guess they are adults and wouldn`t want to ruin anyone else`s fun."

"We can at least discuss it with her. I can imagine myself smoking some Cuban cigars as I enjoy a tequila sunrise."

They sat there in silence just enjoying their beer, feeling completely at ease with each other. Daryl reached over and brushed a strand of loose hair out of Paul`s face, gently stringing it through his fingers. His and Paul`s eyes met. Paul smiled and reached over and swept Daryl`s hair out of his eyes. Paul then turned to Aaron and smoothed out some hairs that were crooked in his beard. Aaron reached up and clasped his hand. Daryl reached over and stroked the side of Aaron`s face.

"Guys." Aaron`s voice was quiet. "I think there`s something we`ve been avoiding talking about isn`t there."

"Yeah." Paul looked over at Daryl who nodded.

After they finished their beer they headed towards the brownstone.
The Solitary Three

Chapter Summary

Paul, Daryl, and Aaron discuss their relationship.

The apartment in the brownstone was simply furnished but comfortable. It was a one bedroom, the bed being king-sized.

"Maggie’s on the ball with arranging accommodations." Paul took a glimpse into that particular chamber. He and Daryl noticed Aaron looking at the three boxes Rosita had mentioned while they were in the recreation hall. "Going to go through them tonight?"

"No, I’ll put them on the wagon with Maggie and King Ezekiel." Aaron sighed and shook his head. "So this is all they found of what was left of my life with Eric. I hope they found some photos. Gracie wants to know what Eric looked like."

"She woulda liked him and he woulda liked her."

"I’d like to think so." Aaron smiled at them.

There was a knock on the door. Paul was closest to it so he answered it.

"Here they are." Rosita and Eugene brought in the two promised crates of booze. "We tried to give you a sample of the best of each."

"These distilled intoxicants are in appreciative gratitude for emancipating us from a distressful situation."

"He also says thank you and so do I." Rosita shook her head in disbelief at Eugene.

"It’s what we do. Thanks." Daryl removed one of the bottles to look at the label before returning it.

"Come on, Eugene. We’ll let you get settled in. Goodnight."

"Goodnight." Aaron waved to them both, feeling a bit loose from all the beer he had drank at the recreation house.

Paul closed the door then went into the small kitchen and opened the fridge. "There’s beer in here." He took out three half-pint bottles. "Their home brew."

"Guess we save the good stuff for home." Aaron stared at the bottle Paul handed him. "A bit small. We’ll just have to drink twice as much."

Daryl and Paul shrugged and nodded as they settled down on the sofa, Aaron the easy chair. They sat in silence for a while as they enjoyed their beer.

Daryl was the first to break the silence. "So, where do we start?"

Paul cleared his throat. "Well--we can’t deny that the three of us have feelings of some degree for each other, right?"
"If we’re gonna sit here drinking beer we need some pretzels." Aaron got up to look for some in the kitchen. "There was a time in my life I was very much in love with the man I thought was the one. We lived a great life together and I felt very lucky that we both survived the strangest thing either of us had ever experienced. We realized the future was quite nebulous. Ah! Here’s some." He took a plastic container of homemade pretzels out of the cupboard and brought them over.

"You made it together which was more than a lot can say." Paul opened his bottle of beer.

"I had been in precarious situations in my life, sometimes wondering if I would ever get home again. I did come home and Eric was always there waiting for me. We had our ups and downs, always believing that together we could make it through. Here in Alexandria it was still a precarious life for both of us." Aaron paused and wiped at his eyes. "When Eric died I thought my life would be nothing from that point on. I did a lot of crazy shit in my grief. I had one saving grace. I find it quite ironic that her name is Gracie."

"I remember in our training sessions about you telling me some of the things she had done. The ones that made you proud, the ones you wanted to toss her over the fence for. I could always see the love you have for her."

"Being a parent has been the biggest challenge of my life, next to losing my arm."

"Scared me a lot when I saw your arm. I knew ya were strong and that ya would make it."

"That time brought me pretty low. I remember asking you to teach me how to fight before the accident, Paul. I didn’t think you would follow through. You did and my confidence returned." He and Paul exchanged looks of affection. "I also realized I had feelings for you." Aaron finished his beer and got up to get another one. "And it didn’t quite end there did it."

"No." Paul hugged himself. "Those were great times, considering we always had to be on the lookout for walkers while fucking."

All three of them laughed.

Aaron returned with his beer and sat down. "Eric will always be my first and truest love. I’ll need some time for a deeper relationship. I do want intimate male companionship." He looked at Daryl. "It would be the same for us, Daryl. Maybe someday when you’re more comfortable in your own skin."

Daryl was quiet as he took a few sips of his beer and munched on a couple pretzels. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead. This isn’t our place." Paul was now snickering, feeling the buzz already hitting him. "What we really need is some pot."

"Won’t argue with ya there." Daryl finished his beer and it was his turn to get one from the fridge. After sitting down he took a couple drinks and inhaled from the cigarette. "I enjoyed bein’ with ya and Eric. Sad when he died. Woulda told ya if I wasn’t in my own funk at the time."

"I knew you were sad. That you would come around in your own time."

"When we were out there lookin’ for people and fightin’ them walkers in them trucks I knew ya were family to me. I woulda thought seriously about what we talked about if the Saviors hadn’t showed up." Daryl looked at Paul. "I love ya, Paul, even though you’re a little shit." He looked at Aaron. "Bout time I got some more shit together and ya two were a lotta help. Whatever happens with us, happens."
"And something will happen. Maybe tonight. Maybe--." Paul was silenced by a kiss from Daryl.

"You found a way to shut him up."

"Only temporarily."

"Guys." Paul could punch both of them right now.

"Go for it." Aaron and Daryl laughed.

Paul emptied his beer and got another one. He was feeling slightly tipsy so when he sat down he almost fell into the cushions. He looked at Aaron. "We may not be boyfriends in the truest sense. I do enjoy our intimate company. I got closer to you than I had anybody else, including Maggie. We work well together."

"I think so."

Paul looked at Daryl. "I know I flirted awful hard with you in those early days. I couldn`t understand it myself at times because I`m not that much of a flirt with people I had just met. And don`t deny it, you kept staring at me."

"Won`t deny nothin`, Paul. Still stare at ya. Other things, too."

Paul reached over and took a strand of Daryl`s hair and stroked it. "It`s strange, I like the fact that I have two boyfriends at the same time. I used to close so many people off, so many boyfriends--." His voice trailed off. "I`m more than comfortable with you two. It took me years to feel that way with just one person. If I could only wrap myself in this cocoon with just the two of you I would be perfectly happy." His lip trembled, the alcohol affecting him even more. "People think I don`t get scared. I do, a lot more than I like to admit. Not of walkers, not Saviors or Whisperers. It`s the nightmares. I keep most of them to myself." He let out a couple sobs.

Aaron got up and sat down on the other side of him. "I`ve heard your screams in the night, seen you tossing and turning as if you`re fighting a hurricane. The sweating and the shaking. I never know what to do."

"All I can do is hold ya, Paul." Daryl scooted closer to him. "And not let go."

"Then hold me. Both of you. And don`t let go."

The three of them hugged each other close together. Outside a bolt of lightning split the sky open, followed by a loud clap of thunder. A storm was coming. Paul clung hard to each of them, feeling safer than he ever had before.

Aaron snapped his fingers. "I got an idea. Let`s get really drunk and see what happens from there."

"Long as we don`t run outta pretzels." Daryl let out a loud belch.

"Or beer." Paul extracted himself from their embrace to get another beer from the fridge.
Maggie looked up trying to see how far away the storm was before it turned into a downpour. She stood just outside the gate that led to where Negan was in his cell as the words 'eenie meenie miney moe' echoed through her head, a reverberation and montage of sounds and images she wished she could remove from the threads of her troubled history; Glenn with his head smashed in so hard his eye had popped out.

'I will find you, Maggie.'

She clutched her arms around herself as the tears flowed as hard as they had done on the night that Lucille reigned supreme and Rick and the others knelt awaiting their fate with fear.

' Eenie meenie miney moe. '

"Shut up!" She couldn`t help screaming into the loud thunderclap.

"Someone there?" Inside the cell Negan got up and grasped his hands on the bars. He grinned in that annoying knowing way of his. "Someone is there." He heard the outer gate unlock and could only see a silhouette in the dim light. Lightning briefly illuminated his visitor. "Well, well, it`s the black widow who graces me with her presence. Heard you were in town."

Maggie didn`t say anything as she reached into her holster and held up a gun pointed directly at him as she slowly walked towards him. The heavily bewhiskered Negan backed up from the bars his arms slightly raised.

"Ole Rick the prick ain`t gonna like what you`re about to do."

"Maybe I don`t care."

Negan smirked at her. "Everything you`ve heard about me lately is greatly exaggerated. Want me to get down on my knees and plead for you not to kill me?"

"Do what you like. I can still shoot you in the head." Maggie moved closer to him.

Negan quit smiling. "Then again, maybe I would consider it a blessing."

Maggie contorted her face in confusion. "I don`t know what you mean."

"Don`t you?" Negan sagged to the ground. "Day after day I`m all alone in this cell." He looked up at her. "Do you know where my Lucille is?"

"I hope she`s been destroyed." She took another step closer.

"Killing me would make a martyr out of me."

"For whom? You never stop kidding yourself do you, Negan." With her free hand Maggie
unlocked the door of the cell and opened it. "What I want is justice. For Glenn. For Abraham. For all the other innocents you killed. If this is how I get it then so be it."

Negan dropped his tough persona and sat against the wall. He seemed to be unfazed by the fact that a gun was being pointed in his face. "Do you know what I used to do before all the shit hit the fucking fan?"

"If you think it`s gonna make any difference now, forget it."

"While you were running around your old man`s farm I was a gym teacher by profession, had to work weekends and summers as a used car salesman." He chuckled. "Talk about dealing with all the suckers in this world." Negan flashed his snarky smile at her.

Maggie rushed over to him and put the gun right next to his head. "Maybe I`m doing this for all the suckers, too." She roughly grabbed his collar and with a strength no one would expect her to have she threw him across the cell. Then she kicked him in the stomach. "Anything I do to you will never be enough." She shot the gun once in the air then put it next to his head again.

"Shouldn`t waste a bullet like that." She grabbed him again and threw him, knocking over the bedpan he had been using to relieve himself. "Now look what you made me do. Smell like a fucking sewer."

There was the sound of rapid footsteps from outside the gate. Moments later Rick, Michonne, and Father Gabriel appeared.

Rick took one look at what was going down. "Maggie, you don`t want to do this."

Maggie looked at Rick then at Michonne. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. "You were there, Rick. You too, Michonne. You remember it all. He almost made you cut off Carl`s arm."

"Yeah, all that did happen. Killing him won`t bring back Glenn and Abraham. Now come on out of there and give me the gun."

"Let her kill me, Rick. End my pathetic misery." Negan`s voice was in mock melodramatic mode.

"You could always shoot him for bad dialogue." Michonne emitted an ironic laugh. "At least we wouldn`t have to listen to his speeches anymore."

Father Gabriel stepped forward. "This is not justice or retribution, Maggie. This is an execution. You already have Gregory`s blood on your hands."

"So that`s what happened to that groveling piece of shit." Negan looked up at Maggie and winked. "Gotta give you some points for that one, sweetheart."

Rick stepped forward. "Maggie, you know this ain`t right."

"What`s right is this man being dead." Her finger squeezed the trigger slightly.

"Your father, I understand, was a religious man." Father Gabriel stepped towards her. "Would he approve of this? Wouldn`t he tell you `Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy`?"

Maggie gritted her teeth. "He doesn`t deserve mercy."

"Everyone deserves mercy. One of my favorite poets is Robert Frost. He once said `Nothing can make injustice just but mercy`. You want justice, Maggie, you must have mercy. Don`t we give
mercy every day to the dead we don’t know when we are outside the fence? I know you know how
to give mercy because you once gave it to me. Please, give Rick the gun."

Maggie’s hand shook. Negan had closed his eyes and bowed his head as if expecting the inevitable.
She held the gun to his head for what seemed like an eternity, the silence deafening against the
thunder from above. All at once she lifted up the gun and gave Negan the hardest kick she had ever
given in her life, one that Paul had taught her years ago. "You deserve to rot in this cell. Maybe
your conscience does really bother you." She hurried out of the cell. After locking the door she
handed the gun to Rick.

"I understand how you feel."

"Do you? Have you forgotten that it was Glenn who saved your life?" Maggie glared at him.

"I’ve never forgotten. Every day I want to come in here and hold my gun to his head just like you.
You know why I don’t?" She shook her head from side to side. "I want him to see that we can
rebuild society without him. He can sit there and watch everyone else walking around, free, being
useful. He knows he’s gonna rot here forever."

They could start to hear the rain beginning to pour.

"Let’s go." Michonne put her arm around Maggie and they left.

Rick looked back at Negan before he closed the gate. "You were lucky tonight, Negan. I almost let
her do it. I’ll send someone to clean up." He slammed the gate shut and locked it.

Negan got up and went over to the bars and gripped them tight. He banged his head on them over
and over as a torrent of rain splashed into his window.

"Lucille, Lucille..."
Boys And Their Toy

Chapter Summary

WARNING: Smut ahead. Well, it is the chapter some of you have been waiting for, right? Lmaaaaao.

"Aha!" Aaron opened a deep drawer in the kitchen. "I knew there had to be more pretzels somewhere." He removed the plastic container and brought it out into the living room. Several empty beer bottles were strewn about the coffee table, end tables, sofa, and floor. He stumbled slightly and some pretzels went tumbling down all over Paul and Daryl who had been engaged in a making out session. All three burst into drunken snickers. They ignored the storm that was going on outside.

Daryl leaned back and stretched out his arm to pick up his cigarette. He rested his head on the back of the sofa cushion, took a puff, and let out a long stream of smoke. All three were quite inebriated as they sat on the floor. Paul tried to get up but fell down right into Daryl’s lap and burst into a spate of laughter.

"Dammit, Paul, you’re as drunk as a skunk."

"And you smell like one. Damn, I wish I was high. We should grow weed at Hilltop." Paul reached under Daryl’s shirt and stroked his chest, admiring the hard muscles. His hand then found Daryl’s smooth stomach and rubbed it. "Like that?"

"Um hmm." Daryl sighed, loving Paul’s gentle caresses.

Aaron came over and stroked Paul’s ass his hand massaging the crack through his pants. Paul tensed up and moaned in pleasure. Paul’s hand rubbed the front of Daryl’s pants. "Touchy touchy." He pulled up Daryl’s shirt and kissed and sucked on the soft part of his stomach.

Daryl’s hand reached inside Paul’s pants and rubbed his hardening cock. "Aaron, what should we do with our boy toy?"

"Why, play with him, of course." Aaron kissed the back of Paul’s neck and reached underneath the front of his shirt to squeeze Paul’s nipple.

Paul’s eyes lit up. "Oh, play with him, please! He needs a little playtime."

"Did ya hear that?" Daryl took off his shoes.

Aaron sat back down and took off his as well. "Yes." He noticed Paul reaching for his shoes. "No. Let us do that for you."

Paul reclined his back against the sofa as Aaron took off one shoe and Daryl the other. They tossed the shoes behind them.

"He’s still got his shirt on."

"He does? I’ll have to remedy that." Aaron reached over and slowly unbuttoned Paul’s shirt
between lustful open-mouthed kisses. As soon as he exposed Paul’s muscular chest he leaned down and sucked on one of Paul’s nipples. Aaron could feel the arousal in his own loins.

"Oh shit." Paul emitted a pleasant whimper. He watched as Daryl fumbled with the fly of his pants.

"Lift up your ass, boy toy." Paul did so slightly and Daryl pulled down his pants to his knees. He could see Paul’s cock straining against his briefs.

"Now, you’re going to help me out." Aaron gestured towards Paul. "Reach over here, boy toy, and undo my fly."

Paul eagerly obliged. Once he finished he reached over and stroked Aaron’s oncoming erection.

"How about me, boy toy?"

Paul giggled and undid Daryl’s fly. "Want me to help you out too?"

Daryl took Paul’s hand and slipped it underneath his boxers guiding it to his already hard cock. Paul stroked it his thumb rubbing the tip and feeling some pre-cum. Paul then jumped slightly when Aaron pulled his briefs down just enough to start blowing him, licking his tip and then moving his tongue up and down his shaft.

Aaron looked at Daryl. "Help me out."

Daryl moved down and he and Aaron worked Paul’s cock, both using their tongues to tease the tip, every so often their mouths meeting in a kiss. Paul could only squirm with ecstasy. Never had he ever had two men working his cock at the same time. His hands gripped the edge of the cushions tightly as his body jerked up and down, relishing each and every flick of Aaron’s and Daryl’s tongues and the caresses of their lips.

"I’m going to erupt hard and fast." Paul felt his juices oozing out, building up inside ready to explode at any moment in one of the best orgasms he had ever experienced in his life. He shot out his load, his cock a volcano and Daryl and Aaron both licked it up. Daryl kissed Aaron then kissed Paul, the taste of Paul’s cum still in his mouth. Aaron kissed up Paul’s chest until their lips met, their tongues probing. Aaron’s hand gripped Daryl’s cock, stroking it up and down as he slowly masturbated it before going down on it and taking it in his mouth.

"Like that, toy boy?" Daryl let out a series of ‘uh’s as Aaron gave him one of the best blow jobs he had ever had.

"Loved it." Paul was now slightly starting to come down from his sexual high. Daryl came with a long groan and Aaron swallowed all of it. Then with a shout Aaron’s cum splashed out across Paul’s chest. All three collapsed on top of each other with Paul on the bottom of the pile, all three panting hard.

"How the hell did that come about?" Aaron looked up grinning at the other two.

"We’re drunk." Paul couldn’t stop snickering. "Maybe we should go in the bedroom and take it further."

Daryl crawled off of Paul and lit up another cigarette. "Forget drunk. In future we get some weed. Sex is better when you’re high."

"I can guarantee that. Ms. Maitlin told me that Kal is growing a batch of it outside the back fence."
"Let me do the dealin`. It’ll feel like old times." He and Aaron exchanged a kiss when Aaron climbed off of Paul. Aaron then kissed Paul.

"Aren`t we a bunch of sluts." Paul was sandwiched between them and put an arm around each of them.

"Shit man, we can be as slutty as we want when we`re together."

"We`ll need to keep our ears and eyes open. You know how gossipy some people are at Hilltop. Some of them still hold on to the old bigoted and homophobic beliefs from before."

"Some things never change. People here in Alexandria can go as far as to say 'bury your gays if they aren`t walking around outside the fence'. It hurts just the same."

"I always had to hide who I was. Merle knew, he didn`’t talk about it much. He told me I gotta be myself. Can`t hide no more. Don`’t want to."

"I know it took a long time for you to come out of the closet, Daryl, and that you repressed your feelings for a long time. In some ways you still are there." Aaron reached over and stroked Daryl`s cheek.

"I know." Daryl grabbed his beer and gulped some down. "Not with ya guys. There`’s the Daryl out there, and the Daryl in here."

"My other personality is Jesus. Think of the kind of pressure that amounts to."

Aaron and Daryl laughed slightly.

"I enjoyed what just happened. Just for a moment I didn`t have to be reminded of Eric." The other two nodded.

"I never had an orgasm that hard in my life. Only the two of you could do that." Paul reached over and lightly stroked Aaron`s beard.

Aaron looked directly at Paul. "I`d like to think that we have something special, Paul." He looked at Daryl. "And I`ve always had a crush on you. Eric guessed it."

"Maybe it don`t matter in the end. Ain`t nothin` gonna change who we are."

"I can feel something coming on again." Aaron took a deep breath as if trying to get his wits about him. "We`re already half-way undressed. Let`s hit the bedroom and see what happens."

Paul got up. "Let`s get those volcanoes erupting then." He stepped out of the rest of his clothes. Aaron and Daryl followed suit.

About an hour later the three of them were huddled together naked in the bed, their limbs entwined with each other, the alcohol and more serious sex making them satisfied and sleepy. It gave them unity and strength. Paul was in the middle, the place he liked best. Daryl and Aaron seemed like they were a fortress around him. If someone wanted to ever get to Paul, they would have to get past them first. Not only was it like this as they slept, it would be the same with everything else in the coming days.
Chapter Summary

It’s the morning after, haha. The parties from Hilltop and The Kingdom head for home.

Paul was the first to open his eyes when daylight shone behind the pulled shades of the bedroom. He groaned at the hangover he wished he wasn’t feeling. He did smile slightly when he remembered the activities of the previous night. Paul Rovia was loved and in love. Slowly sitting up he untangled himself from Aaron first, then Daryl. Three bathrobes were hanging on a rack and he took one before heading out into the kitchen. There was a coffeemaker and some mugs as well as some coffee, his standard cure for a hangover. It had been brewing for about five minutes when his two bed companions came into the kitchen. They wore the other two bathrobes. Aaron looked more hungover than Daryl.

"I really wish I hadn’t drunk all that beer. I should know better."

"I wouldn’t change a thing about what happened last night." Paul smiled through his headache at him.

Daryl seemed to be the least hung over. "We’ll get some food in us. We’ll be alright."

"Coffee first. Shower and get dressed. Then breakfast." Paul leaned over and kissed Daryl, then Aaron.

Breakfast was served as an outside buffet and they did feel better after they ate just as Daryl said they would. Some people stared at them as they sat together at one table giving little signs of affection towards each other.

"What I said last night. They know about me and probably you, Paul. They’re still uncertain about you, Daryl."

"Let ‘em stare. After last night I ain’t turnin’ back. I just wanna go home."

Aaron and Paul nodded in agreement. More than anything they were eager to start the new phase of their lives back at Hilltop.

After breakfast Rick watched as Maggie and King Ezekiel and their security contingent loaded up Aaron’s boxes and a couple crates he had no idea of what was in them. Rosita had told him they were a gift from her and Eugene.

King Ezekiel stood beside Maggie. "I expected to encounter some resistance to our merry and mirthful fair. I am pleased that I was wrong."

"I think it’s safe to say Alexandria is ready to commit itself to breaking out of its isolation."

Rick came up to Daryl and looked at him for a long moment. "Something’s changed about you."

Daryl shrugged. "Ain’t nobody else but me." He lit up a cigarette.
"It`s not that. It`s your demeanor. You seem--calmer."

Daryl hissed a laugh. "Always been Zen." He slapped Rick on the back. "See ya in a couple weeks."

Rick watched him get up on the horse and join Paul and Aaron who were already on theirs. They all bid farewell when Alexandria`s gate opened and they headed down the road. An hour later they reached the intersection where they split off to go to their respective communities.

"We shall not squander a hale and hearty happening. Fare thee well, gracious and hospitable Maggie. We shall rendezvous again in the land of my people in a fortnight."

"Goodbye. Keep an eye out for the Whisperers."

"So we shall." Ezekiel and Jerry rode away as they all waved to each other.

Maggie looked back at her escorts. The two extra security that had been assigned seemed bored, the other three were still nursing their hangovers. "Party too much last night? Must have been some kind of booze."

"Alexandria`s home brew. Which I remember all too well."

"We`re all fine. Can we please just get home?" Paul rubbed his head.

Maggie tugged on the reins and the wagon started forward. She could hear the sound of bottles clinking together in the two crates. Michonne had told her about the massive liquor store raid Rosita and Eugene had embarked upon ten or so days earlier. She was told someone from Alexandria would bring them some of their hoard in a couple days.

"Your own private stock?"

"Our reward from Rosita and Eugene." Aaron gave her a knowing grin.

"Maybe I should confiscate it." She smirked at them, especially when she saw them exchange astonished looks. "Oh, don`t worry. Rick promised to send me more." They sighed in relief. She laughed to herself enjoying teasing them.

The trip back to Hilltop was smooth with no incidents or interruptions, yet no one seemed to take comfort in that thought considering the threats of only a few days ago. Gracie ran to greet Aaron and he walked her to their new home as Daryl and Paul took the horses to the stables.

"I hope Aaron puts on some more coffee."

Daryl snickered. "Ya feel bad now, wait `til I get the still put up and fix us some decent moonshine."

"All the stuff that was illegal before is now a free-for-all. People will start calling our new home the hillbilly shack or something." Paul laughed at always trying to get Daryl`s goat.

"It`s ours, Paul. Our place to call home." Daryl reached over and stroked Paul`s hair, which he had taken out of the bun, then he stroked his beard, which was soft. Paul closed his eyes simply enjoying the petting. They heard footsteps and Daryl lowered his hand.

Alan entered the stables and smiled at them. "I noticed everyone was back from Alexandria. How did it go? Is the fair still on?"
"It is." Paul scrutinized him carefully, watching for any sign of what Alan would be up to next. "Everyone is invited to attend. Will we see you there?"

"Don`t know yet." Alan grabbed some rope and tied it around one of the other horses. "Fairs were never my thing."

"Just a big get-together." Daryl sniffed. "Ain`t no Ferris wheel or Tilt-A-Whirl."

Paul laughed so hard he nearly knocked over a bucket of oats hanging from a peg, spilling some all over his clothes.

"Not everybody can go. Someone still needs to stay behind to guard the place. Then there`s the prisoner."

"Ain`t none of your business." Daryl`s contempt in his voice for the man could not be mistaken. The man was a liar and was hiding something, of that he had no doubt.

Alan shrugged. "Whatever." He led the horse out of its stall in order to give it the daily exercise that was required.

Paul tried to wipe away the oats that were somehow sticking to his clothing. "You still think he`s a spy don`t you. He doesn`t act like a Whisperer."

"Don`t need to. Said it yourself how tricky they can be."

"True. Eduardo was in charge of watching him while we were gone. I`ll talk to him this evening."

Daryl leaned over and he and Paul kissed. "Rick said I`ve changed."

"Did he say how?"

"Nah. Guess I shoulda told him I was in love."

Paul grinned. "You will, when you get a little more used to it. I have to get used to the fact that I have a family and a home now."

"Ya think we`re a family?"

Paul nodded. "After what happened last night, yes. We have a kid and a dog to boot. Speaking of the four-legged devil."

An excited and barking Dog ran up to Daryl who greeted him with enthusiastic hugs. Daryl looked up at Paul and smiled. He nodded. "Yeah. We are." He finished taking care of his horse then went off with Dog.

Paul sighed in contentment and watched them until Echo nudged him almost knocking him down, impatient for the bucket of oats. "You might as well lick them off of me since that`s where most of them are." He dumped the bucket into the trough.

Echo just snorted and whinnied, wiggling his ears as if laughing at Paul.
Are You Going To The Kingdom`s Fair?

Chapter Summary

At Hilltop, last minute preparations are made for The Kingdom`s fair.

The next two weeks were busy with preparations for the fair, the people of Hilltop happy and enthusiastic as they put together crafts, food, games, and other diversions to be presented at the festival. There were enough volunteers to remain behind to watch over things. Walkie-talkies would keep people in touch in case there was trouble.

"Our scouts have reported that they seemed to have moved on." Paul was in the office giving his report to Maggie and Tara during their daily meeting. "I asked Lydia about it and she said they are most likely moving on to some of their winter camps."

"Does that mean we can let our guard down?" Tara hoped things could be relaxed for a while.

"We never let our guard down. Ever."

"Of course." Maggie then smiled. "Do you four have anything special planned for the fair?"

"I do. I`m afraid I can`t elaborate on it. Daryl said he might enter the archery tournament. Crossbows are allowed, as well as bows and arrows. Gracie seems excited by it all."

"It all sounds like so much fun. Booths, games, primitive rides, a petting zoo, tournaments, demonstrations, live music, sketches, food, crafts, art work, and two banquets. Dianne described it as a western Ren-fest sort of thing. I wish I could go. Someone has to hold down the fort." Tara twisted her mouth, wishing it wasn`t her doing that particular job.

"I promise we`ll bring you back some booty. Most importantly this should bring the three communities together."

Paul`s expression was now serious. "There`s still the problem of what to do with Alan. He`s very insistent about staying here. He doesn`t give very convincing reasons why."

"My gut tells me not to let him stay here when our defenses are down. He knows his way around, especially the emergency exits. On the other hand, I`m not comfortable taking him with us. There will be too many distractions as it is."

There was a frantic knock on her office door. Paul went over to answer it. It was Eduardo and he was panting heavily. "What`s wrong?"

"You told me to keep an eye on Alan, right? He ran into the woods and disappeared."

Maggie got up and stood beside Paul. "We were just talking about him. He didn`t say anything?"

"Said something about going hunting. When Kal asked him where his hunting gear was he just ran."

Everyone was silent for a long time. "I can`t cancel the fact that we`re attending the fair, it`s too
late for that. Tara, you’ll just have to be on extra alert for him and if he does show up again, lock him in a cell."

There was some more discussion and soon the meeting was over. All involved were anxious to get some last minute preparations in since the next day they would be making the journey for the four-day festival. Paul went directly home where he found Aaron and Gracie going through one of the boxes he had brought back from Alexandria.

"This is Eric and I fishing in a nearby river just outside of Alexandria."

"Did you catch any fish?" Gracie held the picture, fascinated.

"I don’t remember. We often threw them back." He looked up. "Hey, Paul, how did the meeting go?"

"We may have a problem. Alan has ran off to parts unknown."

"You mean he just took off?"

Paul nodded. "They tried searching for him in the woods. He’s gone. We were discussing what to do with him when Eduardo made his report. Nothing much we can do just keep a lookout for him."

Gracie got up and brought over the photo of Eric and Aaron. She handed it to Paul. "Did you know Eric, Uncle Paul?"

"A little. I wish I had gotten the chance to know him better."

"Eric thought you were a little on the nutty side."

"He was probably right." Paul handed the picture back to Gracie.

Gracie handed the photo back to Aaron. He put it back in the box and closed it up. "I don’t know why I feel the need to go through this stuff. It’s the past. Just memories."

"You will always love Eric, Aaron, no matter how far you’ll try to put it behind you. You may not realize it, everything you do is in honor of him."

"I’ve always wanted to live up to the standards he set out for his life, for both of us. I think that’s why I took in Gracie." Aaron reached over and stroked his daughter’s cheek. "We never talked about being parents. I’d like to think he would have welcomed her into our lives."

Gracie gave him a hug and yawned. "I’m tired, Daddy."

"You should be. It’s time for your nap." Aaron got up and then picked her up. Gracie rested her head on his shoulder as he went upstairs to take her to her room.

Paul watched them for a bit when there was a knock on the door. Answering it he found Bertie standing there holding a guitar. "Come in."

"I was able to find guitar strings and put all new ones on and tuned it up for you." She stepped inside.

"I must have been looking in the wrong place for the strings." Paul took it from her and inspected it.

"It’s been a long time since we heard you sing, Jesus. There are people here who don’t even know
"It’s been so long I’m a bit out of practice. That is what I’m going to do tonight and drive my home companions crazy, especially the redneck."

Bertie laughed. "I know I’ll be looking forward to whatever you’re performing for the fair’s music show. Is it a big secret?"

Paul wrinkled his nose. "Sort of. I’m going to do three songs. One is a duet with Jerry." Bertie seemed impressed. "Thanks for bringing it by and getting it ready." Paul leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"Oh my, I got a kiss from cutie pie Jesus." Bertie held her hand to her cheek where he had kissed it.

"I better get back to the kitchen. Ms. Maitlin is in a fuss to get all of those baked goods ready."

After Bertie left Paul took the guitar over to the sofa and sat down. He knew he could rehearse quietly enough so as not to disturb Gracie. He played a few opening chords and hummed to himself. Aaron came down the stairs and he looked up.

"So you are going through with it."

Paul sighed. "Yeah. There was a time before all of the shit happened that I thought I might have a singing career. We set aside so many dreams when the world around us changes so much that it’s unrecognizable. I sometimes wonder if it would have been best if I had died a long time ago."

Aaron sat down next to him and put his arm around him. "You still haven’t processed all that happened in the graveyard have you."

"No. I don’t think I ever will." Paul buried his head in Aaron’s chest and just let the bigger man rock him.
New Knights For The King

Chapter Summary

People from Hilltop and Alexandria are on the road to The Kingdom for the fair.
(Brief references to child abuse and homophobic remarks.)

It took five wagons to carry everything that was to be set up for the fair. Gracie, Hershel, and Dog were perhaps the happiest passengers surrounded by packs and boxes since they sat together in the back of the luggage wagon. Dog kept licking them and all they could do was giggle. Daryl, Paul, and Aaron were dressed in their full armor and weaponry as requested by King Ezekiel. At least they wouldn’t have to wear it all the time, just to make a great first impression. Bertie had carefully wrapped Paul’s guitar in a blanket and was the keeper of it for the journey; Paul not trusting anyone else to take care of it. The three of them rode together at the rear of the group in order to better keep an eye on things. At least it gave them the privacy to talk.

"Applesauce." Aaron wrinkled his nose. "My mother would try to make me eat it all the time. That wasn’t the worst of it though. My father would drag me to a psychologist for Conversion Therapy."

"As if that kind of thing ever worked." Paul snorted. "I was always bullied by the other kids, not only for being short. I knew I was gay at an early age. One of my foster fathers would try to ‘beat the faggot’ out of me with a thick dowel rod. The state found out and had him charged. I was shoved off to another foster home and the shit cycle would begin all over again."

"The fuckin’ bigotry was always around, somethin’ that never ends. Someone called me ‘fairy redneck’ the other day. Think I prefer Darylina."

"That same someone said something to me about not having the right to raise a child."

"I think I know who you guys are talking about. JoBeth in trailer #2, Hilltop’s resident religious whack-job. She’s always telling me I’m going to Hell and Satan will punish me with AIDS."

"She should think about who’s protectin’ her from all them bad people and walkers."

"That would be asking her to be reasonable." Aaron laughed slightly.

"She works in the bean fields during crop season. Those are outside the fence and unprotected. I’d hate to have a walker make her see reason."

The other two chuckled.

Carl rode up beside them. "Do you guys think I should enter the shooting contest?"

"I don’t see why not. Your aim is getting better." Paul was pleased overall with the progress Carl had been making.

"I’m worried about people making fun of me not hitting the target and all that shit."

"Just do it and prove ‘em wrong."
"Okay. Maybe that will stop the pirate remarks I get in the bunkhouse trailer."

"Arr, matey, come to one of our grog fests. If me crew of stooges approve." Aaron glanced mischievously at the other two.

"Arr, Moe approves." Paul easily picked up on Aaron’s meaning.

"I ain’t Curly, so Larry approves." Daryl snickered, loving every moment of being in on the joking around.

"Certainly, whoop-whoop, nyuk-nyuk." Known for his silly impressions, this was one of Aaron’s best.

From her seat in the luggage wagon Bertie turned around and gave them a 'what-the-fuck' look.

Paul looked with dead seriousness at his companions. "Or he could be Shemp the fourth stooge."

"Would you guys cut it out? God, you’re nuts." Carl then rode off.

Daryl shouted so Carl would hear him. "You’re the one who wants to hang out with us." He knew Carl would be back in with them as soon as they reached The Kingdom.

"What kind of impression are we to make in The Kingdom again?" Paul rhetorical question caused all within hearing range to laugh.

"I’m just glad we don’t have to wear this shit all the time." Daryl squirmed indicating how uncomfortable he was in the armor.

"All we need now is a round table." Aaron rolled his eyes.

There was a shout from the wagon at the front and they could see the contingent from Alexandria waiting for them at the intersection.

"'We went to the animal fair, the birds and the beasts were there.'" Those who had never heard Paul sing were quite impressed.

The jovial mood continued as the wagons were rearranged so the leaders of their respective communities would be at the front. Eugene and Rosita had been relegated to the wagon carrying the luggage of Alexandria and placed themselves in front of Bertie.

"We are the foremost important carriage of mirth and supplementary delights." Eugene slapped his hand against one of the crates. "We got King Ezekiel’s and Queen Carol’s booze." Even Rosita laughed at what he had said.

"But did you bring any weed?" Paul hoped Eugene hadn’t forgotten his secret request before they had left Alexandria two weeks earlier.

Eugene held up a small box that he had reached under the seat for. "Most definitely and unquestionably."

A couple hours later they arrived at The Kingdom’s gates.

Both gates were open and King Ezekiel, Carol, Jerry, and Nabila and their children stood and waited. Maggie’s wagon then Rick’s were the first through.

"Greetings and felicitations to our most honored travelers! A great and gracious welcome to our
most humble guests, who have graced us with their magnificent presence!

"Shit. He probably farts fancy." Daryl had mumbled so only Aaron and Paul could hear him.

"Now-now." Paul smirked at him. "Try and be your most knightly best."

"At least we`ll be the last ones through the gate." Aaron wanted to shed his armor as much as the others.

"I ain`t doin` that bowin` and scrapin` shit."

Aaron and Paul exchanged a look and shook their heads.

As each wagon and rider came through the gate, King Ezekiel and Carol greeted each and every one of them. After Rosita and Eugene`s wagon and then Bertie`s passed through it was only Daryl, Paul, and Aaron who remained. King Ezekiel raised his hand to halt their progress.

"Here it comes." Aaron rolled his eyes.

"Shut up and smile." Paul said it out of the side of his mouth.

"Once again The Kingdom is blessed with knights in armor!" King Ezekiel had shouted out to everyone, then he turned to face them. "Gentlemen." He bowed. "Your presence here shall strike fear to all who oppose us." He turned to address everyone. "Rejoice upon the thresholds of your homes, dear ones. The time has come for merriment and feats of daring, music, and edible delights!" He indicated for the gates to be closed and for everyone to begin setting up booths for the next day.

Daryl, Paul, and Aaron breathed a collective sigh of relief. All they wanted to do was be guided to their assigned room so they could take off the armor.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Paul reveals some things about his past. Daryl reveals to Carol what is going on in his life.

As soon as Paul removed his armor he plopped down on the bed and just relaxed. Daryl and Aaron had also removed their armor, grateful for the fact that all three could share the same room. Aaron left to check on Gracie. Paul patted the place beside him on the queen-sized bed and Daryl immediately joined him. They kissed and made-out for a few minutes before settling down.

"I don`t get how he talks fancy all the time."

Paul laughed, knowing Daryl was talking about Ezekiel. "It`s his way in public. He talks quite normally in private."

"Ya close to him?"

"Ezekiel and I have always been friends." Paul hesitated for a moment. "Sometimes friends with benefits."

Daryl raised an eyebrow. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Yes. Ezekiel is AC/DC. He told me Carol knows and she doesn`t seem to mind."

Paul tried to undo his bun. The tie became somewhat knotted. Daryl helped him to remove it and gently stroked his hair, always amazed at how soft and silky it felt in his rough hands. One thing he did understand is why everyone liked Paul for a lot of things. "Well, I hope he ain`t fancy in bed."

Paul chuckled. "Not fancy. He is quite good. We were both feeling pretty lonely. It had been a long time since I had been next to another man. He hadn`t been with a man or a woman and things just started to happen. It`s been over for quite some time, especially now that Carol is in his life. I`m very happy for the both of them."

"Ya got me and Aaron now." Daryl leaned over and gave him a lusty open-mouthed kiss which led to more kissing and making-out some more.

Aaron quietly came back into the room and noticed them. He didn`t feel like joining them so he quickly ducked back out. He walked down the hallway passing by Maggie on her way out.

"You guys getting settled in?"

"Yeah. Paul and Daryl need to be alone for a while. Has anyone checked on the horses?"

"Don`t know. I have a short meeting with Rick and King Ezekiel. Since Tara isn`t here I was wondering if you could take over some of the details for the time being."

"Be happy to." Maggie thanked him with a wave and went on her way.
Inside the bedroom Daryl and Paul rolled around on the bed, their clothing partially off as their hands explored each other while kissing and necking.

"We need to be with each other tonight. After the welcome banquet." They both straightened out their clothes.

Daryl intertwined his fingers with Paul’s. "What about Aaron?"

"He told me while unsaddling the horses that he wanted to get up a poker game in the stables tonight. That the honor of Hilltop is at stake, whatever that means." Paul grinned and snickered.

Daryl buried his head in Paul’s chest as Paul wrapped his arms around him. "For a long time I thought I could never be loved by someone like ya, Paul. So beautiful a man."

Paul closed his eyes and kissed the top of Daryl’s head. "I do love you, Daryl. Never think of yourself as ugly. Is it the scars?"

Daryl nodded. "On my mind and on my body." He looked up at Paul. "When ya stayed behind and helped me get outta the Sanctuary, I was close to the breakin’ point."

"I knew how close you were, Daryl, after how you killed Fat Joey. I was taken aback at first, eventually I did understand." Paul stroked Daryl’s chest and shoulders enjoying the feel of the hard well-toned muscles that were always so gentle when they shared intimate moments.

Daryl looked deeply into Paul’s eyes. "I thought ya hated me."

"No. Never. And I have big scars, too. Not just the most recent one on my back, either."

"Did someone hurt ya as a kid?"

Paul nodded and bent down and rolled up his right pant leg. There was a faded scar of a long gash on the side of his calf. "It happened in one of the foster homes. There were three kids that were foster kids and two that were biological. One of the daughters got to playing with a loaded gun. The bullet skimmed right along my leg."

Daryl traced it with his finger. Paul giggled. "What?"

"That tickles." He rolled his pant leg back down. There was a knock at the door. Daryl answered it and a smiling Carol stood in the hallway. He was somewhat surprised to see her.

"Are you going to let me in or just stand there with your eyes bugging out?"

"My eyes ain’t buggin’ out." He opened the door wider and let her in, then closed it. "Thought ya were still with King Fancy Pants."

"He’s not as fancy as you make him out to be. Hi, Jesus."

"Hi, Carol." The two of them hugged.

"You look so much better than the last time I saw you. Have you fully recovered?"

"Yes, I have. Thank you." Paul went over to the door. "If you want to talk to Daryl alone I can leave. I need to check with Maggie on some things anyway." He and Daryl exchanged a warm kiss then he left.

Carol looked at Daryl with raised eyebrows. "Wow. Seems like a lot has been going on since the
last time I saw you."

Daryl looked away from her a somewhat shy smile and blush on his face. "Yeah."

"You know I`m happy for you. For both of you. Whenever he came here he always seemed so lonely and closed off. Zeke said he was always that way."

"He told me about him and Ezekiel."  

"It wasn`t anything major. I`m glad we both have significant others that are honest with us." Carol sat down on the edge of the bed. "I understand a lot of other things have changed for you. I saw that armor you were wearing. A lot of people were impressed."

"Just somethin` we`re doin` as a precaution. Don`t want no more surprises. I`m sorry Paul had to find out the hard way. It was real close, Carol."

"And if he had died how would you have felt?"

Daryl had a faraway look on his face as he looked out the window. "I woulda been angry. Probably just go back into the woods. Not really carin` no more. I was tired of losin` people. I woulda lost more with Paul gone."

"So you mean to tell me he`s been on your mind for a very long time?"

Daryl nodded. "Took a long time to figure stuff out, get my shit together on the fact that I`m gay."

"Daryl, you took the time that you needed, no more, no less. When Ezekiel and I connected I was ready." Carol reached over and squeezed his arm. "So it is the same with you and Jesus. Always hang onto that. The rest will fall into place naturally."

"Already has." He watched as Paul and Aaron spoke for a few seconds on the street below. Aaron lightly slapped Paul on the back. They hugged and exchanged a kiss before Aaron continued on his way. "It ain`t just the two of us, either."

"Oh yeah?"

Daryl looked at her. "Aaron, too."

Carol`s expression indicated she was completely blown over by that revelation.
Chapter Summary

It’s the welcome banquet and Carol and Ezekiel tell Daryl and Paul about the status of The Kingdom.

"He has very soulful eyes." Daryl sat across from Carol as he, Paul, and Aaron shared the same table with Ezekiel, Jerry, Nabila, and Dianne at the banquet. Ezekiel and Paul were in a deep conversation about swords and Aaron was talking to Dianne about the poker game in the stables.

Carol laughed. "That’s the best thing you can say about Zeke?"

Daryl shrugged and continued to munch on his pomegranate. "He makes ya happy so why should ya care about what I think?"

"Daryl, you`re my best friend. Of course I care." A small piece of plaster fell onto the table beside her plate. She looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "This place is crumbling apart bit by bit. And I`m not just talking about the buildings."

"Paul says ya got very little defenses here."

"Not many like to admit it, ever since the war with the Saviors our strength has been greatly diminished. We have our young people still here. They lack the training and the discipline to defend this place properly if we were ever to come under attack."

Jerry had been partially listening in on their conversation. "The up and coming generation of teens don`t seem to care, either. I mean, they`re typical teenagers. They can`t seem to get a grip on what`s going down, what`s real."

Paul and Ezekiel had stopped talking and were now listening.

"We`ve lost our spirit. We spend more time making repairs than anything else." Another piece of plaster landed on her plate.

"I worry more about what`s out there than I ever did." Ezekiel had dropped his usual persona and now spoke plainly. "These Whisperers, I`ve never felt more of a sense of danger, more so than from the Saviors."

"Too bad we don`t have Jesus here to whip some people into shape." Carol lightly punched him on the shoulder.

"I wish I could be all places at once. Jesus is only my nickname. I`m really just simple ole Paul Rovia." He felt Daryl playfully nudge his leg underneath the table. "I can at least take a look while I`m here."

"Could you? Maybe a little inspiration is all we need." Ezekiel was pleased that Paul still took such an interest in The Kingdom and its people.

"What about Henry? Is he like the others?" Daryl had rarely seen Henry.
"He flips from being a child his age to acts of outright aggression. He`s never really gotten over the pain of losing his brother." In fact, Carol had never felt more inadequate at being a mother.

"One never does. Not really." Daryl had mixed memories of his mother. He remembered she was always good to him and had kept his father in check for most of his early childhood.

Paul reached over and gently rubbed Daryl`s back. "Maybe we can show him some defensive moves while we`re here."

"We can try if ya want us to."

"Please. If you can help." Ezekiel hoped they could. Daryl and Paul simply nodded.

After the meal everyone mingled with each other enjoying the endless bottles of wine that were being served. Paul and Ezekiel had managed to find a small nook to talk away from everyone else.

"I think Daryl likes it when you drop your king persona, Zeke."

Ezekiel laughed. "Daryl is someone who does not like phony people. I can appreciate that."

"As long as you are good for and good to Carol, I don`t think he really cares." Paul took a sip of the wine and savored its delicate flavor.

"Carol tells me some good fortune has come your way, Paul. I noticed you didn`t seem so lonely since the last time I saw you."

Paul smiled somewhat shyly. "It has. It`s weird, for a long time I had no boyfriends, now I have two. Daryl and I are the ones in love. Aaron doesn`t mind and he`ll be more active in the relationship when he`s ready. The shadow of Eric is still in his heart."

"Dude, I always told you that you deserve the best." Ezekiel paused for a moment. "You know, Paul, there was a time I thought we could have made it together."

"A lot of things were in the way. You were the leader here and I was trying to keep Gregory off your back. It was hard sometimes to not tell him you were also dealing with the Saviors."

"You still did right by me, Paul. And I thank you for that. We have both found our happiness at last."

"Then we have made it. Just not with each other."

The two of them hugged tightly and shared a long deep open-mouthed kiss. It most likely would be their last. "You`ll always be special to me, Paul. Guess we better rejoin the party." Ezekiel motioned for Paul to go before him, then he went over to Carol while Paul went to find Daryl, who was talking to Aaron.

"I think we can beat Rosita and Eugene tonight. I feel like my luck is coming back." Aaron had already drank enough wine to cause him to boast a bit about his gambling skills. Paul looked at him questioningly. "Poker game. Hilltop vs. The Kingdom vs. Alexandria. Should be interesting."

"All night." Daryl looked knowingly at Paul.

Paul nodded his understanding. "Now I understand what you meant when you said the honor of Hilltop was at stake. We`ll leave that in your capable hands. Do you have a partner?"

"Eduardo. Ms. Maitlin told me he`s one of the shrewdest players around. He`s our best chance to
outsmart Eugene." Aaron glanced from Daryl to Paul. "And I know how important it is that the game is to last for most of the night."

"Thank you." Paul and Daryl briefly clasped hands.

"And I left some lube on the bed stand." Aaron winked at them. He saw Eduardo signal to him. "Gotta go. Let the games begin."

"Good luck."

"Eugene cheats. Remember what I told ya about how he marks cards."

Aaron acknowledged them with a wave and he and Eduardo left the party.

"Lube on the bed stand, huh?" Paul raised his left eyebrow. "We better make the best of it. The next four days are going to be quite hectic."

"Havin` ya all to myself is gonna mean a lot, Paul. I really need ya tonight."

"I`ve been needing you for so long, Daryl." They kissed deeply.

Across the room Carol was watching them. Rick came up beside her. "Daryl liking boys. The thought never crossed my mind."

Carol laughed. "I`ve known it since the prison. I would try to flirt with him. He showed no interest at all. It was a perfect opportunity. Then I saw the way he would look at you sometimes. Glenn, too."

"At me." Rick seemed kind of shocked. "I never had the feeling he felt that way about me."

"I don`t think he did. It was just a crush."

They watched as Daryl and Paul exited the party carrying a bottle of wine with them. They only stopped for a moment when Jerry handed them a small box.

"Eugene told me to give you this. I already looked inside. Hope you`ll share before you leave." Jerry winked at them.

Paul placed a reassuring hand on Jerry`s shoulder and grinned. Then he and Daryl left, holding hands.
All Through The Night

Chapter Summary

Daryl and Paul share some intimate time. WARNING: Some smut.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Paul had kicked his boots and socks off and now lounged on the bed as Daryl reached over and lit up the joint that dangled from Paul`s lips. Paul breathed in deeply and held his breath for a bit before letting out a long stream of smoke. "Eugene`s outdone himself." He handed the joint to Daryl who took his own puff.

"Yeah." Daryl had also taken off his boots. He wore his black tank undershirt and Paul could not take his eyes off of how Daryl`s arms just rippled. He knew that Paul was staring at him. "Wanna touch?"

Paul didn`t hesitate and reached over and ran his hand down Daryl`s right arm as he toked another puff from the joint. His hand drifted to Daryl`s soft belly. He tickled Daryl who smiled and scrunched himself up. "So you are ticklish there."

"Better not tell nobody, Rovia."

"It`ll be our little secret." Paul picked up the bottle of wine and took a drink. He handed it to Daryl who took his turn at it and set it down. The room was lit by two oil lamps which burned dimly, the flames flickering slightly. They could hear the sounds of hammers as those from all the communities worked to put up the booths, rides, and whatever else was needed for the next four days. "Put on that mix CD Carol gave us. Do you know what it is?"

"She said it was some songs from the 1960`s to kinda set the mood." Daryl went over to the small battery operated boom box and put the CD in, making sure the volume was low. The strains of I Only Want To Be With You by Dusty Springfield came out of the speakers.

"She`s got good taste." Paul sat up slightly and took off his t-shirt.

As Daryl took a hit from the joint he marveled at how lean and muscular Paul was for such a small man. He knew Paul packed a powerful wallop when he wanted to. He reached up and undid the tie of Paul`s bun. Paul shook his head and let his long hair flow. "Better?"

"Yes. Thanks."

"Ya used to wear it long all the time. Why did ya change?"

"I guess my fighting style got a little more frenzied. It got in the way. I won`t cut it, just a trim on the ends every so often." Paul`s hands reached over and stroked Daryl`s square shoulders. "I want to eat you alive."

Daryl laughed. "Like a walker."
Paul giggled feeling the effects of the weed. "Get over here, asshole."

Daryl laid down beside him and they started making-out. Paul`s hands moved beneath Daryl`s pants and squeezed his ass. Daryl jumped slightly, enjoying the touching, his kissing becoming more and more lustful. Paul then flipped him over and was on top, straddling him and rubbing against his pants.

"Wouldn`t it be easier if we just took `em off?" Daryl could only speak between open-mouthed kisses.

"I`m for that." Paul crawled off of him and quickly removed his pants and underwear. He stood naked his cock hardening and throbbing slightly. Daryl slipped out of the rest of his clothes and as soon as he was naked, Paul tackled him back onto the bed.

"Better." They resumed kissing and rubbing.

"I want you inside me. Stretch me and lube me with your fingers then I`m going to ride you." Paul whinnied like a horse causing Daryl to go into uncontrollable snickers.

Daryl grabbed the lube and did as Paul instructed. Paul moaned and undulated with pleasure as Daryl worked him with his fingers. When Paul felt pliant enough he straddled Daryl and let the redneck slowly slip inside of him. Daryl synchronized his movements with Paul as they bucked up and down, Daryl hitting just the right spot to stimulate Paul`s prostate. Paul`s cock bounced in rhythm and he could feel his juices building up, sometimes dripping on Daryl`s chest. They didn`t care how loud they got.

When Daryl exploded inside Paul, he arched his back and let out a long groan followed by, "Holy shit, God that`s great." The pleasure was almost too much for him to take.

"Jesus is coming." Paul shot his load across Daryl`s chest, some of it landing on Daryl`s lips. "Oops," followed by Paul`s snorting giggles. Daryl only grinned and licked it off.

Paul slowly lifted himself up and Daryl`s cock slipped out. They both lay side by side, legs and arms entwined as Paul lit up another joint.

"That was amazin`." They kissed between draws.

"Let me catch my breath and I`ll do you."

Daryl reached over and tweaked Paul`s nose. "You`re on. Do it doggy style."

"You`ve been practicing?"

"Very funny, asshole."

"Good thing Dog is in the stables. Maybe he`s doing Aaron."

They both laughed as anyone who was high would. They had more and more sex for most of the night until both were too exhausted or the high was starting to come down.

Aaron found them tangled with each other with the stained covers bundled up, both naked and with satisfied expressions on their faces as they slept. He could tell by the empty wine bottle and the pile of smoked joints that they must have had a time of it. In fact, the smell of sex mixed with weed still lingered in the room. It was near three o`clock in the morning so he only wanted to get some sleep, only after staring at them appreciatively for a couple moments. He hoped the quality time
they had together would make all three in the relationship stronger.

By morning The Kingdom was ablaze with activity as people prepared themselves for the fair. When Aaron awoke from his place on the sofa Paul and Daryl were sitting up in bed staring at him.

"How much do you think he watched when we weren`t looking?"

"Don`t know. Maybe wild sex parties ain`t his thing."

"Shut up." Aaron covered his face with the pillow. There was a knock on the door.

"Daddy, get up! The fair is going to start!" Gracie was shouting from the other side.

Paul and Daryl quickly covered themselves with the sheet. Aaron groaned and got up. "Coming, punkin."

"We already did that." Paul couldn`t help snicker, still feeling a bit high.

Aaron looked at him and rolled his eyes. He grabbed some clean clothes and headed out making sure Gracie didn`t get a look inside.

Paul leaned over and kissed Daryl. "I had a great time. We need to do it more often."

"Maybe winter will be real cold this year." They kissed for a while longer before getting up.

"I`ll shower first unless you want to join me."

Daryl raised an interested eyebrow. "Yeah." He slipped on a bathrobe and sat down next to Paul on the side of the bed. "We got past a lot of stuff last night."

"I think the weed and the wine helped. My head was still clear enough to feel and appreciate what was going on."

Daryl put his arm around him. "I want nothin` more than to take care of ya, Paul."

"I could take care of you, too."

Daryl shook his head. "Nope. Anyone who wants to hurt ya will have to get by me and Aaron. No exceptions."

"No one`s ever wanted to protect me before. Had to learn to do it myself."

"Better get used to it then." Daryl snuggled up to Paul`s neck.

"You and Aaron better get used to me protecting the two of you." Paul closed his eyes and smiled at Daryl`s soft kisses. It amazed him how such a big muscular man could be so gentle with him. "This is something that works both ways."

Daryl looked at Paul and saw that familiar expression of stubborn determination on his face. He sighed. "Okay. If that`s what makes ya happy."

"Good. Now let`s hit that shower." Paul slipped on another bathrobe and they were both out the door in no time.
To be honest I really don’t like writing smut because it tends to bog down the story somewhat, but as they say you have to keep the reader interested. When there is smut it won’t be smut for smut’s sake. There are other fanfics that qualify for that category. It’s written only to enhance the characters or advance the story. In this case, it has pushed Paul and Daryl past a lot of insecurities about being intimate with each other. Don’t expect a lot of it. Thank you.
The Walker Outside

Chapter Summary

Daryl, Paul, and Aaron enjoy some of what the fair has to offer and then go outside the fence and encounter a strange walker.

Most of the morning and part of the afternoon was spent browsing the booths for goods with the occasional carnival-style game in order to win a prize. Paul already had a full backpack and carried a stuffed teddy bear, which was a prize he had won in the 'Dunk Eugene' dunking booth. He planned on giving it to Gracie. He and Daryl finally tracked down Aaron at the petting zoo with Gracie. Dog was happily trotting beside them. Several people were there with their children. They stood beside a woman with dark curly hair and overalls.

"What`s all that?" Aaron looked at Paul`s hoard.

"Junk we don`t need." Daryl shook his head in disbelief.

"Stuff for our new house."

Aaron laughed. " Seems to be a difference of opinion here. I can`t hardly wait." He glanced at Gracie who was petting a goat below a sign that said `SHIVA`S ANIMAL FUN`, meant to be a tribute to King Ezekiel`s lost beloved companion. Nabila was in charge of the operation. "Good to see the two of you recovered from last night."

"Had a slight hangover until I got something to eat." Paul set the backpack and stuffed bear down.
"Heard you won big at the poker game."

"Hilltop`s honor is intact. Eugene didn`t realize he was dealing with someone who briefly worked in a casino as a dealer for the Black Jack table." He winked at them then glanced at Gracie. "A llama? Where the hell did you get a llama?"

"There was a farm that was raising them. A few were left and just walking around wild. We`ve been breeding them ever since." Nabila looked at Gracie. "Don`t get too close, honey, it can spit in your face."

"Much like Daryl does sometimes." Paul smirked at the big redneck.

"I`m gonna put ya in with the rest of them animals if ya don`t shut up that smart mouth."

"You beast, you beast." Paul lightly beat on Daryl`s chest.

Aaron doubled over with laughter. "Quit acting so gay, Paul."

Gracie came over to them yawning. "I want to go on the swings now."

The woman beside them opened the gate for Gracie and looked up and smiled at the three of them.

"Thank you." Gracie knew if she didn`t remember her manners she wouldn`t get to go on some of the rides.
"My pleasure."

Aaron picked Gracie up and nodded to the woman. "Not the way you’re yawning, punkin. You’ve had a busy day and need a nap."

"No." Gracie was now getting fussy.

Aaron looked at the others. "I’m going to put her down."

"Children can be so stubborn can’t they."

"Yes." Aaron had never seen the woman before. Even though she seemed trustworthy, there was something about her that bothered him.

"I need to take my loot to our room. I’m for getting some peace and quiet. Want to walk around outside the fence for a while?"

"Sounds fine. Take Dog with ya. He needs a nap, too. I’ll wait for ya at the gate."

"Who was that woman?" Paul and Aaron walked down the street. He turned around and noticed that she was watching them.

Aaron shrugged. "I don’t recognize her from Hilltop or Alexandria. Never seen her around The Kingdom, either. Maybe she’s someone new."

Paul’s eyes met those of the woman. He sensed a coldness about her despite her friendly demeanor. "Maybe it’s nothing."

Ten minutes later Paul and Aaron joined Daryl at the gate. They brought him his crossbow and Paul had put on his knives. Aaron had a knife and the small pike for his prosthesis. As soon as they were outside the fence they seemed to relax.

"Noise and people were getting to me."

"Fairs and carnivals aren’t your thing?"

"I worked at a carnival combined with a circus once. Not the most pleasant of experiences. The money was good. Learned a lot of tricks from a troupe of acrobats."

"Now it’s all startin’ to make sense."

"Like what?"

"Climbin’ on top of a truck, then fallin’ and runnin’ like nothin’ happened."

"Oh that. Child’s play." Paul smirked at Daryl and winked at Aaron.

Since The Kingdom was mostly surrounded by abandoned buildings rather than woods they felt they had to be more on the alert.

"Lots of places to hide." Daryl tried to look into every nook and shadow for any movement.

"Too vulnerable to attack for my comfort. Especially now that they don’t have the defenses anymore." Aaron’s experiences in the combat zones of the Middle East and Africa had given him a sixth sense when it came to exploring destroyed urban areas.
"King Ezekiel knows that. He feels so helpless to do anything about it. And that worries me a lot. If the Whisperers are watching they’ll figure it out. I have no doubt they are."

"None of our scouts have seen ‘em nearby." Daryl pointed to an abandoned warehouse. "Let’s look around in there."

"Any specific reason?" Aaron also trusted Daryl’s instincts, in the woods or elsewhere.

"Nah. Just don’t like bein’ out in the open like this." They followed Daryl inside.

Paul looked at Daryl. "You don’t have that feeling we were being watched do you?"

"I ain’t sure." Daryl went over to a window and peered out of the scope of his crossbow. "If it was the woods, I would know."

"Buildings are different. I know, I’ve certainly been in enough of them in my life." Aaron’s statement made Paul feel all the more uneasy.

Daryl nodded as he lit up a cigarette. They had placed themselves in a dark quiet nook where they were concealed and had a good view of the street.

"They could send spies to any of our communities and we wouldn’t even know it. Take Alan for instance."

"You suspect he’s a spy?"

Paul nodded. "He knows everything there is to know about Hilltop. Probably Alexandria and The Kingdom, too. Our intel isn’t exactly top secret/classified."

There was the sound of a walker coming down the street. Daryl raised his crossbow. Paul indicated for him to hold back for a moment.

"What?" Daryl wasn’t sure what Paul was up to.

"Aaron, go over to where those chains are hanging and rattle one as loud as you can."

Aaron quickly left and did the requested task. He jerked it loud enough for the walker to hear and be distracted enough to head in their direction. It only turned its head for a moment. It didn’t come towards them and only kept on walking. Aaron quickly returned to them.

"Ain’t a walker."

"What’s he doing here alone? I thought they traveled in groups." Aaron was puzzled as to why the Whisperer was alone.

"They change the rules to whatever suits them." Paul watched it closely, waiting for anything abnormal.

"Do we take it out?" Daryl watched it through his scope, ready to pull the trigger on his crossbow at anytime.

"What if there are more?" Aaron always knew it was wise to err on the side of caution. "They find it dead they’ll know we’re onto them."

They watched as the Whisperer slowly lumbered down the street seeming to head directly towards the front gate of The Kingdom. It abruptly stopped and raised its arms giving some kind of signal
the way one would use semaphores. When it was finished it turned around and headed in the opposite direction.

"I say we take it out so it don’t report back to the others."

"They might come back and make some kind of demands, especially if they know the leaders from Hilltop and Alexandria are here." Paul sighed. "Then again maybe it doesn’t matter if we take it out or not."

Daryl let the bolt from his crossbow fly. "We wait too long it’ll be too late."

"Sometimes I already get the feeling it’s too late. Who was he signaling to?" Aaron glanced from one to the other.

"Let’s get back and find Rick, Maggie, and King Ezekiel. At least keep them informed." Paul cautiously led them out of their hiding place.

They hurried back to The Kingdom. After they were inside and the gate was closed they noticed the woman they had encountered at the petting zoo was standing nearby.

Aaron went up to her. "You lost?"

"No. Just going for a walk. Enjoying some time outside the fence?"

"We do that sometimes." Paul eyed her closely.

Before they had time to question her further a llama and five baby pigs came running across their path with Nabila and Dianne chasing after them.

"Someone left the gate open." Nabila was panting as she ran hard after the animals.

The three of them aided the two women in capturing the runaways. With a baby pig in each of his arms, Paul looked up and noticed that the woman had disappeared.
Chapter Summary

Aaron and Paul show off their best moves to an admiring crowd.

Volunteers from Hilltop and The Kingdom agreed to take on sentry duties to keep an eye out for any more Whisperers that might show up. The fair continued with most people not even knowing about the situation with the Whisperer/walker. Paul was on edge so as soon as he got up the next morning he was working out in the open gym, a small crowd gathering to watch him. His workout clothes were a pair of cut off sweats and a tank top which showed off his lean muscular body, much to the admiration of many. He took out dummies and punching bags with high kicks while working with his knives at the same time, sticking them into scarecrows and wooden posts. He then did a workout routine with his sword combined with martial arts moves.

"He reminds me of Legolas in The Lord of the Rings movies." Someone from The Kingdom was overheard to remark.

"Great. Now I`m an elf." Paul muttered to himself as he wiped the sweat off with a towel. Aaron was nearby and had heard him so he laughed in response.

"Maybe the Whisperers have Oliphants."

"Very funny." Paul dumped some water over himself then took a long drink. "My left side is doing a whole lot better. I dare you to take me on in the fights demonstration contest this afternoon."

Aaron held up his left arm. "I`m afraid you have an advantage."

"So I do. But you`ll still take me on?"

"Sure. Even though you`re a sure win."

A makeshift arena had been set up and the fights demonstration contest consisted of wrestling, boxing, martial arts and even some freestyle fighting. Everyone looked forward to watching when Paul took to the ring. No one else challenged him so Aaron emerged from the crowd to face him. He was confused when Paul signaled to one of the referees who came out with a rope. He then proceeded to tie Paul`s left arm behind his back.

"Now neither of us has the advantage."

"Dammit, Paul, are you crazy?" Aaron couldn`t believe what he had just done.

"Probably." Paul aimed a fast kick right into Aaron`s chest knocking him off balance.

"You don`t waste time do you?" Aaron then ran towards Paul and knocked him down. Paul waited until Aaron got closer to him then sprang to his feet, bent down, and with his right arm flipped Aaron to the ground.

Paul danced around in a boxer`s dance. "Come on. Get up." He licked his lips and grinned obviously enjoying the match.
Aaron held up his hand signaling to give him some time in order to get on his feet again. He struggled to stand. Paul quickly realized it was only a ruse when Aaron rammed into him with his prosthesis, right in the stomach. Paul doubled over and held his stomach as if in deep pain. There was a collective 'oh' from the crowd. Aaron immediately came over to him.

"Paul? Did I hurt you?" He placed his hand on Paul’s back.

Paul immediately kneed him and with his foot tripped him to the ground. "You shouldn’t fall for my bluffs. How many times did I try to teach you that?" The crowd roared to life.

"Right."

"What the hell are they doin’?" Daryl came over to sit by Rick and Michonne.

"Exciting isn’t it?" Michonne’s eyes were all lit up.

Aaron took a swing at Paul with his fist. Paul ducked and did a somersault. Now he was behind Aaron. Aaron took a moment to look for him. By the time he had found him Paul had grabbed his legs and pulled him to the ground. Aaron landed with a hard 'oof' and rolled around on his back. He held his arm up in surrender. "Had enough?"

Paul shrugged and had already untied his hand. He helped Aaron to his feet and both of them took a bow as the crowd applauded and cheered. Both were panting at the water station when Daryl came up to them.

"Dumb and dumber, right?"

"We weren’t trying to hurt each other." Paul grinned from ear to ear.

"Some of his training sessions were worse." Aaron pointed to Paul. "I think you have too much fun."

"I think so, too."

The first thing they did was hit the showers since the winner would be announced that evening. Aaron was helping Paul with his hair in their room when Gracie entered.

"Wow, I’m going to fight like that!" Gracie made a couple punches in the air and some high kicks. Then she watched with fascination as Aaron gently brushed Paul’s hair. "Can I touch it?"

"Sure." Paul let Gracie run her hand down his hair.

"It’s so long and soft."

"My number one fan right there."

Daryl entered the room and set down his crossbow. "Hey, squirt."

"How come Uncle Paul’s hair is so long and soft and yours feels like a rat’s nest, Uncle Daryl?"

"Who combed your rat’s nest out the other day?" Daryl gave her a one-eyed look.

Aaron finished and Paul put his hair back up in a bun.

Maggie knocked and peered inside the room. "There you are, Gracie. Hershel and Judith are waiting if you want to ride the ponies."
"Gotta go. I`ll bring you some rats to eat, Uncle Daryl." Gracie then ran to join Maggie.

Aaron`s and Paul`s snickering caused Daryl to glare at them. "She`s learnin` to speak smart-ass like you, Paul."

"Two more days and I`m already beat." Aaron lounged on the bed.

"We haven`t heard from our advanced messengers. If any Whisperers were on the move we would know."

"Except the one we saw. Somethin` makin` me real uneasy about that. Who was he signalin` to?"

Paul got up and stood at the window watching the people below who seemed to be as carefree as he wanted to be. "I can`t seem to shake this feeling of uneasiness. I can`t really describe it. It`s the feeling you get when things seem too quiet."

"Ya want `em to attack?"

"No. We should have expected them to attack again by now." Paul turned to look at them. "There was what happened in the cemetery when we first encountered them. Then we attacked a small group and took prisoners. A couple of other small skirmishes. The only thing they did was make a threat at us at Hilltop. The one we killed yesterday was some kind of advanced scout and he didn`t return home. Wouldn`t they have come looking for him by now?"

"Maybe they considered him expendable." Aaron shrugged.

"That`s possible. They don`t really care all that much about each other." Paul looked out the window again. "I`m worried that as soon as we all leave they`re going to make a move on The Kingdom."
Chapter Summary

A tragic discovery is made. The strange woman is investigated.

Daryl and Aaron were stalking the booths that next morning not looking for anything in particular.

"Have you noticed that Paul’s been giving himself harder workouts lately? Like he’s preparing for something."

Daryl shrugged. "Maybe we should be workin` on our shit, too."

Daryl looked around. He noticed King Ezekiel and Carol mingling with some people when Dianne suddenly came running up to them. They spoke in low voices for a few moments then Dianne ran off to do whatever task Ezekiel had told her to do. He saw them and motioned them over towards him.

"Wonder what`s going on." They walked over to him.

"We`ve got trouble." Ezekiel was speaking in his normal voice. "Dianne has found a body in the stables. I sent her to find Rick. Do you know where Jesus is?"

"Participating in one of the tournaments I think."

"We don`t have the time to go get him. I`ll take care of things here." Carol squeezed Ezekiel`s arm and left.

Moments later Ezekiel, Aaron, Daryl, Rick, and Dianne stared at the dead body of a woman next to one of the stalls in the stables.

Rick looked at Dianne. "How did you find her?"

"I was walking by and I heard the horses being restless. When I came in I noticed a walker and took it down immediately. Her name is Sarah and she tends to the horses."

Rick knelt down to get a better look at the body. He noticed marks around her neck. "Was she suicidal?"

"Not that I know of. She was looking forward to getting married next week. Why?"

"There are marks of strangulation around the neck. See?" Rick pointed to the markings. He searched the body for any other signs. He found the mark of a knife on her back. "Whoever did this held her at knife-point before killing her."

"Who would do such a horrible thing?" King Ezekiel shook his head, obviously troubled by what had just happened. "We must not let word of this get out. Dianne, find a couple others to help you with the body. Take it to the morgue. Be as discreet as possible."

"Yes, Your Majesty."
"We shall make haste back to the sword fighting and fencing contests."

"Michonne’s there as a judge. My son is also participating. We’ll only let her, Maggie, Jerry, and Jesus know about this."

The others nodded their agreement.

Aaron and Daryl walked back with Rick. They decided not to talk about what they had just found in case someone would overhear.

"Which contest is Carl participating in?"

"Fencing. Didn’t know he could do that. Jesus been teaching him?"

"Yep." Daryl had watched some of their practice matches and knew Carl was good.

"I was going to do a little bit of shopping for Michonne’s birthday. That’ll have to wait. Can’t decide on anything anyway."

The three of them headed over to the arena. By the time they got there King Ezekiel had already returned and he and Carol sat on makeshift thrones at the front to watch the participants. It was a fencing dual between Scott of Alexandria and someone from The Kingdom. Scott was the clear winner and as he walked off he waved to the cheering crowd.

"Someone take on the Cyclops," a voice from the crowd called out.

"Cyclops?" Rick gave Daryl a questioning look.

"Carl’s nickname for himself."

They watched as another resident of The Kingdom entered the arena. He stood there alone for a moment then Carl came out an epee in his right hand and carrying his fencing helmet. He glanced back at the contestant area and got a thumbs-up from Paul. After taking their positions they stood with their epees raised.

"En garde." The man from The Kingdom held up his epee.

Carl confidently took his position. Rick watched with fascination as his son held his own, covering his blind spot quite well with each move. When Carl won the first two rounds Rick couldn’t have felt more proud. He turned to Daryl. "I must admit I had my doubts about him training with Jesus, but he’s good. I think he’s going to be alright."

Carl came over to him. "Did you see that, Dad?"

"I did. I’m proud and impressed with you, son."

Carl suddenly whirled around, his epee raised, and poked it right into Paul’s chest armor. "Sorry, Jesus."

"That’s what I mean by getting an instinct for your right side." Paul gently shoved the tip aside. Carl grinned.

Rick held out his hand to Paul who shook it. "I can never thank you enough for helping him."

"He’s a good student. Once we got past his attitude problem." Carl just rolled his eyes then ran off to greet some admirers.
"Why are ya all dressed up in the armor? Ya ain`t fightin` again are ya?"

"Demonstration. Free-style sword and knife fighting."

"Be careful out there." Rick leaned towards Paul. "We found someone murdered in the stables. Strangled to death."

Paul`s expression became serious. "Security is pretty tight around the public areas. No one else noticed?"

Before Rick could reply he noticed Jerry walking towards them. Jerry waved to them.

Aaron was the first to greet him. "What`s up?"

"His Majesty told me to report to you, Rick, in the," he cleared his throat, "investigation."

"Go ahead."

"There are a lot of strangers here. Everyone is vouched for. I found one exception. You see that woman over there, the one in the yellow dress with the dark hair?"

"Yeah." Paul followed where Jerry pointed. "We`ve seen her a lot at the petting zoo and browsing the booths. Why?"

"Is she from Hilltop?"

"I don`t ever remember seeing her. I thought she was from Alexandria."

Rick shook his head. "She ain`t from Alexandria. She`s not from here?"

"Nope."

"Then who is she? Maybe our suspect?" Aaron noticed the woman had been staring at them and as soon as she realized they were scrutinizing her a little too closely, started to leave.

"We can`t allow her to leave." Paul started running after her.

The strange woman quickly dodged through the crowd at a run. Soon Aaron, Daryl, Rick, and Paul were joining in the chase.

She wove in and out of people even knocking some to the ground as she ran between the booths and the petting zoo right into where the pony rides were set up. She almost knocked Gracie off of her pony, which angered Aaron. As soon as she got away from where the entire fair had been set up she ran towards the stables. Her pursuers had split up. She saw Paul, who was the fastest runner, coming towards her and she ran towards the fence where she jumped up and grabbed onto anything that could pass as a hand hold. Paul grabbed her legs and started to pull her down. In the struggle her dark hair fell off of her head revealing the fact that she was completely bald. She kicked Paul directly in the face and scrambled over the top of the fence.

Paul staggered back slightly, his nose bleeding. Aaron quickly handed him a bandana.

"I`m fine." Paul shook his head.

Daryl had picked up the wig off of the ground and handed it to Rick. "Wonder who she was? Never saw her playin` any of them games or do any tradin`."
"Don`t suppose she was the one our Whisperer friend was signaling to."

"We don`t need to create a panic. I`ll tell King Ezekiel and the others." Rick studied the wig for a moment and shook his head. "It`s a good bet she`s our murderer."

Paul`s nose had stopped bleeding so he handed the bandana back to Aaron. "The best thing we can do is finish this thing up tomorrow and get back to our communities."

"Agreed. I`ll look over this wig to see if it will tell us anything." Rick then studied the fence. "What I can`t figure out is how she got past our security. Every inch of the fence is being watched."

"Maybe we missed somethin`. Or there`s another traitor."

"Maggie assigned Alan as one of our liaison people to The Kingdom."

"He probably explored this place on each visit." Aaron could still picture how she almost knocked Gracie off of her pony and how angry he still was.

"I doubt she`ll be back now that we`re onto her. Sarah must have seen her doing something and was murdered for it. These Whisperers will stop at nothing and they obviously have no qualms about killing. I hate to think what else they have planned down the pike." Rick shook the wig in disgust.

"Let`s get back to the arena before we`re missed." Paul indicated for them to walk in front of him. They slowly walked back, people who had observed the chase looking at them with questioning faces. Hopefully King Ezekiel could publicly make some sort of statement to calm people down.
Chapter Summary

Paul Rovia sings to a captive audience at the fair. (See end notes for youtube links to the original songs.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daryl had volunteered for sentry duty since he was concerned about the woman with the wig possibly returning so Paul and Aaron were left alone in the room after Gracie had been put to bed. Paul grasped the sheets hard as Aaron, who was straddling him, kneaded his hands into Paul’s bare back trying to massage out the tightness and the knots.

"I wish at least one of the communities had a decent masseuse. You’ve got a real bad knot here between your shoulder blades."

"Try the gentle touch." Paul grunted and grimaced at the pain.

"That’s all I do with Gracie all day. There are times I just want to be with adults."

Paul laughed. "Too much cotton candy and pony rides?"

"Exactly." Aaron stopped rubbing. Paul’s hair was still in a bun so he took out the tie and gently brushed the strands with his hands. He especially loved the baby hairs at the nape of Paul’s neck. He leaned down and kissed the back of his neck then climbed off, lying down beside him. "I’m ready to go home."

"I think we all are. The Kingdom isn’t what it used to be. Things here were taken care of, looked after, people were able to enjoy some artistic leisure time. War takes so much of that away. I hate to say this, I think the days of The Kingdom are numbered." Paul flipped over and put one of his hands behind his head. With the other he lightly stroked Aaron’s bare chest.

"That’s so sad in so many ways. Ezekiel must be in great despair over the thought."

"Carol tells me he’s somewhat in denial." Paul snuggled against Aaron always enjoying the man’s warm comforting embrace. "The best thing we can do is give him the greatest show we can give tomorrow. It’s mostly art, music, theater--everything he built this community for."

"Are you nervous about your upcoming performance?"

"A little. I’ll probably practice some in the morning. Jerry and I have rehearsed our duet and we’ll have a quick run-through." Paul yawned. He was so relaxed from the massage he felt sleepy and closed his eyes. "My dreams go away when I’m with you or Daryl like this."

"I’ll hold you in my embrace all night, Paul. My one arm is still good for that."

"Then I am very grateful indeed." Paul smiled at him. They shared a kiss.
Since there was a bit of a chill in the air due to autumn temperatures starting to set in at night, Aaron covered up both of them with a blanket. Daryl had found them that way when he got off sentry duty and stripped down to just his pants and crawled in beside them, feeling nothing but pure contentment, the only time he ever really felt it.

In the morning Paul left to rehearse for the show and Daryl and Aaron decided to start packing some things in the wagon. Bouncing Hershel in her arms Maggie watched them. "I wonder how long that woman was here before anyone noticed she didn`t belong to any of the communities. What`s really odd is I sensed something about her that was different. Like she wasn`t any ordinary spy."

"She knows enough about this place. I ever find Alan he`s a dead man." Daryl tossed a bag onto the wagon.

Aaron stopped for a moment to look over The Kingdom. "Why do I have a strange feeling I`m never going to see this place again after we leave."

"Ya ain`t one for premonitions are ya?"

"Not really. I remember being in this village in Africa and there were numerous guerrilla groups in the area. It was a rewarding trip for me. The day after I left it was burned to the ground and practically everyone was killed. That`s the kind of feeling I`ve been getting." The sad expression on Aaron`s face indicated how hard the incident had affected him.

"Maybe when we get back we should make preparations for refugees. Just in case."

That late afternoon was devoted to the music part of the individual performances. Musicians from all three communities played music ranging from the classical to folk, to Blue Grass to country and even some good ole rock `n` roll. When it was Paul`s turn he was the only one onstage sitting on a stool with his guitar in front of two microphones; one set up for singing, the other for his guitar. Daryl, Aaron, and Gracie had front row seats beside Rick, Michonne, and Maggie.

"It`s been a while since I`ve done this." Paul looked across the assembled audience as he tuned his guitar. "In the time before I even considered a career in music. Walkers don`t make a very appreciative audience." There was some laughter. "This first song is a track originally done by The Fleet Foxes. This is for King Ezekiel. Called Tiger Mountain Peasant Song." Paul finished tuning his guitar and started playing the soft low intro. His voice came out smooth and confident. When he finished there was enthusiastic applause with some looks of surprise at how good he really was. "This next song is one that Jerry and I have been working up especially for this four day gathering." He motioned for Jerry to come onstage.

Jerry emerged from the shadows carrying his own microphone and a flute. "It`s a Simon and Garfunkel classic called Scarborough Fair/Canticle. After we got past the confusion of alternating vocals between the main verses and the canticle part it sounded pretty good." He nodded to Paul who started strumming the guitar and singing the first verse solo. Jerry even had a brief solo on the flute. The audience was mesmerized as they listened and when the song ended there was even louder applause than when Paul sang the first song. Jerry and Paul hugged each other and then Jerry left the stage.

Paul took a moment to gather his thoughts. "The past few months I`ve been trying to come to terms with something that had an impact on me more than anything that has ever happened in my life, before the coming of the walkers and since. I`ve had a lot of close calls. In this world as it is now there are nothing but surprises." He paused and took a couple deep breaths. "The thing that I am grateful for the most is that I got the chance to tell you how much I love all of you. I never had a
real family since I went from one foster home to another. The thought that I had people I cared about deeply is what kept me fighting on that night." He looked directly at Daryl, Aaron, and Gracie. Dog was sitting by Daryl’s feet and he even looked at him. "I didn’t get it into my head until reality sucker punched me right where I needed it." Paul paused and bit his lip, wiping away a lone tear. "In a cemetery on a dark night surrounded by mist I saw the Angel of Death and it wasn’t on a tombstone. He missed. Barely. This is a tune by Bob Dylan. *Knockin` On Heaven’s Door.*"

The audience had never been quieter for the entire fair. Even Aaron and Daryl shed tears as Paul sang his soul through the verses. Michonne, Eugene, and Rosita, who also understood what it meant, couldn’t keep a dry eye. Towards the end of the song he had the entire audience singing the chorus with him in one of the most moving moments he had ever experienced. When the song finished Paul got a standing ovation as he bowed and humbly thanked everyone before walking off the stage.

"Damn." Daryl wiped away a tear. Aaron nudged him and they headed to the backstage area where Paul was wrapping his guitar in a blanket. Gracie hugged him first then all four of them stood in a small group hug. Since Paul was the last to perform, King Ezekiel gave the sign for everyone to disperse.

"That last one got to everyone out there." Aaron and Paul hugged.

"That song’s been running through my head for quite some time. Every time I think about it I’m an emotional mess."

"Don’t help that we’re all homesick."

"This one’s getting fussy and that’s a sign, too." Aaron picked up Gracie.

"Put me down, Daddy. I want to go see Hershel and Judith."

"Okay, punkin." Aaron set her down and off she ran towards where Hershel and Judith were playing. He leaned towards them and whispered. "We need to have a great threesome fuck when we get back home." They all snickered and licked their lips lustfully at each other.

"I just want to curl up in a book and escape. Probably won’t get the chance."

They noticed Rick and Maggie standing off to the side and seeming to get into an argument.

"Shit. Wonder what that’s all about?" Daryl was tired of them fighting.

"I hope not Negan again." Paul sighed.

"Don’t think so. This is somethin’ different."

"Maybe it’s about those new people." Paul carefully wrapped his guitar in a blanket.

"Think it’s finally decided they’ll be kicked out. Which means they’ll be coming to Hilltop."

"Like I said. Probably won’t get the chance." Paul balanced his wrapped guitar on his back and headed over towards the stables to load it up on the wagon.

Chapter End Notes
'Tiger Mountain Peasant Song' by The Fleet Foxes--http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdBeP47lxRI
'Scarborough Fair' by Simon and Garfunkel--http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BakWVXH5uAg
'Knockin` On Heaven`s Door' by Bob Dylan--http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_bWzyiU-S_w
Kingdom Feast And Remembrance

Chapter Summary

The final night of the fair is a great feast. Paul remembers the first time he was at The Kingdom.

After the concert was a Renaissance style feast held in the gym which had been transformed into a room decorated with hand-painted tapestries, statues, paintings, and the last of the autumn and summer flowers tucked into evergreens. Carol and Ezekiel presided over the feast as a lord and lady with members of The Kingdom volunteering as servers. The tables were also decorated in the Renaissance style and music of the period was playing over the loudspeaker system. Sitting at the same table with them were Rick, Michonne, Maggie, Jerry, Nabila, Carl, Father Gabriel, Paul, Aaron, and Daryl--all along one side facing the guests at all the other tables. Candles lit most of the place and there were some subdued lantern lights. Wine was the main drink being served and wild boar was the main dish. Side dishes had been donated by Hilltop and Alexandria.

Everyone was dressed in their best, clothing stores being the most scavenged. Paul was particularly excited because he got to finally wear a Renaissance merchant style long sleeved shirt with puffy sleeves, tied cuffs, and a laced collar. He also wore an embroidered vest that Ms. Maitlin had made for him to go along with the shirt. His pants were black leather, laced along the sides of the legs, and he wore a pair of black boots. Daryl wore a simple black shirt with his wings vest and a pair of jeans that were clean and had no holes in them. Aaron was in a western style shirt and black jeans. Aaron and Daryl could not stop looking at Paul’s hairstyle, courtesy of Carol--a simple braid that ran down his back.

"Damn you are so sexy." Aaron leaned towards Paul. "Those leather pants are certainly tight on your ass."

"I'd fuck ya right here and now if I could."

Paul blushed slightly. "My two sexy boyfriends--."

King Ezekiel stood up and raised his arms to quiet the crowd. The gym became silent and all eyes were upon him. "Friends, citizens, Rick, Maggie, and all the good people of Alexandria, Hilltop, and The Kingdom--welcome to our sumptuous farewell feast honoring the gathering of all the wonderful survivors of these three glorious communities. I promise delicious food, superb wine and ale, and entertainments to soothe and delight the soul. Memories are to be made, good conversation is the path to understanding, and may we all be together again for future endeavors." He held up a goblet of wine. "A toast." Everyone held up their glasses filled with wine. "From the Bard’s The Merchant of Venice: 'Fair thought and happy hours attend you.'" He took a sip and everyone else clinked glasses with their neighbors and did the same. "You may now serve. We all await with generous appetites."

The music started and the first course of food was brought out. Everyone ate and talked of the events of the fair and the memories they would be taking home. Afterwards those with cameras, Aaron being one of them, took pictures and just mingled and drank more wine.

Paul wanted nothing more than to get away from the crowd for awhile so with a tankard of ale in
hand he wandered into the auditorium that King Ezekiel used as his throne room. The emptiness and quiet soon helped him to relax. He wandered up onto the stage. Even though the chain was gone the loops for it were still there. He remembered his first visit...

...Two men dressed in sports padding held Paul securely as they escorted him into what looked like a high school auditorium complete with seats and a stage. On the stage was a man sitting on what he surmised to be a throne. He was striking in appearance with long dreadlocks. What really got Paul’s attention the most was that there was a real live tiger chained next to the throne. A large man holding a battle ax was standing some distance from the throne as if to stand guard. The tiger stood up and roared.

"Easy, Shiva." The man on the throne tugged the chain slightly. The tiger roared once more then sat back down. "Is this the sly fox of a man you observed prowling outside the fence, Richard?"

"He is indeed, Your Majesty." The taller of the two men held Paul firmly. "He was fast and difficult to catch. He stepped in one of our bear traps."

They eased their hold on Paul and let him lean forward and clutch the back of one of the seats, holding up his bloody ankle, panting hard trying to keep some control of the pain.

"We shall attend to your injury in due time. What do you call yourself?"

"Paul Rovia. Most of my friends call me Jesus. And whom might you be?"

"Please address our king with respect." The heavy set man with the battle ax glared directly at Paul.

"Jerry, he is a stranger here. Surely we can give him a pass until he understands procedure."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"I am King Ezekiel. We do not take kindly to strangers, especially those who cause us trouble by snooping and trying to sneak in unnoticed."

Paul adjusted his beanie slightly. "I had to know more about you. I look for other communities, go on supply runs, recruit people I come across, and generally explore. I wanted to be certain you were good people before I offered channels of communication and trade with my community."

"What is your community called?"

"The Hilltop Colony, Hilltop for short." Paul winced slightly from the pain of his injury.

"Alvaro, accompany Jesus to our infirmary to take care of his injury. Then bring him to my private chambers."

Alvaro bowed and gently let Paul lean against him as they escorted him out. After seeing the doctor and getting bandaged up, he was taken to a suite of three rooms in the building beside where the auditorium was located. They had elevated his injured ankle and he now sat in a comfortable chair, being provided with some water and fruit for him to eat. He was eating a pomegranate when King Ezekiel entered. Paul started to stand.

"Don’t get up. Resting your injured ankle is of upmost importance."

"Thank you." Paul had removed his beanie and leather duster. "I was wondering, will I get my knives back?"
"In time." King Ezekiel was smiling slightly. "You certainly gave my noble knights a run for the money. Three days we were in pursuit of you and if a bear trap had not been your misfortune we would not have caught you at all. My compliments to your prowess."

Paul grinned at the amusement in King Ezekiel`s voice. "Works quite well with the dead."

"But you are more than you seem aren`t you, Jesus? If it is trade you offer I am willing to negotiate. Do you like what you have seen so far?"

"Yes, I do." Paul was going to say more until Shiva crept into the room. He tensed up slightly. "Do not let Shiva disturb you. She likes you."

"That`s-that`s nice." Paul studied the tiger in silence. "How do you know?"

"I just know."...

Paul bent down and brushed his hand across where Shiva used to be chained. "Miss you, Shiva. You didn`t deserve to die in a pool of putrid toxic waste, even though you saved Zeke`s life."

"You alright, Paul?" Ezekiel entered from the left side of the stage.

"Just remembering my first visit."

Ezekiel smiled. "I knew you could be trusted the moment I laid eyes upon you." He then frowned. "I know when you are troubled, Paul." He looked around the auditorium and at the empty space beside the throne. "We are not what we once were."

Paul looked at him as if he wanted to say something, then sighed. "I better get back to the others."

"You know, I feel like tonight is to be our last and greatest thing. I don`t truly understand why. Carol says it was the appearance of the strange woman that has triggered these feelings. Sarah`s murder has tarnished things somewhat."

"Carol might be right. Be on the alert at all times." Paul quickly ran down the steps of the stage and was just as quickly out of the auditorium.

King Ezekiel stared after him a growing sense of sadness coming over him. "If only you were still alive my beautiful Shiva."
Home Again

Chapter Summary

Paul, Daryl, Aaron, and Gracie get settled back into their home.

The next day many farewells were said with a mixture of both joy and sadness. As each wagon or rider passed through the gate Ezekiel and Carol gave a personal goodbye and thank you. Paul, Daryl, and Aaron wore their armor to honor them and were the last ones out the gate. Promises were made that Ezekiel and Carol would visit Hilltop soon.

No incidents happened on the way back, even though Daryl felt they were being watched. As soon as they set their luggage down in their house and took off their armor, all four flopped on the sofa or in the chairs. Aaron sat in a rocking chair and Gracie cuddled on his shoulder yawning. She soon drifted off to sleep.

"She may be worn out. I do think she enjoyed herself."

"All the kids did. It’s good to see smiles on their faces. Even the youngest have lost their innocence in this world."

"Tara seems to have taken care of everything okay. I think she’ll appreciate the homemade licorice we got for her." Aaron heard a soft snore from Gracie. "I’m going to take her up to her room." He got up and left.

Paul rested his head on Daryl’s shoulder. "I found a whole box of books with a lot of classics in it including J. R. R. Tolkien at one of the booths. I now have a complete set of *The Hobbit/Lord of the Rings* trilogy."

"Sure we got room?" Daryl looked at the already packed bookcases.

"I’ll make room." Paul closed his eyes and smiled. "I told you I just want to read and escape and Middle Earth seems like a great place to escape to."

"I got the itch to do some huntin’. Gettin’ cold and we need meat." Dog nuzzled up to him and he reached down and petted him. "Ready for some huntin’, boy?" Dog wagged his tail. "And I don’t mean walker hands."

Paul snickered. "The newest chew toy. We need to find another pet store to raid."

Moments later Aaron reappeared. "She’s out for the rest of the afternoon." He sat down on the sofa next to them and rested his head on Daryl’s other shoulder. "Did I hear Rick say he was going to send those people he found to Hilltop?"

"That’s what he said." Paul huddled closer to Daryl who put his arm around him. "Maggie wants us there to scrutinize them when we go to the intersection to pick them up."

"Never go by first impressions. Why don’t he want them in Alexandria?"

"Rick told me the leader of the group, her name is Magna, is a disruptive force according to some
people on the Council. Whatever that means. I didn`t interact with them much while I was there. Maggie knows more about them and wants to inform us on the details. I`m surprised she agreed to take them in considering our space situation."

"Maybe she wants to keep things on the up and up since we`re getting along now. Rick is being more reasonable these days."

"He has his moments." Daryl put his other arm around Aaron. The three of them laughed. Dog went over to his favorite rug and curled up and went to sleep.

Paul stared at the pile of luggage in the center of the room. "I`m one of those people who doesn`t feel at home until the suitcases are unpacked. Not to mention the dirty laundry that needs to get done."

"We`re not getting anything done just sitting here. Maybe that`s our purpose in life."

"Don`t mind bein` lazy for a while."

Paul got up and went over to his bags. "You guys do what you want. I`d rather have this done than not done." He picked up his packs and went down the hallway to their small laundry room.

Aaron chuckled. "That`s our Paul. Always has to be busy at something."

"We can make out on the sofa if ya want."

"Then Paul would come in here and lecture us for being a couple of bums. Are you certain you want to feel his wrath?" There was a twinkle of amusement in Aaron`s eyes.

"I just wanna feel him come inside me tonight. As for his wrath, for a little guy he packs quite a punch."

"Both verbally and physically."

Paul peered at them from the entrance of the hallway. "I need more clothes to make a good sized load. Get off your asses and unpack."

"Yes, Mom." Aaron got up.

Paul just rolled his eyes. "You too, Dixon."

"Ya can be a real nag, Rovia, ya know that?" Daryl stood up.

"That`s because your clothes are always the dirtiest and I want a clean house and you`re a lazy butt SOB." Paul flashed him an obnoxious smirk.

Daryl threw up his arms in surrender and picked up his bag. "Anyone else sayin` that would find a crossbow bolt through his head."

"Look at it this way, Daryl, we give Paul what he wants, he`ll give us what we want." Aaron cocked one of his eyebrows.

"Like a hand job? A blow job? Cute. Just bring me your damn dirty clothes for now you house apes." Paul disappeared back down the hallway.

"Home sweet home." A snarky Daryl took out his dirty clothes.
"To be honest I’ve missed someone pestering me to get things done around the house. Eric was pretty fastidious when it came to housekeeping." Aaron gathered up his and Gracie’s dirty clothes.

"Spent a lot of time in laundromats when it was just Merle and me. No real place to call home. I’m startin’ to get used to this."

They walked down the hallway carrying their loads.

"Maybe we shouldn’t. In this world isn’t that when things start to unravel? You feel secure and all of a sudden it’s walkers, marauders, Saviors, and now Whisperers."

They entered the small laundry room which had been built for them in the back part of the former medical trailer. Paul was separating dark and light clothing into piles.

"Guess it always seems that way. We gotta feel secure someday."

"That’s true. It’s how we make it from one day to the next." Paul giggled when Aaron reached over to pinch his ass then dodged out of the way just in time.

"One day at a time is what Eric always told me." Aaron stood there deep in thought for a moment. "I really need to put those boxes away, not even look through them anymore. They are a part of a life I cherish. I want to make this new one work."

"The three of us can make this work. It’s what we want. Right?"

"I’m likin’ it. Better than the shit I’ve been through."

"I like it, too. It gives Gracie stability. One day I’ll have to explain it to her and I want to tell her that it’s a good thing, not a bad one."

"We keep showing how much we love each other, she’ll get it."

"All I know is we plan on lovin’ each other tonight." Daryl picked up a laundry basket.

"Sex, sex, sex, is that all you have in mind?" Paul’s tone was teasing.

Aaron grabbed Paul’s ass. "Yeah, I’ll take a piece of this tonight."

"Let’s hurry and get this done then." Daryl was ready for the oncoming night.

On that note they quickly went to work.
Waking up in bed that next morning was a slow process since the three of them were still sleepy from a long night of making love. Three naked men had to quickly cover themselves when they realized the footsteps of a young girl were padding down the hallway. Aaron got up to take care of Gracie and she smiled all morning because Aaron was smiling all morning. Paul and Daryl were also smiling and after Aaron dropped Gracie off for school, they headed for the stables. The three of them were still smiling and laughing as they joked about nothing while saddling a horse and hitching up the wagon, all that seeming secondary to their mirth.

"I thought I’d never see Jesus get attached to anyone." Bertie handed Maggie some water as the Hilltop leader waited at the gate.

"He’s really only attached to those two. He still has a lot of trouble connecting with people. The three of them share experiences that are very painful from their pasts."

Aaron was driving the wagon with Dog in back. Daryl would be on foot. Only Maggie and Paul were on horseback. It would be a slow journey to the intersection because they were going to be cautious, knowing they most likely were being watched. They were soon on their way.

"I hate this." Paul rode beside Maggie. "I look into the woods, through hills, behind rocks-- anywhere and I can feel eyes upon us. It’s like ants crawling all over your body all the time."

"We’ll pick up those new people, get those supplies, and get back as quickly as we can."

"Who exactly are these people? What did Rick say about them?"

"They were a group of five people Michonne and Rosita met on the road one day. They were being overwhelmed by some walkers. One of them had been injured and needed immediate medical attention. The group’s leader is named Magna. Apparently she is having trouble integrating into Alexandria so Rick thought they might do better at Hilltop. I told him I’m willing to take them in for the time being."

They arrived at the intersection and waited in silence. Daryl took the time to explore the nearby trees to make sure no Whisperers were hiding ready to ambush them. Even though he was satisfied that there weren’t any, the feeling of being watched persisted.

"There they are." Daryl saw a wagon and someone on horseback arrive from the direction of Alexandria. Rosita was in charge and she greeted everyone with a wave. In back of their wagon was a group of five people that Paul had remembered seeing off and on in Alexandria.

"We got a bit of a late start. I’m glad we made it on time." Rosita nodded to Scott who was driving the wagon. He reached underneath his seat and handed Daryl a large bag.

"These are their weapons. Mostly knives, some guns, and a bow and arrows." Daryl acknowledged with a nod.
"Let me introduce everyone. I’m Maggie Rhee, the leader of Hilltop. Driving the wagon is Aaron. On foot is Daryl and Jesus is on horseback."

"Magna and Yumiko. Luke. Sisters Connie and Kelly." Rosita pointed to each one as she said his or her name.

The group of five newcomers slowly climbed out of the wagon looking suspiciously at those from Hilltop. They grabbed what luggage they carried with them.

"I’m sure we can accommodate them."

"Be careful going back." Scott pointed to his left. "We saw a herd of walkers not far from here. We couldn’t determine if it included any Whisperers."

"Thanks for the heads up. We’ll be careful." Paul nodded and pointed to the wagon. "Go ahead and climb aboard. Don’t worry about Dog. The worse he’ll do is get fleas all over you, maybe a tick or two." His old instincts of when he had to recruit strangers he had just met kicked in much to his delight. It was something he hadn’t felt for a long time.

Magna used sign language and Connie laughed. Magna looked at Paul. "Connie is deaf. She does read lips."

Paul nodded in understanding. "Well, we best get going and hope to avoid that herd."

They waved as Rosita and Scott turned around and headed back to Alexandria.

Maggie addressed everyone. "We’ll need to make a slight detour. A couple of our runners hid some supplies at a nearby abandoned factory. We’ll need to retrieve them."

"Could we have our weapons back?" Magna’s demeanor was somewhat hostile.

"Why were they taken away in the first place?" Maggie could understand Magna’s hostility about being turned away from Alexandria. She wondered if there was something more behind it.

"Since we were new no one trusted us." Yumiko was cautious and didn’t seem as hostile.

"I’ll have to think about it."

"Try not to think about it too long. We’re unarmed out here." Magna hoped to connect with Maggie as one leader to another.

They threw their luggage into the back of the wagon and climbed in. Dog only sat there and tilted his head looking at them. The fact that he wasn’t barking or growling indicated to Daryl that this new group wasn’t that much of a threat. Dog even let Luke pet him. Paul made the signal and they started on their way down the road and turned down another one that led to the abandoned factory. When they reached their destination they heard the growls of the walker herd.

"Dammit." Maggie made sure everyone got their weapons ready.

"Please. We need our weapons, too. We can help you with this." Magna was obviously nervous about not being armed so near a herd.

Maggie looked at Paul for assurance. He nodded once. "Give them their weapons. They have the right to defend themselves."

Daryl set the bag down and opened it. He handed the weapons to them one by one. Magna took
most of the knives, Yumiko the bow and quiver of arrows. The rest were distributed accordingly. They climbed out of the wagon. The herd was blocking all entrances to the building, some even meandering in and out of the broken doors and windows as well as the torn up chain link fence.

"Be careful. Some of them may be Whisperers." Paul climbed down off of Echo and took out his sword.

"We`ve heard some things about them at Alexandria. How do we know the difference?" Magna hadn`t liked the idea of the Whisperers as much as the others.

Paul looked at her unwilling to answer. "We don`t. Yet."

"Kill `em all for now. Keep your eyes open for any that act more like people than walkers." Daryl knew Paul didn`t like that approach. For the moment there was no other choice at their disposal.

They moved as a unit getting the nearest walkers first. When one of them cried out as Magna stabbed it in the chest before she stuck it in the head, they knew there were Whisperers mixed in with the herd. Paul did his dance of kicking while slashing with his sword in one hand and one of his knives in the other, amazing the newcomers with his skill and fearlessness. When one of the Whisperer/walkers ran towards Paul with a knife, Yumiko raised her bow and shot an arrow directly into its head. They continued their carnage and when those that were Whisperers decided they were defeated they ran away. Aaron and Daryl started to chase after them.

"Let them go. Let`s just get our supplies and get out of here." Maggie was anxious to get the group back behind Hilltop`s fence.

They found the backpacks of supplies easily enough and undisturbed and put them in the wagon.

"Thank you." Paul rode up next to Yumiko in the wagon once they were on their way. "You`re a good group of fighters."

"We`ve fought the dead for a long time. We even lost one of our group recently."

"I`m sorry." Maggie was warming up to them even though she knew she still had to be cautious.

They quickened their pace and finally reached Hilltop. Daryl and Aaron took care of the supplies. Maggie wanted Paul to come with her while she interviewed the new guests, so they headed for her office.

"Do you get a good feeling about them? I wonder why they weren`t welcome in Alexandria." Aaron was leading the horse hitched to the wagon.

"Guess we`ll find out." Daryl was taking care of Echo. "They know how to hold their own in a fight. Besides, Dog didn`t tear them apart right away."

Aaron laughed. "If they are good fighters we`re going to need that. Sooner rather than later, I think. This was just a small skirmish today. It takes only so many small defeats before things escalate."

"Paul was makin`a bunch of notes before we went to bed last night. It`s got him baffled."

"That`s when it`s time to worry." Aaron knew Paul would obsess about how to fight the Whisperers until he got it figured out, which meant he most likely would be driving them crazy at times.

Daryl nodded almost as if he could read Aaron`s thoughts. "We ain`t gonna let him do anythin`
alone if we can help it." After securing Echo in his stall he slung one of the packs from the wagon over his back and headed for the storage truck.
Tara had been holding down the fort so she was already in the office when the others entered. She could tell that they had encountered some trouble. Paul assured her with a hand gesture that everyone was fine.

"Have a seat." Maggie took her place behind the desk. "Can we get you anything? Something to drink? Eat?"

Magna and the others looked at each other uncertain if Maggie was being sincere or testing them.

"We`re fine." Magna nodded and they all somewhat reluctantly sat down, except Magna, who preferred to stand.

"First of all I want to know why you weren`t allowed to stay in Alexandria."

Magna seemed unsure about speaking until the others gave their consent with nods. She cleared her throat. "We were voted out by their Governing Council. They added two more recently so there were seven total. Rick, Michonne, and Siddiq voted for us to stay. Eugene and the two new ones voted to kick us out. It was that preacher that gave the deciding vote. He`s hated us from the start."

"Father Gabriel has always been suspicious of new people." Paul had only somewhat warmed up to Father Gabriel.

"We were there for weeks. Why did it take him so long to decide to hate us?" Yumiko now felt confident to speak out.

"Who knows? Did any of you go near Negan?"

"I did." Luke was somewhat relaxed by Maggie`s demeanor. "He called to me from the window of his cell. Asked me who I was and if there was any news. I didn`t tell him my name. I only told him about the construction of the recreation hall. I didn`t think it was that big of a deal."

"Probably not. I`m sure there were residents who were suspicious and they may have influenced some people on the Council. As you may have heard Negan isn`t very popular around here."

"We heard some stories. We weren`t there so it wasn`t really our concern." Magna paused unsure about what she was going to ask. "Are you going to lock us up?"

Maggie couldn`t believe Magna would ask such a question. "Of course not. I was quite impressed at how you fought off those walkers and Whisperers. In fact, I think you might be a great asset to us."

Magna and the others exchanged uncertain but hopeful looks. Connie and Kelly signed to each other, joyful looks on their faces. Magna looked from Paul to Maggie. "We want to be. We`ll do anything that needs to be done. Runs. Laundry. Cooking. Anything."

"Settling In"

Chapter Summary

Maggie and Paul find out more about Magna`s group.
"We're primarily an agricultural community." Paul hoped they were being sincere. "Our busiest times are planting and harvest. We just brought in the harvest a few weeks ago, so right now we're working on construction projects."

"We welcome any skills that you may have to offer. If you want to learn more all you have to do is ask. We do require that you contribute to the community if you want to live with us. Right now our biggest project is preparing for winter. We also require that you have some fighting skills, which we saw earlier today so I don’t see a problem with that." Maggie turned to Tara. "What accommodations do we have?"

"We actually have some openings since JoBeth and her family left. We have those two rooms vacated upstairs by the Gonzales family who have moved into the trailer."

"Ah, new neighbors." Paul was actually glad that JoBeth was gone. He knew she and her family had left because she didn’t like living next door to the 'abominations of God sent by Satan to pervert the good people of Hilltop' as she had put it to Paul on numerous occasions.

Tara grinned completely understanding his glee. "Three bunks are open in the men’s bunkhouse. Then there are several tents available."

"Tents are out. Do you have any special requirements?"

"Yumiko and I are together." Magna exchanged a warm smile with her. "We share a bed. Kelly and Connie are sisters."

"I can sleep in the men’s bunkhouse, no problem." Luke seemed actually pleased at the prospect.

"Then we’ll give the two rooms here in the house to the women. Tara will show you."

Magna looked at Maggie, Paul, and Tara somewhat astonished. "You mean that’s all? You aren’t going to ask about our past before the world ended?"

"Everyone has some kind of past. We see it as a chance to renew ourselves, mold ourselves into what we’ve always wanted to be. Leaving the baggage of before behind." It was certainly something Paul had done. He knew if anyone he grew up with would see him now, he would be unrecognizable.

"Not many were kind to us in Alexandria, especially the preacher. Rick and Michonne tried to convince others that we were okay. The doctor was also kind. I was seriously injured and he treated me well." Yumiko showed them the scar on her shoulder.

"Jesus here is in charge of security and enforcing the rules." Maggie looked at him and grinned knowingly. "He’s fair and he’s tough. You can have a week to look over the place and decide what you want to do. If you decide to leave, we won’t stop you if that’s your choice. We will encourage you to stay. It’s safer behind the fence." She stood up. "Tara?"

"Come with me, please. I’ll show you to your rooms upstairs."

"I’ll take you to the bunkhouse, Luke."

They all left the office except Maggie.

"What was this place?" Magna looked around the foyer astonished at the fine pieces of furniture and the portraits.
"It was a history museum." Tara motioned to them from the stairway.

"I got an idea. I need to ask my housemates first. Why don’t the five of you come over to our place for dinner tonight. It’s trailer number one just to the right of the gate. It doesn’t look much like a trailer anymore. We like to call it home."

"Sure." Magna looked at him somewhat curiously. She couldn’t quite figure Paul out just yet. Or maybe she just wasn’t used to such kindness.

Tara showed them to their rooms then went back downstairs to talk with Maggie about the progress of Hilltop’s winterizing.

"They’re nicer to us here than when we first came to Alexandria." Yumiko was marveling at the splendor of the bedroom she and Magna would be sharing.

"We aren’t a threat to them. Nor will we be. I like this place better. Did you see that Jesus guy in action? I’ve never seen anyone fight like that before."

"Wasn’t he the one who got stabbed, almost killed?"

"Yeah." There was a knock at the door and Magna got up to answer it. Kelly and Connie came in and sat down and relaxed. Connie signed something.

"Yeah, it is nice here." Yumiko’s translation was both aloud and in sign language.

"We won’t cause trouble." Magna felt she couldn’t emphasize that enough.

"Maybe they’ll throw us out eventually, too." Kelly would never get over how they had been treated in Alexandria.

"We’ll have to make sure they don’t." There was another knock at the door. When Magna answered it an older woman stood there holding several blankets and sheets.

"I’m Tammy Rose. I brought you something to keep you warm. It’s going to be a cold night."

"Oh, sure. Come on in." Magna stepped to the side.

"Eduardo said he would bring you some firewood. I have enough here for both rooms."

Kelly and Connie took some of the blankets and sheets. "Is there a place where we can clean up?" Kelly could smell the freshness of the blankets and smiled.

"Down the hall there’s a bathroom. The towels are in the linen closet next to it." Tammy Rose moved out of Eduardo’s way when he entered carrying the first load of firewood. "There. You should be all set for now. If you’re hungry, Ms. Maitlin is always in the kitchen. She’s our head cook and a good one to boot. Welcome to Hilltop."

"Thanks." Magna smiled slightly. She knew she was going to like living at the farming community. It had been a long time since any of them had felt welcome anywhere.
Candlelit Dinner With A Little Devil

Chapter Summary

Magna and her group have dinner with Paul, Daryl, Aaron, and Gracie.

It was Aaron who answered the door when Magna, Yumiko, Kelly, Connie, and Luke arrived for dinner that evening. He wore a frilly apron indicating he had been working in the kitchen. The five of them shivered as a rather cold wind blew around them.

"Looks like we need to find you some coats." Aaron motioned for them to quickly come inside where it was warm. They jumped back slightly when a small girl seemed to appear out of nowhere just before they stepped inside.

"Be careful. If you are witches someone will drop a house on you."

"Gracie." Aaron’s voice had a note of caution in it. "She watched The Wizard of Oz just before you arrived. Sorry."

"That’s alright." Magna bent down towards Gracie. "My name is Magna."

"My name is mud. I need to tell Uncle Daryl what to do. Bye." Gracie took off to the other end of the living room where Daryl was building a fire in the fireplace.

Aaron waved his hand in dismissal. "Pay her no mind. She has the ears of an elephant and picks up all kinds of things." He closed the door before the cold wind blew in more dead leaves. "Make yourselves at home. Dinner isn’t quite ready yet. Can I get you something to drink? Coffee?"

"That sounds great, thanks." Yumiko indicated the empty seats and they all sat down. They looked around the living room that was mostly decorated with books, videos, CD’s, vinyl records and an odd assortment of art objects. A guitar had been set aside in one corner. Daryl’s crossbow hung from a hook on the wall, alongside Paul’s knives and sword, and Aaron’s weapons. There was also a flat-screen TV on a stand. Taped to the peninsular bar was a lobster bib, the bar separating the living room from the kitchen where Paul was busy preparing more food. The dining table off to the side had already been set with some candles that were already lit.

"Nice place. Did you do this yourselves?" Luke was mostly impressed with the music collection.

"Pretty much." Paul watched Aaron take rolls out of the oven. "Don’t forget to butter the tops."

"I’ll butter you if you keep telling me things I already know."

"You’re the one who told me you didn’t do a lot of cooking." Paul smiled at their guests. "Don’t worry. I know my way around a kitchen. You will not get food poisoning."

Magna and Yumiko exchanged amused looks.

"That log goes there, Uncle Daryl."

"Ya sure?"
"Yep. You promised I could light the pinecone with that long match."

The five of them could not believe how domestic things seemed to be. It was almost unnerving. At the same time it was comforting and relaxing. Just the smells coming from the kitchen alone helped to remind them that there were still some places in the world that meant people were still alive and thriving.

"She`s six going on a hundred and six." Aaron brought them all mugs of coffee. There was also some sugar and cream on the tray.

About ten or so minutes later dinner was ready and Paul set a roast chicken on the table. Aaron set out some baked potatoes, butter, sour cream, and the rolls. Paul set out a bottle of wine. Everyone sat down to eat, eager to dig into the food.

"I can`t remember the last time we ate this good." Luke marveled at the food on his plate, not really believing he would ever eat this well again.

"There`s apple pie for dessert. Made by Ms. Maitlin, Hilltop`s best cook." Aaron indicated the pie that rested on the peninsular bar.

"We already had a lunch made by her. The best I ever had." Not someone who relaxed all that easily, Magna was now feeling secure.

Daryl helped Gracie fill her plate before sitting down. Aaron poured everyone`s leaded crystal wine glasses with wine and the tumblers with water. "We raided every kind of store and house we could find. You`d be surprised what people leave behind. The plates came from a Pier One Imports warehouse." The utensils had faux pearl handles and there were even linen napkins for everyone.

"I found a Stradivarius violin in this mansion. Being a music teacher in my former life it`s kind of cool to have it." Luke grinned somewhat sheepishly.

"He still carries it around everywhere we go." Kelly translated Connie`s signing. "Don`t ask me how it`s survived this long."

Paul sat down at the head of the table. "We only get the good stuff out for special occasions. Otherwise it`s the cheap plastic stuff."

Magna inspected her fork and set it down. "You really didn`t have to go all out for us."

"Nonsense. We`ve been wanting to entertain for a long time." Paul began to fill his plate. "When was the last time you were treated like decent human beings?"

"Feels like almost never." Luke now spoke with his mouth full.

"Excuse me for asking, does everyone call you Jesus because you are religious? After our experience with the last religious person, you understand our caution." Religious people had always been a sore spot with Magna.

Paul reached behind and untied the string to his bun. He let his hair fall down to his sides. "This is why." He laughed slightly. "And I`m not religious at all."

The five guests looked at each other with expressions of relief. A lot of their misgivings and tension created by being in Alexandria were quickly melting away.
"Eat up. Food is getting cold." Aaron tapped the side of Gracie`s plate, indicating she needed to not be fussy and eat.

After eating dinner they ate their dessert in the living room drinking more wine and enjoying the coziness of the fire, Dog going from one person to the other wanting attention, which they gladly gave. The wine had helped them all relax as the five newcomers related some of their experiences since the fall of the world. Magna and Yumiko felt even more welcome when Paul, Daryl, and Aaron sat on the sofa. Daryl had his arm around Paul and Aaron leaned against Daryl on his other side.

"So you`re--." Yumiko didn`t need to finish her question.

"Yeah. All three of us." Paul pointed to her and Magna. "And you two are a couple."

"Right." Magna laughed.

Connie signed something to them.

"Connie says thank you for such a wonderful dinner and making us feel welcome." Kelly noticed Gracie observing her.

"How come she talks with her hands?"

"My sister is deaf."

Gracie looked at Aaron questioningly. "She can`t hear. Her hand gestures are what is called American Sign Language. It`s how she communicates with people."

"Like some people do with a middle finger. I`m not supposed to do that one."

There was general laughter.

"I`m glad you feel welcome." Paul knew they were trustworthy.

"You`re outsiders. Like us. There are those around here that can be somewhat judgmental. Just ignore them."

Connie held up her hand to Gracie, putting up her thumb, index finger, and pinkie and keeping her ring finger and middle finger down, holding her palm outwards and waving it back and forth slightly. Gracie imitated the gesture.

"That means 'I love you'." Kelly winked at Gracie.

"I told her I loved her back so we`re even." Gracie high-fived with Magna and Yumiko.

"We raided a costume store and found these devil horn headbands. Feel free to wear them when someone makes an anti-gay comment." Paul`s sense of humor also made their guests feel relaxed.

"I don`t need horns. I`m already a little devil." Gracie held fingers above her head imitating small horns.

"I don`t think anyone is going to argue with you, punkin."

"Can I go play in my room? I have some dolls to torture."

"Go on. And stay off the floor, it`s drafty." Aaron had to yell since she took off at a run up the
"Is she your biological daughter?" Kelly had to get a hold of herself from laughing at the girl’s antics.

"No. We found her at an outpost. I had just lost my husband. I felt like I needed to adopt her and haven’t regretted it since."

When the second bottle of wine was empty Magna, Yumiko, Kelly, Luke, and Connie decided it was time to leave and go to bed. Aaron promised to find them some coats. They had enjoyed the evening and felt they had made some new friends. The almost icy cold wind whipped harder and he quickly had to close the door after they left.

"That went well." Aaron looked at Daryl who had been quietly observing the group.

"I think they’re alright. No worries."

"They just needed to feel human again." Paul got up. "Who’s going to help me with the dishes?"

"I’ll do them. You did most of the cooking and set the table."

"I’ll help ya."

"The wine’s made me sleepy anyway." Paul slowly stroked Dog and eventually nodded off to sleep on the sofa.
I Smell Sex

Chapter Summary

A little Daaron action. Not as much smut as you might think (or like).

Aaron and Daryl finally finished doing the dishes and cleaning the rest of the kitchen as well as the dining area. Daryl was about to say something to Paul when he heard a soft snore from the area of the sofa.

"Got to be the wine."

"Paul and alcohol. I know he`s not much of a drinker. Let him stay there for a while. I don`t want to disturb him."

"He`s worryin` himself sick about them Whisperers. Wish I knew how to help him."

Aaron went over and covered up Paul with a blanket. He had his arm around Dog, the canine content to just curl up next to him. Daryl built up the fire again to keep Paul warm, then leaned over and gently kissed Paul on the forehead.

"I think I`ll go put Gracie to bed. It`s getting to be her bedtime anyway." Aaron also gave Paul a kiss and stroked some stray strands of hair away from his face. Paul was warm and alive. The image of his ride from the cemetery briefly flashed in his mind when Paul was cold and barely breathing. He shook the image away.

"I`ll be up in a bit." Daryl turned to look at him.

"Okay." Aaron headed upstairs.

"C`mon, Dog. Ya gotta go outside and do your business."

Dog reluctantly uncurled himself and got off the sofa. Paul stirred somewhat but didn`t wake up. Daryl let Dog out for about ten minutes and when he heard the scratch at the door he let him back inside. Dog decided to go over to his rug in front of the fireplace so Daryl went upstairs. Aaron had just closed the door to Gracie`s room.

"I found her asleep on the floor. She woke up a little when I helped her with her pajamas then she went right back to sleep in her bed."

"At least Dog and Paul are settled for now." Daryl headed for their bedroom.

"But you and I aren`t." Aaron closed the door of their bedroom. "I think I know what`s on your mind."

"I don`t wanna push anythin` ya don`t want."

"Never said I didn`t want." Aaron sat on the edge of the bed smiling. "I wanted to give you and Paul some space. I know you needed to feel comfortable in a relationship. Paul needed to know he could have some security, too."
Daryl sat on a chair and removed his shoes. "I`m ready for just the two of us, too."

"Sure." Aaron took off his boots, then his shirt. He patted the spot beside him on the bed. Daryl got up and sat down beside Aaron who leaned over and kissed him on the lips. He then removed his prosthesis. "The one-armed man. Call me 'stumpy'."

Daryl snickered. "Don`t need your arm for what we have in mind."

"You`re right. We don`t." They kissed again. "You know, I just realized something. The three of us have some major scars we`ve acquired throughout our lives, before and after the world fucked up. Maybe that`s why we understand each other so well."

Daryl removed his vest and shirt and they reclined on the bed stroking and kissing.

"Our scars made us who we are. Took me a long time to realize that." They kissed hard, their tongues, along with their hands, exploring each other`s body.

"I just know I`ll be forever grateful that you were there when my accident happened."

"Ya got a lotta courage, Aaron. I saw it that day. Then lettin` Paul teach ya how to fight again. That takes courage, too." Daryl ran his hands down Aaron`s chest. "Never thought ya were a coward."

Aaron smiled slightly. "I almost decided to retreat from the world. Paul wouldn`t let me. He wasn`t afraid to kick my ass. I was angry at him for a long time until I realized he was right. I almost died myself that night in the cemetery."

"We both did. We all need to put that night behind us. Forget about it for now." Daryl reached up and stroked Aaron`s beard. "I think Paul`s is softer."

"Paul uses the right shampoos." Aaron kissed him deeply his hand all over Daryl`s back and moved beneath his pants to massage his buttocks.

Daryl responded with a moan of pleasure, his hand reaching down the front of Aaron`s pants. He could feel Aaron`s cock getting hard. "Looks like we both need to take care of somethin`."

Aaron laughed. "We need our pants off for that."

There was a slight chill in the room since the electric heater was turned on low to save energy, both shivering as they removed their pants. Daryl quickly embraced Aaron pulling him down onto the bed. They kissed until they worked up to a sexual high and for the next twenty minutes made love to each other. When they had finished they both began to shiver again.

"I better turn the electric heat up. Don`t want Gracie to get sick." Aaron got up and quickly slipped on his bathrobe in case she might get up to use the bathroom. In the hallway he turned up the thermostat then came back into the bedroom. "Do you think we should go get Paul? You know how cold he easily gets." Daryl had already slipped on some pajamas and was cleaning up the bed.

"That fireplace will die down. Yeah, we better." They went downstairs and found Paul was still asleep. The flames were lower and would soon be embers. Daryl gently shook Paul. "Wake up, asshole."

Paul slowly opened his eyes. He saw both of them and smirked. "I smell sex."

Aaron rolled his eyes. "Nothing gets past you. You need to come upstairs. It`s a cold night."
"Not in the mood." Paul yawned and closed his eyes.

"We`re just gonna keep ya warm. Ya can sleep all ya want. Want me to carry ya?"

"Why not?" Paul opened his eyes and looked at Daryl as if to dare him. Daryl didn`t pay him any mind and just picked Paul up and slung him over his shoulder, blanket and all. "Oh, you big adorable strapping brute. The muscles!"

Aaron laughed all the way as they headed upstairs. It was comical how they put Paul`s pajamas on as he playfully tried to get some sleep. They eventually got him ready. Aaron took off his bathrobe to put on his pajamas and got a catcall whistle from Paul when he temporarily stood naked.

"Be quiet. You`ll wake up Gracie."

"Ya better hurry and get dressed. Just in case she is awake."

"I`m wondering, has anyone ever asked her about us?" Paul lounged on the bed.

"A couple kids have. Since Hershel comes over here to play all the time he doesn`t. He sees it as something natural that the three of us are together."

"I hate to think she would ever be bullied about us. Just because the world ended doesn`t make anybody any more enlightened."

"She`s strong. And a bit strong-willed. I`m not sure if she was born tough or we made her tough because we`re nurturing her that way."

"Even though I have to rein her in sometimes in my classes, she will show the others what it is I`m trying to explain. She`s quick, she pays attention, and when she gets older and her coordination gets better, she will kick ass."

Aaron smiled. "I`m glad to hear that. I want her to survive, even after I am long gone."

"Which ain`t gonna be for a long time. Let`s get some sleep." Daryl crawled in bed next to Paul on the side closest to the door.

"Good idea. You wore me out." Aaron then crawled in on the other side of Paul. Daryl reached over and shut off the light.
Mr. Do-Gooder

Chapter Summary

Paul does a good deed. Maggie reminds him about her rules for Hilltop.

In colder weather Paul tended to wear his hair down and wore his beanie as well as several layers of clothing underneath his leather duster. The wind was still cold the following morning as he made his way over to Barrington House for the daily meeting with Maggie and Tara. Magna was carrying some firewood inside when they both arrived at the door at the same time.

"Looks like you recovered from drinking all that wine last night." Magna couldn’t help teasing him.

Paul grinned and noticed she was having trouble with her load. "Can I help you with that?"

"Thanks." She handed it to him. "We haven’t had much of a chance to build up a lot of physical strength yet. That preacher wouldn’t let us wander around much."

"He never used to have such a rod up his ass." They headed upstairs.

"I think it was because I was in a women’s prison when the outbreak happened. I was lucky to escape." They went into the room she shared with Yumiko. "The others are out looking around. Aaron brought us our coats."

"If you aren’t warm enough we do have a lot of winter clothing to choose from. Feel free to go through the boxes in the storage truck." Paul set the logs down by the fireplace and even started to build a fire.

There was a knock on the door frame and Tara peered in. "There you are, Jesus. Maggie is waiting."

"I’ll be down as soon as I get this fire started. Five minutes?" He held up five fingers.

"Okay. I’ll tell her you’re being Mr. Do-Gooder. She’ll understand." Tara left.

"Looks like you’re pretty popular around here."

"I sometimes wish I could understand why. I just do what I do. I’m the type of person that likes to be left alone and work alone, especially outside the fence." Paul finished scraping away the ashes and placed the logs inside the fireplace. He carefully lit a pinecone and soon a warm inviting fire was burning. "There. All set."

"Thanks." Paul turned to leave but Magna stopped him. "You’re pretty good with those knives. How’d you learn to do all that and the martial arts stuff?"

"I did a lot of odd jobs after I left the foster home system. Didn’t have much of an education so there weren’t a lot of opportunities. I wound up in a circus for a couple years working for the acrobats and a knife thrower. I studied the martial arts as a child and a lot of other fighting techniques on my own when I got older. Throw in a little parkour and things just naturally evolved."
Never thought I’d ever have use for them.”

"I was in prison for a long time. It was an education. A bit rough at times so I just kept telling myself I could take it. I don’t know if being a lesbian factored into that or not.” Magna sat down on the bed and seemed to stare at nothing. She wasn’t one to reveal a lot about herself to people she didn’t know that well. However, there was something different about Paul that made her feel comfortable.

"I’m the last person to ever judge people, Magna. People like you and me have to develop a coat of Teflon. I try to see the inherent good in people. It’s in everyone, even the worst of us.” He stood up. "I better get downstairs. Maggie can get a little impatient with me when I’m distracted." Paul left, carrying the bucket of ashes with him.

When he entered Maggie’s office he set the bucket down by the door. Maggie looked at him with some amusement. "There are chimney sweep brooms in the closet by the kitchen if you have a mind to do that."

"Not really. I was doing a good deed."

"So Tara tells me." She and Tara looked at each other and laughed. Maggie then became serious. "Daryl tells me you’ve been staying awake nights worrying about the Whisperers. What’s that all about?"

Paul sighed. "Nothing really. I can’t seem to find a strategy on how to fight them. Charging into their groups or camps is too dangerous since we can’t tell who’s a walker and who’s not. Daryl even suggested shooting them all in the legs and if they keep coming they’re a walker, if they fall they’re human. All that does is waste bullets, arrows, bolts, or whatever. We can’t even be sure of their complete numbers--."

"I understand all that. I can’t have you not being at your best if they do attack. Get some rest and get some sleep."

Paul seemed to sulk a bit. "I’ll try." He looked up. "What I really need to do is get out there and look around, gather some intelligence."

"No. I meant it when I said no one is to go out alone anymore. That also applies to you."

"I won’t jeopardize anyone else’s life." Paul’s tone became insistent.

Maggie stood up and came around the desk so she could stand toe to toe with him, a stern look on her face. "Dammit, Jesus, I know you need to be out there. It’s too dangerous. You either take at least two people with you or you don’t go out at all. Is that understood?"

Paul met her gaze for a moment then looked down. "Perfectly."

"I don’t want to rein you in. I will if you don’t follow my rules. No one is above them in this community, including you."

"Alright." Paul looked around the room somewhat flustered. "If there isn’t anything else I have a class to teach."

"We’re done here." Maggie backed away from him.

Paul quickly left the office, grabbing the ash bucket on his way out.
Tara watched him leave with a look of concern on her face. "Are you sure you weren’t too harsh with him? He seemed on the verge of crying."

"I don’t need him getting any more ideas in his head that it’s okay to take stupid chances, especially on his own."

Tara nodded, even though she was uncertain Maggie’s approach towards Paul was right.

After dismissing his karate class for the older children and teenagers Paul retreated to the stables where he found his horse Echo. He took the time to brush him then fed him some oats and carrots, speaking in soft tones while he stroked his mane.

"I’m so worried, Echo. I’m not sure I can protect anyone anymore. I can’t seem to figure these Whisperers out. I’m not allowed to try and find out more about them." He wiped away a couple tears. "If people die it will be my fault for not doing enough. For not warning people enough ahead of time."

There was the sound of footsteps walking on hay. Paul looked up and noticed Tara in the next stall. "Jesus? Are you okay?" Her voice was soft and low.

"I didn’t realize anyone was there." He wiped away a couple more tears. "I’m sorry."

"For what? For being human?" She leaned over the top of the fence that divided the stalls. "I know Maggie can be a bit demanding. I don’t think she’s being unreasonable."

"She wants to protect me, I get that. She doesn’t want me to get stabbed again. Or worse. Neither do I. I can feel that something terrible is going to happen, something we may have been able to prevent."

"It’s hard predicting the future, Jesus. She said you can go out if you don’t go alone. How about Daryl and Aaron?"

Paul sighed. "I thought of that. If the risk is too great why risk all of our best chances all at once? I know Daryl and Aaron would reject that kind of thinking, they are as much at a loss as I am."

Tara paused to think for a moment. "How about those new people? They seem eager to help out. Magna told me you guys gave them a wonderful dinner last night."

"Just because they are new doesn’t mean they deserve to have their lives more jeopardized above anyone else’s."

Tara looked at him, crossing her arms. "Jesus, we’ve all been in jeopardy since the world changed. You can’t make up the rules to fit your sense of right and wrong anymore. There are those who will volunteer. Ask them. If they say 'no', then so be it. If they say 'yes' it means they are willing to take as much risk as you. Don’t make me jump over this fence and beat you over the head with what I just told you."

Paul chuckled and smiled. "And I know you would, too." He then yawned.

"Now get out of here and go get some sleep. Or will I have to hit you with a crowbar for that to even happen."

"I surrender." Paul walked over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Tara watched as he headed towards his home before deciding to groom the horse in her stall.
There Be Whisperers Outside The Fence

Chapter Summary

Daryl, Paul, Magna, and Yumiko take on a small group of Whisperers who have camped too close to Hilltop.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day dawned with light snow flurries falling from the sky. It was late October and a cold front seemed to grip the world and wouldn’t let go. Paul didn’t let it deter him from his plans for that day. He approached Magna and Yumiko after enjoying the weekly breakfast buffet always served on Wednesday mornings.

"I need a couple volunteers to come with me for an excursion outside the fence. Interested?"

"Sure." Magna glanced at Yumiko.

"It could be risky." Paul’s voice contained somewhat of a warning.

"We’re in." Yumiko nodded and she exchanged a grin with Magna.

The two women were eager to work with Paul having seen him in action. He was one of the few good people they had had any real contact with. Even in the limited time they had known him they realized what a tragedy it would have been if he had been killed.

"Okay. Dress warm and bring plenty of water and some food in case we get caught in a bad storm. You’ll need your weapons and you can get a couple guns from the armory. Tell Eduardo I sent you. Meet me at the front gate in twenty minutes." He quickly left to get his own weapons.

Magna and Yumiko high-fived each other and shared a kiss before heading upstairs. They didn’t see Daryl watching them as he finished his mug of coffee.

At the gate Paul waited somewhat impatiently for them to show up. He heard footsteps behind him. Expecting the two women he turned around and smiled. Instead it was Daryl who stood there with his crossbow slung across his back.

"No. You’re not going."

"Who said?"

Magna and Yumiko came up beside him. "Here we are." Magna finished securing her knives.

"I said."

Daryl shrugged. "Ya don’t tell me what to do, asshole. I’m comin’ with ya." He calmly lit up a cigarette. "You’ll need a tracker if you’re gonna do what I think you’re gonna do about them Whisperers that were spotted."
Paul growled to himself. He knew that arguing with Daryl once the hunter had made up his mind was impossible. "Alright." He signaled for the gate to be opened and they headed out on foot going in the direction of the woods. The snow came down a little bit harder but not enough to obscure their view or hinder their footing.

"Why didn`t Aaron come with you?"

"He said Gracie had a cold and wanted to stay behind."

"So he would have come too. I didn`t tell anybody I was going anywhere."

"Overheard ya at breakfast. I know ya too well, Paul."

Paul looked at Magna and Yumiko. "He knows me too well. Imagine that." They both laughed.

Daryl pointed to the ground. "They`ve been through here. Gettin` too close for comfort."

Paul knelt down beside him. "They`ve become overconfident with the fact that they can take us by surprise, evading us when we spot them. What we need to do is turn the tables on them a bit."

Daryl nodded. "We gotta find out how many there are in this group. I can track `em to their camp easily enough."

"Let`s do it." He turned to Magna and Yumiko. "Still up for this?"

"What are we going to do when we get there?" The determination in Magna`s voice gave them all a sense of confidence that she was as ready for the fight as much as anyone else. She was not going to back out, neither was Yumiko. Never had they backed out of a fight once they committed themselves.

"I haven`t figured that part out yet."

Daryl only shook his head. However, he was confident in Paul`s ability to make up things on the fly. He knew that Paul was already feeling happier inside. This was what he was meant to do.

The snow kept coming down and piling up in spots and Daryl tracked several trails that the Whisperers often used. After figuring out which one was the freshest he followed it. They stopped when they heard the growling sounds of walkers. Paul held his finger up to his lips indicating for all of them to be quiet. He and Daryl knelt down beside each other as soon as the walkers came into sight. They were being held together in a roped off area of trees.

"Them`s all walkers."

"So that`s how they keep them when they aren`t using them to hide."

Yumiko made a soft hissing sound and pointed. She had spotted the Whisperers huddled around a campfire eating some fresh kill. The lower part of their masks were rolled up so they could easily put the food into their mouths. She counted them and flashed the fingers of her hand--five-five-three--meaning she had spotted thirteen altogether. Paul gave her a thumbs-up and indicated for them to retreat back a ways.

"Ain`t ever seen `em separated from `em before."

"We have to keep it that way." Paul was silent as he thought of a plan. "We can`t allow them to get to the walkers. Magna, I want you and Yumiko to make your way to the other side. Once there
create a diversion of some kind. Draw their attention away from the walkers."

"You want them to chase us?" Magna wasn`t certain she liked what Paul had said.

"Yes. Be sure to keep at a safe distance. Once you`ve lured them about, a hundred yards say, circle your way back to us. Don`t let them see you at any time."

"What are you going to do?" Yumiko understood that with Paul in charge, she knew whatever he had in mind would work.

"First we`ll take care of them walkers. Once ya get back we`ll take care of all of `em."

Paul waited then gave the signal. "Go!" The two women quickly moved out.

He and Daryl crept closer to the walkers and waited. At the sound of some crazy yodeling noises the Whisperers around the campfire suddenly became alert. One pointed to the walkers. Another, most likely the group`s leader, shook his head and instructed everyone to go towards where they heard the yodeling. The small camp cleared out pretty fast and Paul and Daryl moved swiftly towards the roped off walkers and within a couple minutes had killed all of them. Moments later Magna and Yumiko returned.

"They got nervous and are on their way back to the camp." Even though Magna was panting, she still had the energy to take the Whisperers on.

"Everybody get ready."

Daryl raised crossbow and Yumiko her bow and arrow and at the first sign of the Whisperers let bolt and arrow soar into the air taking out the closest two. They quickly reloaded. Magna took out two pistols and with one in each hand started shooting. They then realized that Paul had disappeared. Then they heard a noise coming from behind the Whisperers. Paul leaped out of his hiding place, both knives at the ready and took down two more. He whirled around in opposing circles knocking down four others with swift kicks. Daryl, Magna, and Yumiko ran towards the remaining Whisperers and soon all thirteen had been put down.

"We got lucky they were separated from the walkers." Daryl ripped off a couple masks.

Paul looked around at the carnage. "I really wish we didn`t have to resort to killing them."

"They ain`t gonna negotiate, Paul. They wanna be animals. They certainly see us as animals."

"I know you`re right, Daryl. Good job, ladies." He high-fived Magna, then Yumiko.

"We thought for a moment they had spotted us. They sure move fast." Magna quickly put away her weapons.

"More importantly, you moved faster. I didn`t even see you leave." Yumiko looked at Paul, still in awe of his skills and swiftness.

"That`s cuz he was showin` off." Daryl casually lit a cigarette.

"You got another one of those?" Magna had not had a cigarette for the longest time. Daryl got out his pack and offered her one, then handed her a couple matches.

The snow had not stopped and it was getting colder. "Let`s go home." Paul shivered, more than he usually did in such weather. "I`m freezing."
"Do you think our attack will deter them?" Magna hoped that was the case as they started back through the woods.

"Probably not. But it might give them enough pause to know that we can win at this game, too."

"We need every advantage we can get." Daryl gave Paul an appreciative nod.

It didn’t take them long to get back to Hilltop. Daryl noticed that Paul was still shivering a bit too much for his liking. They quickly parted ways with Magna and Yumiko when they got home. The first thing that Daryl did was pluck Paul down in front of the fireplace, building a warm fire and wrapping a blanket around him. He hugged him close, rubbing Paul’s back to warm him up.

Paul rested his head on Daryl’s shoulder. "I thought I dressed warmer."

Daryl liked how solid Paul’s arms and shoulders felt in his embrace. "I’ll get ya warmed up in no time. Hope ya ain’t comin’ down with somethin’."

Chapter End Notes

I will soon be filling in the ? in the number of chapters slot. So, yes, there is an end to this thing in case you’re wondering. ;)
"We`ve got four people down with what seem to be colds. I think it`s something more." Enid was reporting to Maggie, Tara, and Paul at the next morning`s meeting in Maggie`s office. "I`ve already sent for Siddiq."

"Who are they?" The last thing Maggie needed was an epidemic.

"So far there`s Kal, John Kaye, Phil Myers, and Gracie."

"Phil and Gracie, Children." Maggie took a moment to ponder what Enid had just said. "What are their symptoms?"

"Excessive coughing, some sneezing, sinus and chest congestion, high fever, chills, headache, loss of appetite--a lot of symptoms similar to the flu. I checked out the pigs, they all seem to be fine so they aren`t the source. I`ve been pushing fluids and Ms. Maitlin`s chicken soup, they only give some relief. Those who are sitting with patients I`ve required to wear masks."

"Aaron`s been with Gracie most of yesterday and all night." Paul`s voice sounded somewhat hoarse.

"Antibiotics?" Maggie had a feeling they most likely were low on that particular medication.

"We have some. Our runners are already out looking for more."

"You might tell them to check out veterinary hospitals and schools. They carry the same drugs, though I might be concerned about expiration dates."

"Is there a way to get a message to Georgie? Maybe they have something." Paul held his arm up to his face as he coughed and cleared his throat.

Maggie turned around in her chair and gazed out the window. It had snowed more overnight. The sun was out so she hoped maybe there would be some melting. She sighed as if she was reluctant to talk about Georgie and her group. "There`s a signal tower about ten miles from here. We can radio them from there. A hunting party is going out today so I`ll ask them." There was a knock on the door frame. "Yes?"

A woman wearing a mask stood in the doorway. "I need to speak to Dr. Enid."

"This is Franny, one of my nurses." Enid went over to her and they conferred in low voices. The nurse then left. "We`ve got five more cases. Luke, Edgar, and three more children."

"Damn." Maggie got up and paced. "Just like the prison."

"Pardon?" Tara had heard some of the others mention the prison. She was uncertain what Maggie exactly meant.
"When we were at the prison we had an epidemic of some kind of swine flu. The pigs may not be at fault with this, that doesn’t matter." Maggie looked directly at Enid. "Everyone needs to be tied down to their beds."

"Isn’t that a little excessive?"

"No. Trust me on this. If anyone dies--I don’t need to spell out the consequences do I?"

Enid nodded. "Let me know when Siddiq gets here." She left the office.

"This is all we need. Some kind of epidemic." Maggie threw a sheaf of papers across the room. "Sorry. I almost lost Glenn at the prison. The children need to be isolated, especially toddlers and babies. Any signs of symptoms must be looked after immediately. People are to remain in their rooms, houses, or trailers unless it’s an emergency."

"We’ll spread the word." Tara exchanged a look with Paul. They quickly left the office. In the foyer Paul sneezed.

"I’m fine." Tara stared at him. "Just a tickle in my nose."

"As long as you’re sure."

"I’m sure. Let’s go." He grabbed his coat and beanie and headed out the door.

Word spread fast and the best thing to do was to keep people from panicking. Ms. Maitlin and Bertie were two of the few allowed to remain out of their rooms since they were responsible for keeping any medicinal foods and water on tap in the kitchen.

"Surprised this don’t happen more often." Daryl hauled a wagon of firewood towards the hospital.

"You ever been sick?"

"Used to get a lot of colds. Got the chicken pox as a kid. You?"

"Are you kidding? Foster homes are hotbeds for all kinds of bugs." Paul went into a coughing fit. "Dammit, can’t get that tickle out of my nose and now my throat. Have you talked to Aaron?"

"A little. Won’t leave Gracie’s side. She’s awful sick."

"Aaron would be devastated if anything happened to her." Paul coughed again. "I’ll be at the house, see if I can find something to soothe my throat." He headed in that direction, Daryl’s gaze following him for some time before resuming his course towards the hospital.

Before going in Daryl pulled the bandana over his face and grabbed a load of firewood. He passed by Aaron who was holding vigil over Gracie’s bed. Gracie was awake but looked quite sick.

"Hey, swee’ pea. Ya not feelin’ good, huh?"

"I’d rather be stuck in the hospitall."

Aaron rolled his eyes. "That’s her name for the stables because a horse spit some oats on her when it was startled."

"Ya get some rest and do what Dr. Enid tells ya. Do it for your Uncle Daryl."

"Okay." Gracie smiled and closed her eyes.
Daryl placed a supportive hand on Aaron`s shoulder then continued with his work on stoking the two fireplaces. While he was lighting the kindling in one of them a woman cried out.

"Phil`s dead! Phil`s dead!" Enid and Franny rushed over to her. "He couldn`t breathe. He`s dead."

"Calm down, Gretchen." Enid put her arm around the distraught woman.

"He`s dead." Gretchen Myers burst into tears and turned her back. Daryl slowly got up and came over to them and looked down at the young boy.

Enid looked at him. "Daryl, will you take care of him?"

Daryl nodded and took out a small knife. He stuck it into the boy`s head and then put the sheet over his face. When he went back to the fireplace he couldn`t finish his task quickly enough. About an hour later he finally had all the firewood stacked and was ready to return home. The sadness he felt was overwhelming as memories of the epidemic at the prison rushed through his mind. When he got home he found Paul sitting by the fireplace wrapped in a blanket drinking some water.

Paul couldn`t help noticing the troubled look on Daryl`s face. "What happened?" His voice was more hoarse than it had been earlier.

"Phil Myers died."

"Gracie?"

"She`s holdin` on. Ya cold?"

"Can`t get warm. Got a headache, too. Took some Aspirin." He coughed and drank some water.

Daryl came over and sat down beside him. "Just like the prison. So many got sick. Died. Some were in the cells and they turned. We barely could keep up at times."

"Maggie sometimes talks about the prison." Paul went into a coughing fit and dropped his water on the floor.

Daryl reached over to comfort him, his hand brushing across Paul`s forehead. "Dammit, Paul, you`re burnin` up."

"Am I? I`m so cold." Paul felt faint as the headache pounded his temples and he passed out.

Daryl picked him up and carried him out, hurrying towards the hospital. He shoved his bandana over his face and practically kicked the door open startling everyone inside. Aaron looked up. As soon as he saw who was being brought in his heart sank.
Paul is the latest to take ill in the epidemic.  
WARNING: Brief descriptions of sexual assault.

"Maggie`s orders." Enid watched Franny strap Paul`s wrists to the hospital bed. Everyone wore masks or a bandana when around the patients.

"What do ya mean 'Maggie`s orders'?” Daryl`s quick temper was on edge since Paul had fallen ill. "He ain`t gonna die."

"We don`t know that." Siddiq was standing behind him. He had arrived at Hilltop about half-an-hour earlier.

"Makes sense. I`m not going to die if I can help it." Paul`s voice was almost gone and sounded weak.

"We need to get some fluids going. Hang in there, Jesus." Siddiq patted him on the leg then left to tend to other patients.

"I ain`t gonna leave your side." Daryl pointed at finger at Paul.

"Who`s going to stoke the fireplaces? That`s your job."

"When I ain`t doin` that, I`m right here. I ain`t doin` it now." Daryl grabbed a nearby chair and stubbornly planted himself next to the bed. "What can I do?"

"I`ll bring you some ice water and you can apply cold compresses to his head. It might help to bring the fever down." Enid squeezed Daryl`s shoulder.

"Don`t argue with him, Enid." Paul smirked. "He`s now an expert nurse."

"Hush. Even when you`re sick ya can`t shut up."

Paul closed his eyes. He would have smirked some more if he didn`t feel so terrible.

Gracie had fallen asleep so Aaron took the time to come over. "I think about everyone almost keeled over when you brought him in here."

"He was actin` strange earlier. Ya know Paul, he won`t admit to nothin`."

Aaron looked around the ward. "I hate seeing everyone strapped to the beds. Seeing Gracie like that--."

"She`ll pull through. Ya gotta believe that. She`s strong." Daryl reached over and squeezed Aaron`s hand.

"At least her fever is down so that`s a plus."
Franny came back with an IV bag and prepared to put it in Paul’s arm. Rosita came over with a bowl of ice.

"What are ya doin’ here?"

"I came with Siddiq. Our nurse practitioner stayed behind. I do know how to nurse." She set the bowl down and handed Daryl a cloth. "Apply it constantly for as long as you need. We’ll take his temperature every hour. Call a nurse if anything else changes." Rosita left to tend to other patients.

"Looks like you and me are going to be busy for a while." Aaron placed his hand on Paul’s shoulder. "Stay with us, Paul Rovia. Stop using up those nine lives of yours."

Aaron went back over to sit with Gracie. Daryl silently wet the cloth in the ice water and gently applied it over Paul’s forehead. He could feel the heat coming off of it.

There was some commotion by the front door and he looked up. Holding a mask over her face Maggie came bursting in and walked directly over to Paul’s bed. She glanced at Franny who was still connecting the IV tube to the port she had just inserted into Paul’s arm. "How bad is he?"

"Daryl just brought him in about fifteen minutes ago."

Maggie met Daryl’s eyes. Both had an immediate understanding of what it all meant. "I can’t have the prison all over again. I just can’t."

Rosita came over and took Maggie’s arm. "You shouldn’t be here. Come on." She gently led Maggie out, who couldn’t take her eyes away from Paul.

Paul slipped in and out of sleep for the rest of the day and into the night. Daryl watched as two others in the ward died. The fireplaces were kept going constantly so when Aaron said he could relieve him for a while he took the opportunity to get more firewood and stretch his legs. Outside it was snowing again and the air was bitterly cold.

Paul tossed in his sleep and mumbled things that Aaron did not understand, mostly from dreams. At one point Paul began to sob and Aaron gently woke him up. Paul’s fever fluctuated but only slightly and he surmised the dreams were mostly caused by the fever.

"He told me he didn’t love me then shoved me down on the bed." Paul opened his eyes slightly. "He slapped me so hard he gave me a black eye then masturbated and came all over my face three times. I didn’t want it. I didn’t want it." He began to sob.

"Sshh." Aaron wiped the cold compresses across Paul’s head. It became obvious to him that Paul had been sexually assaulted more than the one time in his life. It hurt him in his heart to realize this. "It’s me. Aaron. I will never hurt you, Paul. I love you."

Daryl had been preparing the fireplace nearby and had heard everything. "Is that all anybody wants to do? Hurt him? What I would do to hurt them." He angrily tossed a log onto the rack.

"He’ll always be safe with us." Aaron turned around and saw Rosita standing nearby and wiping away tears from her eyes.

"Sorry. I didn’t mean to overhear. Now I understand a little bit of why we don’t know a lot about him. Who would want to talk about being hurt all the time?" She glanced over at Daryl who gave her a reassuring nod.

"Paul is very precious to Daryl and me. Not a lot of people know or approve that the three of us are
"I think that’s a beautiful thing. Love was in short supply before the walkers. It’s even more so now." Rosita checked Paul’s IV. "Looks like it’s getting low. Siddiq said when he wakes up you need to push more fluids down him, even if he spits it back up. I’ll also bring some more water." She started to walk away then stopped and turned around. "He saved my life. I’m going to do my damnedest to save his." She went on her way.

Moments later Siddiq came over to Aaron. "I have the latest results on Gracie. Her temperature has gone down and the congestion in her lungs is clearing up. We’ll know by morning for sure. I think she’s going to pull through."

Both Aaron and Daryl sighed in relief.

"And Paul?" Daryl hoped the report for him was just as good.

"I’m afraid it’s too early to tell. His fever is still too high and his sinuses and upper chest are extremely congested. We’re trying to keep it from turning into full blown pneumonia. Georgie’s group has been contacted and they have some herbal medicines and antibiotics that can be delivered sometime tomorrow--weather permitting."

They all glanced out the window and watched the snow fall for a while. It was steady and heavy, but not blowing.

"So we keep pushin’ fluids and the cold compresses, right?"

"Most of all it’s one of those things that you have to ride out so that’s all we can do for him right now. That, and pray if you’re religious." Siddiq swept his hand over the rest of the ward. "I know I will for everyone here."

"Thanks."

Paul sat up abruptly as he coughed until his face turned red. He panted heavily as he tried to take in some air through his nose. Aaron helped to hold him until he stopped then put him back down.

Daryl finished his work then sat down beside Aaron. "This is harder on Maggie than ya think. Her daddy, Hershel, locked himself up in quarantine at the prison. He was the only doc after one other died. Had to fight the disease and had to fight the ones that turned. One tough SOB."

"I wish I could have known Hershel."

Paul abruptly sat up again trying to reach for his chest, but was unable to do so because of his strapped down wrists. He tried to breathe through his nose and mouth. His throat constricted. "I can’t breathe. I can’t--." He tried to gasp for more air but was unable to take in any since his sinuses and throat were completely congested.

"Enid! Siddiq! Paul can’t breathe!" Aaron’s voice was loud enough to be heard throughout the entire ward.
"Quick! He needs a tracheotomy!" Siddiq and Rosita quickly rushed over with the needed equipment. He ran over to Paul’s bed. "Hold him down." Aaron held down Paul’s legs, while Daryl held down his shoulders. Siddiq made the small incision in Paul’s throat then inserted the small tube. After a couple moments Paul was breathing easier.

As was everyone else.

Siddiq listened to Paul’s lungs with a stethoscope then felt along his sinuses.

"Is that the worst of it?" Aaron looked up, his expression one of deep concern.

"Let’s hope so. I’ll need to irrigate his sinuses and ventilate his lungs somewhat as well as close up the incision once he’s breathing normally again."

"Are you sure there isn’t something more we can do?" Rosita looked out over the ward.

"Elderberry tea." Daryl patted Paul’s shoulder to help calm him down. "Hershel used it at the prison. Helped ease the symptoms."

"Do we have any elderberries?" Siddiq was willing to try anything at that moment.

"Let me make a quick check on Gracie and I’ll go find out." Aaron reassured Paul with a squeeze then left. Siddiq nodded and after working on Paul he went to finish his rounds.

Paul had fallen asleep and was breathing much easier so Daryl was able to relax after he gently bent down and through his mask kissed Paul’s strapped hand. He stared at the latest stitched up scar on Paul’s throat. "I’m so sorry." Paul opened his eyes briefly and smiled at him before closing them again. Daryl hoped there would be no more close calls.

An hour later the sun rose and the ward grew quiet. The doctors and nurses took care of the patients as Aaron and Daryl stood quiet vigils. The day wore on and Paul had slept for most of it and there were more dead by the time it was dark. There was a night nurse on duty. Along with other family members, Daryl and Aaron stayed. Earlier Gracie had eaten some broth and a piece of bread so Aaron was encouraged that she was on the mend. Paul had managed to choke down some elderberry tea and seemed more awake that evening, his breathing very much eased.

"Another scar to add to your many scars." Aaron traced the new one on Paul’s throat.

Paul only smiled since he wasn’t allowed to talk.

Most people holding vigil tried to sleep in the uncomfortable chairs provided. Aaron now sat in his and rested his head on the side of Gracie’s bed. His prosthesis had been placed on the end of her bed. Daryl dozed off and on, wanting to keep as close an eye on Paul as possible. Every so often he
would apply the cold compress, then doze off again. When he realized the fires were getting low he headed outside to get more firewood.

What no one noticed in one of the other beds was a patient rising up to a sitting position. Someone had forgotten to rebind his wrists. His growls were soft and low as he stood up and sauntered down the center aisle between the rows of beds.

Gracie had woken up. "Daddy, I gotta potty." She looked up at the sound of growling and let out such a blood curdling scream the entire ward was awakened.

Aaron woke with a start. "Gracie?"

"He`s a walker, Daddy. John Kaye is a walker!"

Attracted by the noise the walker came directly towards Gracie`s bed. Aaron reached for his knife, then realized he had left it at the house. He desperately looked around for something else to use. The walker was now attracted by his activity. He went over to Paul`s bed to see if Daryl had left any weapon behind, the walker still coming towards him. Paul had been awakened by Gracie`s scream and instinctively tried to reach for his knives before realizing he was still strapped down. He struggled wildly as if doing so would loosen them, but they were secure. The walker had been attracted by his struggles and now came towards him. Aaron`s back was turned as he frantically searched for any sharp object. The walker bent down towards Paul. Even though he was weakened he was still able to give it a good strong kick. The walker backed up only slightly and lunged towards him again. Then from behind the walker a knife was plunged into its brain. Daryl stood there panting, the bloodied knife still in his hand.

Aaron turned around and held up a dirty scalpel he had found. "Yours is better." Both of them looked at Paul and wished they hadn`t. The angry look on his face said it all. He held up his strapped wrists as high as he could.

"Maggie`s orders." Daryl almost spat out the words since he was just as angry at the fact that Paul was unable to defend himself.

Paul couldn`t yet speak but was breathing hard and started to cough again. Aaron hugged him until he relaxed.

Siddiq came running towards the scene and noticed the dead John Kaye. "Get him out of here." The two men who had volunteered as orderlies removed the body. He quickly came over to Paul. "Calm down, Jesus."

"He ain`t gonna calm down." Daryl growled. "Undo his straps."

Paul glared at Siddiq and snapped his strapped wrists.

"The answer is no." Siddiq glanced from Daryl to Paul. "You`re not out of the woods yet."

Frustrated and angry Paul laid back down on the bed and turned his head away from Siddiq.

"As much as I complain about him talkin` too much, I want him to say somethin` now." Daryl aimed his outrage directly at Siddiq. "Maybe gonna have a talk with Maggie in the mornin`."

"He still can easily wind up like John." Not wanting to feel more of Daryl`s fury Siddiq walked off.

Aaron went back over to Gracie to make sure she was alright. Daryl reached over and felt Paul`s forehead. "I think the fever`s gone down some." He placed his hand on Paul`s cheek and Paul
kissed it. "See if ya can get some more sleep." Paul nodded and sighed as he relaxed. Daryl was always a calming influence for him.

By morning it had quit snowing and the hunting party that had gone to get Georgie`s medications had not yet arrived. Gracie ate some solid food for breakfast and her hands had been freed. Enid now checked up on her. "We can probably release her and keep her at home as long as she gets bed rest. We need to free up this bed."

"Are a lot of people still sick?" Aaron wiped some crumbs from Gracie`s face.

"Yeah. They need to come here for treatment. I`ll have Franny get you what you need and some instructions then you can be on your way."

Aaron looked very much relieved. He stroked Gracie`s hair. "Did you hear that? We get to go home."

"Yeah, it`s scary in here." Gracie looked at Paul who was still sleep. "Will Uncle Paul be okay?"

"We hope so. He`s still very sick."

"Can I go see him?"

"Sure." Aaron helped her out of bed and she walked over to Paul and took his strapped hand. "Get better, Uncle Paul. You still owe me a game of `Go Fish`."

Paul opened his eyes slightly and smiled, mouthing a `thank you`.

"He can`t talk yet." Aaron saw Franny approach them so guided Gracie back to her bed.

"Ya need to drink some water." Daryl held a glass with a straw towards Paul, who swallowed quite a bit without coughing. "Ya hungry? Some of Ms. Maitlin`s chicken broth?"

Paul nodded. Daryl got up and went over to where a pot was sitting on a hotplate next to some bowls and spoons. He soon came back with the broth and dipped the spoon in the bowl.

"Here comes the airplane, whatever that is." Gracie was now giggling.

Daryl made a flying noise as he moved the spoon towards Paul`s mouth. Paul gave him a look that could kill a thousand walkers. Daryl stopped and just spooned the broth into Paul`s open mouth.

"Probably not a good idea, Gracie." Aaron`s suggestion had caused her to giggle even more. They were soon ready to go. Aaron went over to Paul and Daryl.

"I`ll be waiting." Aaron clutched Paul`s hand. "I know you`ll pull through."

Paul nodded. Aaron held his hand for a long time before letting go. He then watched Daryl feed him until Gracie tugged him on his coat. They quietly left the ward.

Daryl fed Paul some more until he went into another spell, coughing up a lot of phlegm. He hoped it was a sign that Paul`s lungs were clearing up. When Daryl heard the sound of a truck pull up outside he glanced out the window. It was the party of hunters sent to get the medicine. He looked back at Paul and smiled. "Meds are here. You`re gonna be alright."

Paul sighed with relief. He jerked his strapped wrists indicating that his sense of fighting was still strong within him. Daryl probably understood that better than anyone.
Paul and Gracie recover at home.

Once Paul and some of the other patients were given the antibiotics and herbal medications most started to feel better. Some elderly and children, however, didn’t make it and more people were coming in with symptoms. By the next day Paul had no fever and actually felt hungry. Rosita came over to him carrying a tray of solid food. Daryl moved to feed him. She shooed him back and undid the restraining straps.

"No more fucking airplanes." Paul’s voice was a hushed whisper as he sat up and picked up the fork, glaring at Daryl the whole time.

Rosita just shook her head and laughed. "I think Daryl was kind of cute the way he took care of you. And try not to talk so much just yet."

"That ain’t possible." Daryl got another death glare from Paul. He just dismissed it with a hissing laugh. "I’m gonna go for a smoke." He leaned over and kissed Paul’s cheek and left.

Paul eagerly dug into the food which was his favorite--bacon, scrambled eggs, toast, and a blueberry pancake. "Only need orange juice." At least the water was cold.

"I wish." Rosita checked the bandage on his throat. "Siddiq says if you remain on bed rest for the next few hours he’ll release you and you can go home. We really need to free this bed."

By early afternoon Paul was home. The sofa had been prepared for him and a fire roared in the fireplace. He took a long nap and by the time it was almost dinnertime he was propped up by pillows at an angle and sat across from Gracie. He stared at some playing cards in his hand, looked at her, raised one eyebrow, and then looked at his cards again. "Got any strawberries?"

"Go fish!" Gracie went into a spate of giggles.

Disgruntled Paul took a card from the pile.

Aaron and Daryl were in the kitchen and looked upon both of them in amusement. Dog was off to one side waiting to see if he would get a bite as they prepared for that night’s meal. There was a knock at the door and Aaron went to answer it. Maggie stood there shivering as she held Hershel’s hand.

"Get in here, it’s an early arctic freeze tonight." Aaron stepped aside to let them in and quickly closed the door. He indicated for her to sit down in the chair near the fireplace.

"I came to check on the patients." Maggie rubbed her hands together and held them up to the flames.

"Hi, Aunt Maggie. Hi, Hershel." Gracie waved to them.

"Hi, Gracie." Hershel was happy to see her.
"How is everyone doing?"

"The brat and Gracie are doin` fine."

Maggie laughed and looked at Paul who put a pillow over his face. "And he can`t talk back much for a while, either."

Paul flashed a notepad in the air. He quickly wrote something on it.

"What`s it say?" Aaron wasn`t sure if he should ask.

Paul held it up. It said 'Daryl Dixon has no dick' on it.

"Ya see? A brat."

"We usually use another word but there are children present." Aaron returned to the kitchen.

"Can I see what Uncle Paul wrote?"

"No. Why don`t you take Hershel up to your room and show him that set of Hot Wheels we found."

"Come on, Hershel. They want to talk about grown-up stuff." Gracie guided him up the stairs.

"I`m glad she pulled through. Five children didn`t. That makes seventeen total and eight are in critical condition. We`re starting to run short of the antibiotics."

Aaron wrinkled his head in concern. "Can we ask Georgie for more?"

"They sent us all they can spare. I`m afraid it will be touch and go from here on out." Maggie helped Paul reach for some water. "And don`t you do anything to cause a relapse."

Paul scribbled on the notepad. 'Can`t. They need a brat around the house.' He coughed slightly and clutched the bandage around his throat.

"We`re keeping him warm and hydrated along with the bed rest."

"Stay for dinner?" Daryl felt they at least owed her that.

"Is it squirrel?" Maggie wrinkled her nose causing Paul to softly snicker.

"Nope. Something called bierocks. Ms. Maitlin made them. They`re stuffed bread rolls with cabbage, sausage, and beef. We`re just warming them up." Aaron had already gotten out a tray and was preparing the food.

"They sound delicious. Sure, I`ll stay. I could use a break."

After Maggie and Hershel had left and they cleaned up, the four of them relaxed in front of the fire.

"She seems to be holding up okay." Aaron held Gracie and rocked her. She still didn`t feel one hundred percent.

"Maggie`s always been tough, like her daddy." Daryl looked over at Paul to say something but noticed he had fallen asleep. "Had a busy day."

Aaron looked at him. "One of us needs to stay down here in case he wakes up and needs anything."
"I will." Daryl seemed to sulk a bit.

"You okay?"

"Just another close call for him that`s all."

Aaron nodded in understanding. "We are going to lose more people. I`m sorry for all those who lost children." He hugged Gracie closer to him and noticed she had dozed off. "I`m going to get this one to bed. Don`t want her relapsing, either." Aaron headed on upstairs.

Dog came over and rested his head on Daryl`s leg, sensing that he was somewhat in a melancholy mood. Daryl slowly stroked Dog`s head and became lost in thought. His eyes closed as he dozed off, the image of Hershel Greene slowly coming into focus...

...It`s always green here. Reminds me of the farm on a soft summer day after a rain. I would read Psalms while lying in a hammock under the old oak tree. I particularly remember Psalm 85:10-- `Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.` I was always worried about you, Daryl, never finding that peace in your heart. Just because I`m not there anymore doesn`t mean I`m not watching. I see how you keep an eye on Maggie and my grandson. I saw how my Bethie helped you to face the pain of your past, and how you mourned her. Now you`ve found someone who has opened up your heart even more. No one may have seen you cry in the dark hours at the hospital. I did, as you held that young man`s hand fearing you were going to lose him. I`ve had my eye on him, too. Anyone who is close to my daughter I always watch. I saw him in the lonely hours when he cried, too, thinking that no one was looking, believing his heart was so closed that he would never find love, or love would never find him. It broke my heart. I wanted so much to reach out to him and comfort him. I saw what was in his heart. I also saw that he found you and your friend Aaron." Hershel reached down and plucked a strawberry from its plant. "Most of all I saw love."...

...Daryl woke with a start when he felt Dog pawing at him. "Gotta go outside? Ya won`t stay long."

He got up and let Dog out. The remnants of the odd dream lingered and he realized how much he missed Hershel and wished he could be with Maggie at this time in her life. He went over to Paul and felt his forehead. It was cool, no sign of any fever. He remembered how pale Paul looked that night he found him ill. Almost as pale as the other night Paul almost died. Daryl knew that if Paul had died at either of those times, something big inside of him would have died as well. He would have suppressed his feelings and gone back into the woods.

Paul opened his eyes. "Hey." Even though he wasn`t supposed to speak he did manage to get a few words out every now and then.

"Just checkin` on ya. Ya need anythin`?"

"I need to take a piss." Daryl helped him to stand. Paul clung to the furniture as he slowly made his way to the bathroom. He hated feeling so weak, knowing as soon as the bug cleared his system he would be feeling strong again in a couple days.

Daryl heard Dog scratching at the door and let him in. For once he felt that everything was going to be alright.
Trouble At The Front Gate

Chapter Summary

Carl tries to get some more help for Lydia. The people of Hilltop finally meet the true face of their enemy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carl fought the cold wind as he made his way over to the cellar door and opened it, coming down the steps carrying a blanket and a thermos. Lydia had been reclining on her cot and stood up and smiled, coming over to the bars and grasping them.

"Brought you another blanket and some hot coffee." Carl looked at the stove that sat in the corner outside the cells. "Looks like I need to bring in some more firewood. Are you warm enough?"

"Yeah. I think being underground helps." Lydia was always grateful for Carl`s company since the other guards didn`t speak to her at all.

Carl opened the cell and placed the blanket on her cot then handed her the thermos. "This should warm you up. I take it you want to forgo your outdoor exercise again?"

The wind rattled the cellar doors. "You got that right." She sat down in the padded chair that had been provided for her. "I heard a lot of people have been getting sick."

"It`s crazy. This mysterious bug shows up out of nowhere then it starts to disappear. Our doctor thinks it has finally run its course. A lot of people died, though."

Lydia`s expression became somewhat embarrassed. "I`m actually sorry about that. I`m used to people dying all the time and thinking nothing of it."

"I don`t pretend I understand what the Whisperers are like up close. It sounds pretty hellish to me."

Lydia poured herself some coffee. "I guess it would be considering where you come from, Carl."

"Yeah." He left the cell, locking the door. "You can stay here, you know. With us. Think about it. Okay?"

The cellar door opened and the guard for the duty watch arrived. Carl nodded to him and left. On his way to Barrington House he told one of the supply people that the stove needed more firewood. Since Maggie was having her daily meeting as she always did at that time of day he knocked on her office door.

"Come in." Maggie was surprised to see Carl.

Carl was surprised to see Paul. "Hey, Jesus, you`re finally up and about."

"Aaron and Daryl were driving me stir crazy with their babying and coddling. Talk about motivation to get up off my ass." Maggie and Tara looked at each other laughing slightly. "I finally
have all of my energy and strength back." Paul`s voice was only slightly hoarse and the scar on his neck was already beginning to fade.

"What can we do for you, Carl?"

Carl looked from Maggie to Tara, then to Paul. "I want to talk about Lydia. Can`t we lock her up in some place nicer? I mean, she`s been real cooperative and that cellar gets real cold in this weather."

"That stove works fine. We`ve given her blankets, a coat, warm liquids, hot food--what else should she need? She is a prisoner, Carl."

Carl looked at Paul. "What if she ever decided she wants to live here?"

"Has she said something to that effect?"

"No. I do keep asking her."

"I`m afraid that`s not enough. Even if she said yes, why should we believe her? Her people thrive on lying and deceit."

Carl sighed. "I had to at least try." He left, his head bowed down.

"What is going on with him?" Tara was somewhat baffled by Carl`s request.

Paul sighed. "It`s possible he`s developing feelings for her. If that`s the case, I`ll have to remove him from guard duty."

"He won`t like it."

"Wouldn`t be the first time I`ve been unpopular."

Later that day Paul delivered the news to Carl that he had been reassigned to sentry duty.

"Jesus, you can`t do this."

"Yes, I can. And I just did." Paul turned away from Carl not willing to listen to any more of his protests.

Carl followed after him. "Lydia talks to me. We`ve become friends."

Paul stopped walking and turned around and glared at him. "This is Maggie`s final decision. And that`s the problem right there isn`t it? We don`t become friends with the enemy, especially this enemy."

"Why do you hate her so much? She wasn`t the one who stabbed you."

"I don`t hate her, Carl." Paul was calm despite Carl`s comment, which he read as Carl being angry at the situation. "You`re seeing this as a personal attack on you for some reason. Why? Is it because you are developing feelings for her?"

Carl was taken aback somewhat. "I never said that."

"You don`t have to. Your behavior speaks for itself. You have sentry duty in fifteen minutes. I suggest you dress warmly for it." Without another word Paul left, Carl just staring after him with his mouth open.
"Damn him." Maybe he could talk to Daryl later.

After four hours of freezing sentry duty Carl sought out Daryl who was in the smokehouse sorting out the meat.

"He took me off because he thinks I have a crush on Lydia or I’m in love with her or something." Carl’s voice indicated he was still angry.

"It ain’t my place to dispute Maggie’s and Paul’s decisions. He’s the head of security around here. What he says, goes."

"We talk a lot. She’s attractive. She needs friends around here."

Daryl snorted. "Anyone who’s a damn Whisperer ain’t a friend to nobody."

"So you won’t take my side, either."

Daryl glared at him. "There ain’t no sides but one side, Carl." He became angry. "Ya know better than that."

"If you won’t help me, I’ll find someone who will." The determination was strong in Carl’s voice which indicated to Daryl that perhaps Paul was right about the younger man developing feelings for Lydia.

"Ain’t no use talkin’ to Aaron." Daryl finished his task and left to get the wood they used for smoking the meat.

Carl sat there for the longest time until he could smell the hickory and maple being lit. He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his coat as he walked out, his head down, only looking up when the alarm at the front gate was sounded.

"Walkers! Herd!"

Carl ran towards the front gate.

Those who knew the drill at Hilltop took children into trailers, houses, or Barrington House. The fence had been strengthened and could now withstand the onslaught of a large herd. Moments later Paul, Daryl, and Aaron ran towards the gate, their weapons ready, and climbed up the ladders.

Maggie joined them after making sure Hershel was safe. She stood next to the three of them. "Are they all walkers?"

Paul peered through a pair of binoculars. "Don’t think so. I can see the eyes of some of them. They’re quite human."

"Two-thirds walkers, one-third human, I would estimate." Aaron also was using binoculars. "Oh shit."

"What is it?" Aaron handed Maggie the binoculars.

She gazed through them for a long time then realized that in front of the herd was one of the four-person hunting parties they routinely sent out. They were bloody and beaten.

"Son-of-a-bitch." Daryl spat.

They watched in silence until the herd came up to within twenty feet of the gate and stopped. A
Whisperer with long scraggly hair attached to the mask came to the front. It looked as gruesome as the walkers it mimicked.

"We found your people in our territory." The voice definitely belonged to a female. She took out a knife from a sheath on her wrist and brutally slit the throat of one member of the hunting party then held it at the throat of another. "Give me the prisoner."

"Who are you to make such a demand?" Maggie`s voice was strong and authoritative.

The female Whisperer removed her mask to reveal a somewhat attractive woman with a completely bald head.

"Alpha." Her whisper was a cold menacing voice that sent chills into everyone present.

Chapter End Notes

I did not watch the Season 9, Mid-Season Premier, nor do I intend to watch it for a long time (or the rest of Season 9, for that matter). This story is canon divergent with elements of the comic and TV show. I have seen images in gif`s as well as clips, but will not necessarily base any of my interpretations on these, even though there may be similarities. As always, your imagination can provide whatever elements you desire and to me that is much more preferable.

Thank you so much for all the kudos, hits, and comments. You don`t know how much all of that is appreciated. I hope you continue to enjoy the story and that it still serves as a salve for a great wound that will never be truly healed.
Chapter Summary

Alpha confronts Hilltop’s leaders with an ultimatum. A surprise discovery is made.

No one said a word for about a full minute as they were too shocked and stunned, taking the time to study the situation presented before them. It was difficult to believe that there was a mixture of walkers and humans within the group of about fifty or so that were scattered over the empty crop fields.

Aaron leaned over to Paul. "That’s the woman we chased at the fair."

Paul nodded. "All this time. Alpha. She must be the leader."

"That her name or what?" Name or no name Daryl didn’t like her.

"Remember, they don’t have names."

Alpha took a step forward. "Give her to me."

"And then what?" Maggie looked her directly in the eye.

Alpha slit the throat of the second man. "Two down. Two to go." She moved over to the next, a woman. Alpha played with the woman’s hair with her knife. "A little short. I’m sure someone will like it." She took the woman and brought her forward a few steps. "Bring the prisoner to me and she may live. As for the other one?" She nodded and the fourth member of the hunting party was stabbed in the chest. "Careful. He’d make a nice suit." She looked at Maggie again. "Do we have a deal?"

Maggie exchanged a look with Tara, then with Paul. She signaled for them to come over to her.

"What if she doesn’t keep her part of the bargain?" Tara, though horrified by what she had just seen, tried to remain calm.

"There’s no way of knowing either way." Maggie was certain no matter what deal was made, it would end badly.

"I can sweeten the deal. We’ll leave you alone as long as you stay out of our territory."

Paul turned to face Alpha. "Just what is your territory?"

"You must be the one they call Jesus, resurrected from the dead."

"I was never dead."

"None of them are ever dead. Yet we are all truly dead. You think you can rebuild society." Alpha shook her head. "You are mistaken. Man’s fate is to be dead. We are all infected. Does that not mean that we are all doomed to die and wander the world living yet dead?"

"You have a very strange and twisted philosophy, lady. We have rebuilt and we are thriving."
Maggie made a sweeping gesture over all of Hilltop.

"Thriving? Do you think this is going to last forever, these wooden structures, flimsy in a great hurricane wind? You stay together in one place, never moving and hope to continue to exist?"

Alpha moved closer to the gate. "I have no desire to debate our differing philosophies. Bring the prisoner to me."

"Don`t." The woman held captive looked directly at Maggie. "Let them kill me. Don`t turn her over to them."

"You see? Even your own understands the problem." Alpha then slit the woman`s throat. The other three she had killed were now beginning to rise as walkers. "And look at the gift we bring you."

Daryl aimed his crossbow and shot one of the walkers down. "Gift nothin`." He spat on the ground.

"Control yourself, archer. One of mine could easily throw a knife right into your head."

Daryl lowered his crossbow.

"Now that you`ve killed all of them we have no deal."

"Do you really think this is the worst we could possibly do?" Alpha could only laugh as if to mock them. "We know who your friends are. One community is already in direct violation of our territory. We can either choose to let them stay--or not."

"Do we know which one?" Maggie looked at Paul and Tara. Both of them shook their heads. "Then I have no choice."

"What do you mean?" Paul knew he wasn`t going to like what Maggie was thinking about doing.

"I`m going to turn Lydia over."

"You can`t." Paul`s voice indicated a sense of desperation. "You just can`t."

"Sorry. This is my final decision."

"You`ll be condemning her to a life of hell. Here she will be protected."

Maggie ignored him and turned to Eduardo. "Go get Lydia."

"Maggie--." Paul moved towards her. "You are making a big mistake."

"Maybe so. Now step aside, Jesus."

Paul closed his eyes and sighed before moving to stand with Daryl and Aaron.

"So, what is it?"

"I`ve sent someone to get her." Maggie looked over at Paul and he gave her a long stare of disapproval, one she had only seen once before--when she had executed Gregory.

"A very wise decision." Alpha turned to talk in whispers with some of the others.

Moments later Lydia was brought over. Maggie nodded for the gate to be opened just enough to slide her through. She noticed that Carl had been watching the entire proceeding and had a horrified look on his face.
Daryl had been mostly observing the scene after taking his shot. When he glanced at Aaron he noticed an odd look on his face. "What is it?" This also caused Paul to look at him.

"I don’t know. There’s something odd about one of those walkers. Or is it a Whisperer."

"Odd? How?"

"Something familiar." Aaron shook his head to clear it. "Maybe it’s my imagination."

"What?" Daryl was just as curious.

Lydia now stood by herself a few feet from the gate as it was closed. Alpha came up to her and indicated for her to get into the group. At first Lydia shook her head, then Alpha slapped her and shoved her into those who were Whisperers. Lydia’s last look was one of pleading for help.

"We will leave you for now. However, there are still consequences to be had." Alpha slipped her mask back on and signaled for the others to leave.

Paul went over to Maggie. "That was the worst thing you could have done to that girl."

"Maybe so. You need to explain yourself a little more, Jesus."

"Rape, Maggie. It’s an integral part of their beliefs. The men rape the women, young girls as well. That’s what you’ve sent her back to."

Maggie looked down and closed her eyes. "I’m sorry. I wasn’t left with much of a choice. I’ll be in my office." She climbed down the ladder and walked across the lawn speaking to no one.

Aaron leaned over the top of the fence taking a pair of binoculars from the sentry. He watched the group as they walked away, the humans seeming to herd the walkers as if by instinct. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped. "Eric! They’ve got Eric!"

"Are ya sure?"

"I’d know that red hair anywhere." Aaron quickly climbed down and went over to the gate. Daryl and Paul were right behind him. "Open it. Now." He wouldn’t let Paul or Daryl stop him. He ran towards the group, the last of them retreating. In his hand he held a knife. Without warning the walker he thought was Eric turned around. The face and body were definitely Eric’s. However, it wasn’t a walker. The Whisperer stood there and merely stared at him. Aaron fell to the ground on his knees. "Eric! They’ve got Eric!"

"We’ll take care of him." Paul gently placed his arm around Aaron’s shoulders.

Aaron broke down into more sobs as Paul and Daryl removed the skin suit from the body. Aaron then knifed the remaining walkers that had been part of the hunting group.

Daryl watched as the others in the group didn’t seem to care that one of their own had just been killed. He then knifed the remaining walkers that had been part of the hunting group.
ago, his last regret now coming back to haunt him.
Funeral For A Friend And Lover

Chapter Summary

Maggie and Paul are at odds. Aaron and the others say goodbye to Eric.

Tara and Daryl cringed at how loud the voices in Maggie`s office were getting as they stood outside in the foyer later that day. They could only listen in silence, the closed doors not enough to suppress the argument between Maggie and Paul.

Paul stared hard at Maggie. "The only thing you did for that girl was send her back to torment and violence."

"I had no choice, Jesus. You saw what they did to our hunting party." Maggie stood behind her desk, her arms folded.

"I`ll form a party and go out there myself." Paul could be just as stubborn.

"Everyone, including you, has standing orders to stay here behind the fences for now."

"We can`t even take a stab of a guess at what their next move might be. We can easily follow their trail."

"They are most likely waiting for us to track them and lead us into an ambush."

Paul put his hands behind his neck and paced. He knew all he could do was go in circles. "I`m not sure I can forgive you for this mistake, Maggie. When you made the decision to leave for Georgie`s group right before the harvest, you know what people told me? They thought you were abandoning them."

"You refused to take my place while I was gone, remember?" Maggie sat down and grabbed some papers on her desk. "Now get out of here."

Paul leaned over the desk and stared directly into her eyes. "These Whisperers are not like ordinary enemies."

"I said leave."

Paul snorted and did a hard left face and was gone, slamming the door behind him. He went past Tara and Daryl and went directly out the door of Barrington House.

"I`ve never seen him so angry."

"We`ll let him calm down some." Daryl had never seen Paul lose his temper the way he had done with Maggie. He also knew that some feelings had been triggered and he hoped Paul would be able to cope with them.

"I better go in and see if I can calm Maggie down. The memorial for Eric is this evening, right?"

"Yeah. I better go check on Aaron."
"Eric and I could get into some pretty wild games of backgammon." Tara went into Maggie`s office.

Daryl found Aaron in the stables holding Eric`s body suit and mask, inspecting them closely. He looked up at Daryl.

"I know every freckle, mole, scar--every blemish." Aaron wiped away some tears and sighed. "At least I found him."

"Need any help?"

Aaron shook his head. "No." He gently placed the suit and mask in a small wooden crate. "It`s amazing how well preserved it is. They must have found him soon after he died."

"Must have been around for a long time and we didn`t know it." Daryl lit up a cigarette.

"Where`s Paul?" Aaron put the cover on the crate.

"He and Maggie got into a fight. Never seen him so worked up and pissed. Better go look for him."

"I`ll go with you."

The two of them found Paul in his outdoor workout/classroom area. A large canvas had been put over the top to keep the cold winds and snow out of it. Paul was doing a hard workout routine with the punching bags and dummies, so hard that he was even sweating in the cold air. He did an impressive double spin quatro kick which caused both Aaron and Daryl to take a few steps back. They never even realized Paul was so skilled at doing such a feat.

"Take it easy, Paul." Aaron was surprised at how worked up he was. "You could hurt yourself."

"I know what I`m doing." Paul aimed several punches at the bag. "Have to get back in shape after my bout with the flu." Only a scar on his throat remained, the stitches already dissolved. He did several high double running kicks at the large punching bag then whirled around and roundhouse kicked another one behind him. He grabbed a knife from off of a table and stuck it into the head of a dummy. Only then did he stop to take a break, panting slightly and wiping his face with a towel.

"Ya gotta accept what`s done is done. Don`t think we coulda done more."

"Maggie was in a tight spot, Paul, she could have--."

"Made other choices. She took the easy way out." Paul threw the towel aside. "And don`t tell me about how harsh the world is now blah-blah-blah."

"We weren`t going to say that."

"Chill, man."

Paul came right up to Daryl. "I`ll chill when people stop making stupid decisions." He and Daryl stared directly into each other`s eyes. Paul was the first to look away. "I`m sorry. Lydia was on the verge of wanting to stay here."

"I think this all goes back to what happened to you. Am I right?"

Paul hesitated then nodded. He turned to look at them. "It`s all part of their culture. The women just accept the fact that the men can sexually assault them. I don`t understand how they can`t understand how wrong that is."
"C`mon, Paul. Ya gotta be freezin` out here. Let`s go home and get ya warm. There`s somethin` we gotta do this evenin`." Daryl reached out a hand towards him.

After a moment Paul took his hand. Daryl clasped it warmly and the three of them headed back towards their home.

Since the winter months were getting closer the sun set earlier as each day passed. There had been a few clouds during the day. Most had cleared away and now reflected the brilliant fiery colors of a bright sunset. Only a few were gathered at the small gravesite in the cemetery; Aaron, Gracie, Daryl, and Paul along with Tara and Maggie. Maggie and Paul avoided even looking at each other. The small wooden crate containing Eric`s mask and skin suit had been placed beside the small grave. Eduardo stood off to one side with a shovel in hand. Most held green carnations that had been grown in the greenhouse, Gracie and Aaron held red roses.

"I never thought I would be able to lay you to rest, Eric, when I saw you walk away and I could not give you mercy. I miss you and I love you."

"Goodbye, Uncle Eric. I wish I could have known you." Gracie buried her face in Aaron`s coat to hide her tears. Even though not ever meeting Eric, she did feel the sadness of the others around her.

"You were a light to guide everyone down the good path. Goodbye, Eric." Maggie clutched Tara`s hand.

"Found a great backgammon board in the storage truck. Now all I need to find is someone as good as you that I can beat. Goodbye, dear friend."

Daryl felt somewhat awkward and rocked from one foot to the other. "Thanks for the spaghetti. Gave Ms. Maitlin your recipe. Hope she can make it just like ya did. Bye, Eric." Aaron looked at him and grinned.

Paul stepped towards the grave. "I know you didn`t want to be out there. Always know that I thought you were tough and handled yourself well. Our conversation about the best waterfalls in Virginia will always stick in my mind. We never could decide could we? Goodbye, Eric. Wait for us, wherever you are." Paul and Daryl placed the crate into the grave.

Aaron glanced at everyone. "I want you to know I am at peace now. I want you to know that I am happy. I have two lovely men in my life and a little girl who gives me hope for the future. They`re even letting me decorate the workout room in our house with license plates." Aaron smiled through his tears. "Rest easy, Eric Raleigh." He nodded for everyone to toss their flowers into the grave. One by one they did so. He then nodded to Eduardo who took his shovel and covered the crate with dirt.

Maggie said nothing to no one and just left. Tara hugged Aaron then followed her. Paul and Daryl came over and put their arms around him and Gracie. They watched in silence as Eduardo slowly worked.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Paul dug around in the large pocket of his cargo pants. "I found this in one of my book boxes I had in storage. Eric gave it to me for safekeeping when we were on our way back from Oceanside." He pulled out a license plate. "He and Daryl found it washed up on the bank of the river." He handed it to Aaron.

Aaron took the license plate and grinned. "A Maine plate with the lobster on it. Do you know how I looked for one of these even before the fall?" He held it next to his heart and looked at Paul, then at Daryl. "I guess this means it was meant to be. Eric gives us his blessing." All three exchanged
kisses as the sun disappeared below the horizon. They only lingered for a moment longer. Aaron
then took Gracie’s hand and they headed back home.
Carl Goes Missing

Chapter Summary

No one can find Carl so a search party is formed to look for him.

The next morning dawned with more snow falling and obliterating the view across the yard with a white curtain. Daryl had been the first one up and had a roaring fire going in the fireplace by the time the others had come down the stairs. Aaron opened the fridge to pour some milk out for Gracie, but made a face when he realized it was sour.

"I guess I start the day with a conversation with a dairy cow." Aaron looked at Gracie. "Sorry, punkin."

"I`ll live, Daddy." Gracie yawned, still not quite awake.

"Go on upstairs and get dressed. I already put out some warm clothes." Aaron kissed the top of her head and she went upstairs.

"Was goin` huntin`." Daryl let Dog out the door to do his business. "Maggie ain`t lettin` no one leave for no reason."

"When did something like that ever stop any of us?"

"Paul, you are third-in-command of Hilltop. I know you don`t like to be called that. You`ll be treading on thin ice if you defy Maggie`s orders." Aaron looked directly at Paul as if he was a father warning an unruly child.

"I`ve been treading on thin ice in one form or another ever since I`ve lived here at Hilltop, Aaron. Gregory was not the easiest person to put up with, you know. Maggie and I are just strongly disagreeing right now. She has better capacity to see the light than Gregory ever did."

"There`s a blizzard goin` on. If ya do decide to go out there I`m goin` with ya. No ifs, ands, or buts about it."

"I didn`t say I was going today."

There was a knock on the door. Daryl was closest so he answered it. Dog scooted inside so fast he almost knocked Daryl over. It was Eduardo who stood outside. "Somethin` wrong?"

"Have you seen Carl? He was supposed to report for sentry duty an hour ago. We`ve looked all over for him. Thought he might be here." Eduardo stamped his feet and blew on his hands against the cold.

"Nah, he ain`t here. Did ya check the bunkhouse?"

"Not there, either."

Aaron came up beside Daryl. "We`ll look into it. Get one of the alternates."
"Okay." Eduardo nodded and left. Daryl quickly closed the door before more snow blew inside.

"Do you think he did what I’m thinking he did?"

"Guess we’ll be leaving today after all." Paul was now smiling. "First we eat a hearty breakfast. He couldn’t have gotten far."

Aaron put on his coat and boots. "I’ll see if I can find a sitter for Gracie."

An hour later they were suited up, packed, and ready to go. Since Dog was not one for colder weather Daryl left him with Ms. Maitlin. They were about to go out the back door when Maggie came into the kitchen.

"Just where do you three think you’re going?" She stubbornly crossed her arms.

"To look for Carl. He’s missing." Aaron put on a knitted wool cap.

"What makes you think he’s gone out? What would he be doing out there anyway?"

"He’s gone to rescue Lydia." Paul did not look at her.

"Lydia. Why?"

"The same reason any teenager would go after the one he loved." Paul now looked at her.

Maggie emitted a short doubtful laugh. "What makes you think he’s in love with her?"

"Why do you think I took him off guard duty?" Paul’s face was unwavering. "We’re leaving, Maggie."

She stood there wanting to defy Paul’s stubbornness, but knew better. "Alright. If you’re not back here in forty-eight hours I’m sending out a search party."

"Fair enough." Aaron only wanted to keep the peace between Maggie and Paul.

"C’mon. It’s gettin’ late." Daryl put his hand on the knob.

Without another word the three of them went out the back door and were soon outside the fence. The snow blew around in light flurries as they headed out on foot.

"Do you think you can still find his trail?" The wind was blowing slightly so Paul hoped Daryl would be able to track in the snow

"Don’t really need to no more. Got their territory scouted out. They ain’t far." Daryl scanned what he could see of the horizon.

"How about Carl? How good is he at following a trail?" Aaron studied the ground looking for footprints.

"Good enough."

"He knows better than to do this alone. She’s probably well-guarded." That was a prospect Paul wasn’t looking forward to.

They heard running footsteps behind them and stopped and turned around. Magna and Yumiko were dressed warmly, their weapons primed and ready.
"Overheard you in the kitchen. Going after the kid, right?"

"We want to help." Yumiko held up a pack. "We brought our own food and supplies."

Paul looked at Aaron and Daryl who both shrugged. "The more the merrier."

Aaron studied them for a moment. "Maggie know you followed us?"

"No, and Maggie doesn`t tell us what to do, either." Magna could be just as stubborn.

They traipsed through deep snow drifts as they followed the familiar path through the woods and the cemetery. In three hours they found the spot where the camp was located. Except it wasn`t there.

"They must have moved on." Aaron sighed. "Figured we would try to trace them."

Daryl knelt down and looked at the snow covered field. He shook his head. "Snow`s too deep to see anything."

"Then Carl might be lost." The concern in Paul`s voice was heavy.

Daryl looked around some more. "There are traces that they left hours ago. Can`t tell which direction."

"Maybe he found them. Or they found him." Paul looked up at the sky. "It`ll be dark soon. We need to find a shelter for the night. The wind chill is already below zero."

Even with the landscape covered in snow, Daryl knew it well. "The hunter`s cabin is a couple miles from here. We`ll be there by sundown."

Paul shrugged. "Let`s go. We`ll have to get an early start to meet Maggie`s forty-eight hour window."

Daryl`s estimation that they would be at the cabin by sundown was accurate and they were all the more grateful when they reached it just to get out of the wind. It had been kept up as an emergency shelter so firewood was already stacked on the porch and Daryl got a fire going. As soon as the cabin warmed up they were able to shed their winter gear and prepare something to eat.

Paul started to get out the pots from the cupboard. Magna and Yumiko came up behind him.

Magna took the saucepan from him. "Let us return the favor for the meal you made for us."

"Alright. We`ll prepare the beds."

There were two beds, the men would take one, the women the other. Aaron had already started when he saw something strange on the floor. It was a Polaroid, a picture of Carl and Judith.

"Carl was here." Aaron held it up for the others to see.
Paul, Daryl, Aaron, Magna, and Yumiko bond beside a warm fire.

The five of them had moved the sofa and two comfy chairs nearer to the fire as they ate and were finishing some mugs of hot coffee as they sat and relaxed.

Daryl studied the Polaroid. "Don`t think he lost it. Left it for us. He knew we`d come lookin` for him."

"Carl`s not stupid." Paul gave a hopeful glance at the others.

"He dressed warmly enough. Wore his long underwear and took a sleeping bag and tent with him when I checked at the bunkhouse."

"Still takin` too much of a chance." Daryl tucked the photo in a pocket.

Paul used Daryl`s lap as a pillow and Aaron`s as a footrest. Aaron gently massaged his feet covered in woolen socks. Magna and Yumiko exchanged amused looks.

Magna looked at Paul. "Why aren`t you the leader of Hilltop?"

"Oh, that`s a loaded question." Aaron laughed slightly.

"I actually was for a while, years ago when Hilltop, Alexandria, the Kingdom, the Sanctuary, and another community called Oceanside were trying to get together to form some kind of mutual agreement for trade. Maggie was still our leader. She had to be away for the negotiations so yours truly was in charge for about two to three weeks. I never was so miserable in my entire life. When she got back I was still stuck doing administrative things."

"What did you do before?" Yumiko was just as curious as others about the enigmatic Paul Rovia.

"I went on runs and mostly recruited other communities. I was the one who first came into contact with Alexandria. I was chased by my pillow here and Rick through this field. They stole my truck full of supplies that I had hidden."

"Truck`s probably still at the bottom of that lake. Wanted to leave ya up a tree cuz it was all your fault."

"Nope. You and Rick were the thieves. I just wanted back what was mine." Paul sighed. "Good times compared to now."

"But you`re not stuck inside the fence anymore." Aaron tickled his feet causing him to giggle slightly.

"I`m not exactly exploring, either. Bertie always kept telling me I never smiled anymore during that time. She was probably right. I did feel a sadness come over me that never seemed to leave. I was alone, maybe even lonely. I came very close to breaking." Paul`s face became sad as he
thought back to those times.

"Hey." Daryl gently stroked Paul’s hair. "Ya ain’t there no more. No more sad sack."

Paul looked up at him and smiled. "No more sad sack." He and Daryl kissed. "All three of us feel alive out here."

"I can understand that." Magna was also one who longed to be free. "It’s odd. For a long time we yearned for a place to call home. When we arrived at Alexandria we wanted to leave when hardly anyone liked us."

"Do you like Hilltop?" Aaron hoped they did.

"Hell yes." Yumiko fist bumped with Magna. "If it weren’t for the three of you I don’t think we would have stayed."

"You’re good people. Daryl knew right away."

"How did you know?" Magna looked at Daryl, her expression mixed with curiosity and caution.

Daryl shrugged. "Just knew. Ya fought for us. That said a lot." He noticed the fire was getting low and didn’t want to get up and disturb Paul.

"I got it." Yumiko threw on some more logs.

"Have the two of you been together long?" Aaron flicked his finger from one to the other.

"What is it? Two, maybe three years?" Magna looked at Yumiko.

"At least. Kind of lose your sense of time out there."

"How long were you out there?" Paul felt that they had been wandering around for quite some time.

"Ever since the outbreak. We were a much larger group in the beginning. Slowly our numbers just diminished." A sad look came over Magna’s face.

"I know about that. Came here all the way from Georgia. Just Rick, Carol, Carl, and me from the Atlanta group. Met the others along the way. Had a brother that was alive until he did somethin’ stupid."

"Sorry about your brother." Yumiko got up to refill her coffee.

"Merle and I had our differences. He was still my brother. Had to put him down myself. Now I gotta new kind of family." He hugged Paul close to him for a moment and reached out and clasped Aaron’s hand.

"I don’t feel comfortable with a lot of people I don’t know that well. You guys are different." Magna paused as she gazed around the room. "I was in a prison cell for so long. It makes you forget that there are good people in the world."

"I was never in prison. Merle was. It changed him. Made him angrier than he already was. So much for reformin’ him into a better person."

"I don’t know if it made me a better person or not. By the time I tried to figure it out the world had ended. Being out here reforms you fast I guess."
"Maybe that`s how the Whisperers see us." Paul became contemplative. "Like we`re inside some kind of prison behind our fences. They wish to roam free and in order to do so have to take on the persona of that which is most dangerous in the world right now. To them it makes perfect sense. Who are we to criticize that part of their existence? However, there are other practices which we find completely repulsive. On top of that they hate us for no real rhyme or reason, claiming we are on their territory as their rationale for attacking us."

Aaron tapped the side of his head and pointed to Paul causing Magna and Yumiko to laugh.

"This guy is gonna defeat them Whisperers all by himself." Daryl`s confidence in Paul had grown the more he got to know him.

"The real problem is," Paul continued as he glared at his two boyfriends, "that they haven`t revealed all of their tricks yet and even observing them in their camps is difficult because they are so secretive. For one thing, where are they keeping the walkers hidden? In their camps we see just them and their animals. Because of the nature of the walkers they can`t have them in the same place where they live. So where the hell are they?"

"They seem to herd them the way we would cattle or sheep. If there are any experts in the behavioral studies of walkers, it would be our Whisperer friends." Aaron held out his coffee mug to be filled.

"Now there`s an article I`d like to read." Since the pot was in reach Yumiko obliged him.

"This month in *Psychology Today*--'Whispering to Pavlov`s Dead Walkers'." Magna`s joke, got a laugh from everyone.

"As much as I love massaging your feet, Paul, we need to hit the sack. Do you want us to put up a sheet between the beds?"

"Too cold to get naked." Yumiko winked playfully at them.

"Actually that`s wrong. If you sleep naked when it`s cold, you`ll be warmer. That`s because the moisture your body heat produces evaporates instead of staying close to your body."

"Are ya sure? Or is that somethin` ya made up cuz ya wanna cuddle up to us naked."

"I`m sure. And I do want to cuddle in the raw." Paul was now smirking.

Daryl hissed a laugh and shoved him off his lap. "I`ll take first watch."
Carl had followed the trail as best as he could, remembering Daryl’s lessons in tracking, even though he would never be as good as the hunter. Once he picked up the trail in the snow it was easy to find the Whisperers’ camp. He had pitched his tent and disguised its presence in the woods not far from it and now hid as he watched them meander around makeshift tents made out of animal hides as well as canvas that was somewhat in tatters from years of use. It was easy to pick out Alpha. Sometimes she wore her mask, sometimes she didn’t, mostly dividing her time between two tents; one most likely her home, the other to confer with others. Nothing was really happening until he saw Alpha lead Lydia into the tent that was her home. He knew he would have to get closer, even chance getting Lydia’s attention. The thought occurred to him that what he needed to do was disguise himself as a Whisperer. Due to the cold he had left his hat in the tent so he could use the hood of his coat.

As Carl moved in closer he saw one tending to a group of cows. No others seemed to be around so he took the opportunity to jump the man and killed him with a stab to the head, taking off the mask before it got bloodied. He wiped the remnants of blood off in the snow before donning it. It was difficult to see through with only one eye, however it was adequate.

He walked around as he had seen the others do, somewhat like a walker as if it had become a habit for them to do so. He made certain Alpha was nowhere nearby and ducked into the tent. Lydia was sitting on some fur rugs eating some soup.

"You want some service?"

"It’s me. Carl." He took off the mask.

"Carl, why are you here?" Lydia looked surprised and afraid. "You must leave. Now."

"I came to get you out of here. Come on."

"Carl, I can’t. It’s too risky."

"I don’t care." There was the sound of footsteps. Carl turned to look out the tent entrance, a somewhat fearful look on his face. He quickly put the mask back on.

"She won’t recognize you." Lydia stood up. "You’ll have to hide." There was an area behind her where some supplies had been stacked. She quickly arranged them so Carl could squeeze in. She sat back down and went back to eating her soup.

"Our plans are coming along nicely." Alpha entered and removed her mask.

"That’s great, Mother."

Alpha bent down and slapped Lydia hard causing the soup bowl to fly into the air. "Never call me that. I am Alpha." She struck Lydia again.
In his hiding place Carl’s jaw dropped. Alpha was Lydia’s mother? That’s why they wanted her back so badly.

"I’m sorry. Alpha.” Lydia choked back sobs.

"Better. Beta says he wants to see you later. You are to go to his tent tonight at sundown."

"Beta is so big. I’m very small."

"He only wants a blow job. He says you give the best. You should be proud that Beta thinks you are so important.” Alpha set the mask aside.

"He only thinks I’m important because I’m your daughter.” Lydia seemed to shrink at the thought of what she had been ordered to do.

"Maybe so. You are to go to him and pleasure him well."

"I’ll do as you ask.” Lydia lowered her head.

"No. You will do as he asks. He must be in top form. In two days we execute the first phase of our great plan to destroy the intruders. I must go now to discuss the details.” Alpha flipped up the hood of her coat and exited the tent.

Carl peered out from his hiding place and stared at Lydia for a long time. "Why didn’t you tell me Alpha was your mother?"

"It’s forbidden to talk about such things. Please, you must go."

"What is this great plan she was talking about?” Carl emerged completely from behind the supplies and sat down beside her.

"It has something to do with an attack. We’re close to their community now. Apparently they’ve been there for a long time. It’s been years since we were out this way."

He leaned towards her. "Look, I’m kind of lost. What community is it?"

Lydia shrugged. "No one tells me things like that. Now please go."

"Come with me."

"No. Not yet. If I’m missing the entire camp will raise the alarm. You’ll be caught for sure and if I’m with you I’ll be punished severely.” She reached over and clasped his hand. "I like you, Carl. I don’t want anything to happen to you."

Carl sighed, weighing which decision to make. "Alright. I’ll go. But I will come back for you. I promise."

"I know you will.” Lydia looked out the entrance of the tent to make sure the coast was clear. When no one was about she signaled for Carl to quickly make his way back to the woods.

When he got near the trees and some ways from the camp he turned around and looked back. Again his jaw dropped. Standing beside one of the tents was the biggest man he had ever seen. He still wore his mask and a long scraggly beard hung below it. Carl estimated him to be close to seven feet tall and he had the muscles of body builders that he had seen pictures of in Shane’s weight lifting magazines when he has a child. Alpha was standing beside him and they were deep into discussing something.
"Who could that be?" Carl couldn`t take his eyes off the big man.

The sun was getting low so he continued to watch. He saw Lydia come out of her tent and walk up to the man. Alpha said a few words more then left. Lydia went with the man and disappeared into another tent.

"Beta?" If that was the man Lydia was to give a blow job to it had to be him. "Beta." Carl still couldn`t believe the size of the man.

He realized it would be dark soon so he quickly made his way back to his hidden tent. He noticed there were extra footprints around it. Had the Whisperers discovered him? He ducked inside the tent.

"Hi." Paul sat cross-legged and waved to him as he playfully twirled Carl`s hat on his finger.

Carl sighed. "I knew you`d come after me." He heard some more noises and Daryl, then Aaron entered. Magna and Yumiko stayed outside to stand guard. They all must have hidden themselves quite well since he hadn`t seen them. "I hope you guys know where I am. I`m lost."

"I think we`re a couple miles out from The Kingdom." Aaron peered out the door. Magna and Yumiko hadn`t moved from their positions.

"The Kingdom?" A concerned look appeared on Carl`s face. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Been here huntin` lots of times. Somethin` wrong?"

"Yeah. When I hid myself in Alpha`s tent I overheard her tell Lydia that they were planning to attack a nearby community. They must have been talking about The Kingdom."

Paul stood up, tossing Carl`s hat aside. "We have to find some way to warn them. The difficult part is getting through. Every way in will be watched and they constantly patrol the woods."

"Ain`t this somethin` you`re good at?"

"It`s winter. Hiding is more difficult since I don`t have cover of leaves and such." Paul gazed outside the tent. "I have to at least try. Alone. Sun`s going down so I will have the cover of darkness."

"No. Not alone." Aaron grasped Paul`s arm. "I can`t let you do it."

Paul looked from one to the other. "Alone. Too many of us will catch too much attention. You guys have to get back to Hilltop and Alexandria to warn them and get some help."

Daryl and Aaron knew he was right.

"Stay safe." Daryl put his arms around Paul and they exchanged a deep kiss. Aaron also got a long deep kiss and a tight hug.

Paul was out of the tent like a shot.
Paul warns The Kingdom about the impending Whisperer attack. Plans are made.

"He lives for this." Aaron knew that quite well as all of them watched Paul disappear into the density of the tree trunks.

"Still don`t like it." Daryl looked at Carl. "Did they say when they`re gonna attack?"

"Two days. Look, I`m not going anywhere without Lydia."

"We`re not going to leave you out here alone after tracking you this far." Aaron knew Carl could be stubborn.

"We`ll find another way to get her back." Daryl knew Carl had feelings for Lydia and it only complicated things.

Carl grabbed his hat and put it on. "And leave her to more torment? You should have seen the guy she was to give a blow job to. Biggest, tallest man I have ever seen. I think they call him Beta."

"We need to make tracks." Aaron was in a hurry to get back to Hilltop. "Two days may be too late. I don`t like the idea of Paul getting caught inside The Kingdom when they attack."

"You`re comin` with us. Leave the tent." Daryl slung his crossbow over his back and walked away.

Carl sighed. He knew Daryl could rat on him something fierce to his father if he let his feelings for Lydia get the best of him. He picked up his backpack. "Lead on."

They hurried as fast as they could, hoping to make it to Hilltop by morning. At least it had stopped snowing.

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Paul trusted no walker or group of walkers that he spotted as he slowly worked his way towards The Kingdom. He knew it wouldn`t be best to go up to any of the gates. When he spotted the roofs and buildings he knew he was getting close. Kneeling behind a pile of rusted scrap metal he tried to figure his way over the fence. The sun was now touching the horizon. While he was waiting and thinking he heard two raspy voices.

"King Fancy Man will be surprised."

"More surprised than anyone."

"You`re the ones who are surprised." Paul leaped out of his hiding place and had them both down in no time with a couple of well-placed high kicks. One got up and charged him and he had one of his knives in his attacker`s head so fast the other wasn`t sure what had happened. When he tried to run, Paul had already tackled him and held him fast with a blade at his throat. "I need information. How are you going to attack The Kingdom?"
"The way we always attack." The Whisperer`s hiss was loud.

"Details please."

"The way no one will be able to escape."

"You and your kind just love giving vague answers don`t you." Paul stuck the knife into the Whisperer`s head. He dragged both bodies into some piles of dead leaves and snow drifts. After disguising them he ran into the oncoming darkness disappearing like an elusive ghost.

Dianne was the sentry at the front gate and had seen movement in the distance. She wasn`t sure if it was one person or more than one. Carol and Ezekiel had bundled up in long coats and were taking a stroll when she called down to them. "I think I spotted something. Not sure if it`s a walker, a Whisperer, or an animal."

"Just one?" Ezekiel and Carol came to a full stop. Dianne could only shrug. "Keep a sharp eye out." She nodded and went back to her watch.

"We`ve built so much here. And many good memories." Carol felt that something was up and that things would soon be drastically changing for the community.

"We must stop kidding ourselves, Carol. Things are falling apart. This winter has been harsh on pipes that are already bursting at the seams. Our buildings crumble. If a fire breaks out there is no alarm and no way to put out the flames."

They saw two knights hauling someone with a hood over his face across the street towards them.

"Caught this one trying to sneak in over the fence by the trash dump."

"Remove his hood so we may gaze upon his visage."

The knight pulled back the hood and Paul stood there rolling his eyes, his hair somewhat in disarray.

"Jesus?" Carol looked at him somewhat taken aback. "What are you doing here?"

Ezekiel motioned for the knights to let Paul go and be on their way.

Paul brushed off the sleeves of his coat. "I came here to warn you. The Whisperers are planning to attack this place. They were overheard discussing the plans."

"Attack? When?" Ezekiel exchanged an alarmed look with Carol.

"Probably within the next two or three days. Their camp is a couple miles from here."

"Come inside. Warm yourself." They headed for his and Carol`s apartment.

A fire was blazing in the fireplace and Paul removed his coat and sat down. Carol brought him a bowl of soup, bread, and some wine. "Thank you. I haven`t eaten since this morning."

"You were out there by yourself that long?" Carol, ever the fussing mother, tucked a napkin into his shirt.

"No. Carl decided to go on a rescue mission to the Whisperer camp. We followed him on foot. We`ve been out almost two days."
"Who`s `we`?" Carol was somewhat amused.

"Myself, Aaron, Daryl, Magna, and Yumiko. The others went to warn Hilltop and Alexandria. It might be too late by the time help arrives."

"Then we must evacuate." Ezekiel`s expression became crestfallen.

"All the roads are being watched and the woods are heavily patrolled by them. I had to kill two in order to get inside here. You`d all be caught and killed." Paul looked from one to the other. "Unless you have a way you haven`t told me about."

"Dude, you know all of our secrets." Ezekiel was somewhat teasing in his attitude.

"It`s dark and getting cold. You must stay the night." Carol placed a bowl of fruit beside him.

"I need to get back out there. Keep an eye on their movements."

"Jesus, no." Ezekiel placed a hand on his shoulder. "We`ll figure a way out of this. No reason for you to get caught in the crossfire."

"Zeke." Carol took his face in her hands. "This is something we may not be able to win. The inevitable has finally caught up with us."

Ezekiel looked at Paul. "I honestly don`t know what to do. Staying and fighting is not an option. I`m uncertain evacuation is one, either."

"Only if everyone evacuates all at once. It`ll alert them that we`re onto them. It might work if done in small groups of two or three at a time. Just tell everyone to make their way as best they can to Hilltop or Alexandria. It`s risky, but may be the only option available. Travel light. A lot of things will have to be left behind."

"So much of what we have built here will be." The sadness was so deep in Ezekiel`s voice he began to weep.

"It was a good run, Zeke." Carol hugged him trying to comfort him. "We must get our people to safety. They understand the risks as much as we do."

Ezekiel nodded. "Yes." He looked at Paul. "We may not be able to wait for daylight to begin."

"The sooner you start the better. While we still have the cover of darkness we can get started packing and the first groups can move out. The rest can pack during the day then evacuate completely during the next night." Paul knew he wasn`t going to leave until the last person was out.

Ezekiel gazed intently at both Carol and Paul. "One thing I will not do is leave the animals behind, especially the horses. Small animals we can put in carriers and load them on wagons along with the rest of our winter food stores. Those are the priorities after people." He paused drumming his fingers. "There may be a way off the main roads. I`d almost forgotten about it. There is a little used road called `the wagon road`. Richard discovered it. We haven`t used it in years. It is most likely overgrown but still usable. We can tie the larger animals to the rear of the wagons and haul them that way. It will be slow going."

"I doubt they`ll be watching it."

"Get everything ready." Carol paused for a moment, then nodded. "I`ll lead them."
The Endless Dark Road Ahead

Chapter Summary

The Kingdom is evacuated.

The message to evacuate The Kingdom spread rapidly and the citizens went into action packing onto wagons, horses, and their own backs all the food stores, animals, and some belongings that were to be taken with them. It only took almost four hours to do the loading. There were many hugs and good luck wishes as the people lined up to leave. Carol and Ezekiel hugged for a long time.

"I will see you and Henry at Hilltop. Keep everyone safe."

"I will. With my life." They kissed. Carol then gave Paul a hug. "We will make it."

"Knowing you I believe you. Tell Maggie and Rick reinforcements won’t be necessary."

"Get my Zeke out of here safely, Jesus. I trust you with his life."

"My life was here. Perhaps Hilltop is our destiny now."

Carol exchanged doleful looks with both of them and headed for the gate.

Outside the little used gate that led to the wagon road Jerry was talking to Nabila, who was already on a wagon full of chickens and turkeys. A couple cows and three mules had been tied to the back. Two strong horses had been hitched to pull the wagon. He lifted up the children they shared and set them next to Henry.

"Help your mother. Make sure the crates with all the birds remain covered. They need to stay quiet." Jerry saw Carol approach them. "Your horse is ready. I’ve already got the wagons lined up."

Carol noticed there were about six all loaded with horses hitched and ready to go. "I hope you’re good at reading maps in the dark."

"I’ve used this road by myself a lot. It’s overgrown in spots but since it’s winter it might be easier to navigate. I used it last week and it’s quite passable. We’ll be more out in the open when we reach the highway that leads directly to Hilltop."

"Let’s hurry while we still got the night. For once I’m grateful that winter nights are long." Carol mounted her horse and gave the signal for the gate to be opened. Beyond the dim torches of The Kingdom was a maw of darkness. Without any hesitation she slowly rode into it, the wagons and those on horses quietly following her out.

By morning at least two-thirds of the people and most of the animals had been evacuated. Paul and Ezekiel had gotten no sleep and were now eating breakfast in Ezekiel’s apartment.

"You should rest, Paul, get a couple hours sleep. You look like you could keel over on your feet."
Paul chuckled as he sipped his coffee. "I could say the same for you, Zeke."

"I want to at least take one last look around. Accompany me?"

"Of course. I have good memories of this place, too."

"You seem happy. Does all go well with Daryl, Aaron, and Gracie?"

Paul smiled. "Yes. Each day I feel less and less insecure. Gradually my fortress is coming down, brick by brick."

There was a frantic knock and one of The Kingdom’s scouts stood outside the door.

Ezekiel stood up. "You may enter, Jacob."

Jacob bowed. "Some Whisperers have been spotted in the surrounding city, Your Majesty."

Ezekiel looked at Paul. "Does this mean they have changed their plans?"

"How many?"

"Two scouting parties. Both walkers and humans."

"They must be putting their forces into place. We may not have until tonight." Paul took a couple last bites of food and finished his coffee before hastily standing up. "I guess that last look around is canceled."

"Tell the others to load up the remaining wagons and get the last horses ready. We head down the wagon road as soon as possible."

Jacob bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty." He ran from the room.

"Let me get what baggage I have and we shall be on our way." Ezekiel stood up and looked around the apartment. "This was my home ever since I came here. What is to become of us?"

"Maggie and Rick will take everyone in." Paul placed a comforting hand on his sleeve. "We will figure out a place for you."

Ezekiel grasped Paul’s hand and kissed it then he held it against his cheek. "Sweet man you are, Paul Rovia. I will take those thoughts to heart. It is the only way I can bear this misfortune." He held it there for a long time before releasing it. "Come. Let us depart."

Paul nodded and closed his eyes. He wiped away a couple tears and then followed Ezekiel out.

An hour passed and the last of those left in The Kingdom were ready to go out the secret gate. Paul rode ahead and sensed no Whisperers nearby. He heard no sounds of walkers. There were two covered wagons loaded with the last of the goods, food, and some people; the rest were on horseback. No one was to speak to one another, using hand signals only. The snow muffled the footsteps of the horses and it was always comforting to look down and see the tracks of the wagons and horses that had passed before them.

When Paul heard the sound of walkers he halted everyone with a hand signal and indicated they were all to be absolutely quiet. He dismounted his horse and went in the direction of the sound on foot. He spotted three walkers hovering over a small dead deer. There was the snap of a twig behind him and he whirled around and grabbed the lone Whisperer and threw him down. He placed his foot on the Whisperer’s chest.
"Any more?" The tip of Paul`s sword was pressed down just enough on the man`s throat not to cut it.

"No."

"You best not be lying to me." Paul skewered the Whisperer`s skull with his sword. They couldn`t afford to have any Whisperer scouts reporting back. He walked back to the others. "Walkers eating a deer. I killed a scout." He mounted his horse and indicated for everyone to move on.

At last they reached the end of the wagon road that connected to the highway that led to Hilltop. Tied to a tree was an orange scarf. Ezekiel dismounted his horse and went over to it, glancing at Paul.

"Carol. She left it here to let us know they made it this far." He untied the scarf and smelled it then tucked it into his pocket. "How far now?"

"About ten miles. I don`t like traveling on the open road like this in broad daylight." Paul observed the distant landscape with binoculars. "We should camp in the trees and wait for darkness."

"That is the way of the wise," Ezekiel sighed. "As anxious as I am to know that Carol and the others are safe we must wait." He pointed to the trees and everyone headed for cover in the forest which was mostly evergreens. "We all must rest and refresh ourselves as it is."

It would be a few hours before the sun was to set so those who were tired would be able to get some sleep. Paul was one of them and after eating some stew he allowed his exhaustion to take over and wrapped himself in thick blankets finding a choice spot on the ground. Ezekiel was too anxious to sleep so he kept a watch along with Jacob. He wanted more than anything to mourn the fact that The Kingdom would be no more. The rest of the journey to Hilltop dominated his thoughts. When the sun finally set he gently shook Paul awake.

"It is time to go, Paul."

Paul opened his eyes and sleepily sat up. "Already?" He slowly stood up. "I`ll go take a leak then we can be on our way."

Ezekiel smiled for the first time since they had hit the road, happy that Paul was with them. He signaled for the others to hitch and saddle up the horses. When they were ready they slowly moved out onto the dark open highway. The stars were dim and some clouds obscured the crescent moon so there was little light to see anything by. They had ridden for about four miles and were on top of a hill when Jacob pointed to some flickering orange lights in the distance.

"What is that, Your Majesty?"

Paul and Ezekiel studied the orange lights in silence. A look of shock crossed Paul`s face.

"It`s The Kingdom. They are burning The Kingdom."

"No." Ezekiel rode up slightly ahead of him. "You are wrong. You must be wrong."

"I`m not. That is the direction of The Kingdom."

Ezekiel could not take his eyes off of the distant fire. Tears rolled down his face. "It is so much darker when a light goes out than it would have been if it had never shone.' John Steinbeck, The Winter of Our Discontent. So it is." He bowed his head. All the others could do was look upon him with sadness and grieve at the loss of their home.
"I'm oh so sorry, Zeke. So very sorry." Paul could only sit there on his horse trying to suppress his deep seated anger towards his inability to come up with a plan in order to defeat the Whisperers at their own game.
Those at Hilltop anxiously wait for Paul, Ezekiel, and the others to arrive from The Kingdom.

Daryl came up beside Carol and Jerry as they stood below the sentry posts of Hilltop’s main gate, watching for any sign of the rest of their people from The Kingdom. They hadn’t budged from that spot since the sun went down. It was below freezing cold. Carol hugged herself more out of worry than the iciness of the bone chilling wind. She looked at him and smiled slightly.

"Have you come to wait with me?"

"Yeah." Daryl looked at Aaron who had been keeping watch ever since he went on sentry duty. He shook his head. "Might be a while. Go in the house and warm up."

Carol shook her head. "No. I’m alright."

"Paul knows what he’s doin’. He’ll get ‘em through." Daryl gently squeezed her arm as reassurance.

"I want so much to believe that."

"What the hell?" Aaron peered through a pair of long-range binoculars.

"What is it?" Carol anxiously looked up at him.

"I’m not sure. Some kind of strange flickering orange light. Pretty far from here. Coming from the direction of The Kingdom."

Carol and Jerry quickly climbed up the ladder. Aaron handed her the binoculars. After a moment she exchanged a grim look with Jerry. "Something’s on fire. I think it’s The Kingdom." She buried her face in her hands. After getting herself together she climbed back down. Jerry stayed, now standing beside Aaron.

Daryl immediately took her into his arms and held her tightly. He glanced up at Aaron and Jerry, both with grim looks on their faces. "They coulda left early. Probably had to hide and not get on the road durin’ the day."

"I have to believe that, too. Whether they were still there or got away--Daryl, I have no home to go back to now."

Behind them Rick came running up to them. He had remained behind when a group from Alexandria had heard the news. "Anything?"

Daryl shook his head. "The Kingdom’s burnin’."

"What?" Rick took a moment to process the information. "They would burn down a whole community just like that? Hilltop or Alexandria could be next." He was obviously troubled by the
thought. "How do we fight these people? We can`t even get any kind of advantage over them."

"We always found a way, Rick. Even in our darkest hours." Carol and Rick exchanged understanding looks.

"This Alpha. Maybe she can be reasoned with." Rick wanted nothing more than to avoid the same kind of destruction that had happened with the Saviors.

"Nah. Not after what Carl overheard. She let her own daughter get raped and don`t care."

The three of them were silent for a long time, every once in a while looking up at Aaron. He stood there as still as a statue, gazing intently through the binoculars.

Rick smiled slightly at Carol, always an admirer of her endurance and strength. "How did you make it down the wagon road using no lights?"

"Glow sticks and night vision goggles. There were only two sets of goggles. Jerry wore one and Dianne the other. We used glow sticks on the horses and wagons. Kept everything as dim as possible. Everyone made it and all the animals we had with us made it, too. It was a little used road and Jesus was right about the Whisperers not watching it very closely."

Rick chuckled. "Our brave Carol. Comes through once again."

"I was scared shitless to tell you the truth." She laughed slightly. "You already know I`m not a quitter and I don`t let fear get in the way of what needs to be done. I couldn`t have done it without Jerry. He knew the road best of anyone."

Aaron still hadn`t budged from his position.

"We`ll help take care of the overflow from here. We have lots of unused space at Alexandria."

Carol clasped Rick`s hands. "Thank you. There were nights I would go out into the royal gardens and just stare up at the stars, realizing how much I missed everyone, both the living and the dead. I felt Sophia close to me on those nights." She sighed. "And I`m afraid I`m not doing right by Henry at all. He`s so distant and recalcitrant. Zeke and I can`t reach him. We don`t know what to say or what to do to give him comfort. He changed so much after he killed that Savior."

"The children are the ones that take it the hardest. I know Carl adjusted until he lost his eye. I am seeing improvements with Jesus helping him. The hardest part for me has been to let him go."

"He`ll come back to ya, Rick. He`s always loved ya. Right now we gotta focus on gettin` it right for Judith, Gracie, and Hershel--all the other children."

"Carl said that Lydia told him the Whisperers have no children." Rick sniffed. "How do you figure that? What do they do to any babies that are born?"

"Abandon them most likely. Expose them to the weather, the wilderness. Walkers. How can anyone be so horrible towards the innocent like that?" Carol shivered at the very thought.

"We can`t allow ourselves to think we should eliminate them all. We did that with the Saviors and almost eliminated ourselves in the process. I don`t plan on making that mistake again. If there is a way to reason with Alpha, I will find it."

"Yo, dude, what was that?" Jerry looked at Aaron. "Did you see it?"
"That brief flash of light?" Jerry nodded. "Yes." Aaron adjusted the focus on the binoculars. "I'm not sure if it was a flashlight or lantern."

"Is it signalin' anythin'? Like Morse code?" Daryl climbed up the ladder to join them.

"Nope. It was only a momentary flash." Aaron resumed keeping his eye on the spot where the light had come from.

Rick came up and stood beside them. "How far do you think it was?"

"Five or six miles. Maybe closer." Jerry shrugged. "Hard to judge distances with this terrain and it was only brief."

Daryl stood behind Aaron and rested his chin on his shoulder.

"Paul will come back to us." Aaron wished he could turn around and just hug Daryl close to him.

"I don't think I could take it if he's gone."

"I know. I'm sure there's somebody somewhere out there, maybe in a different reality, that thinks Paul's life is worth nothing. Hell, being gay I felt that from a lot of people. Being around Paul--I wish I could describe how wonderful it feels. He's our ray of sunshine, Daryl. Right now he's out there in the dark. Maybe alone. Maybe lost." Aaron couldn't continue what he was thinking. He couldn't allow himself to go down that path.

"Wait. There it is again." Jerry pointed in the direction in which he had seen it. "I think it's closer."

"I see it." Aaron raised up the binoculars. "I think I can see it coming this way."

Everyone stood still and silent. The cold crisp air amplified the sounds of hoof beats and wagon wheels. Daryl and Aaron strained against the side of the fence. When a light flashed again it was from a bright lantern and it came from the road that turned onto the one that led right up to Hilltop's gate. Aaron lowered the binoculars. Once the horses and wagons reached the gates, Aaron shone a beam from a flashlight right into Paul's face.

"Dammit, Aaron. You know how I hate that."

Aaron laughed and aimed the beam at the others. "Give us the password and we'll let you in."

"Go fuck yourself." By the tone of Paul's voice they knew he was too exhausted for playing silly games.

"Close enough." Daryl nodded for the gate to be opened. He and Aaron quickly climbed down the ladder.

Paul and Ezekiel rode side by side as they passed into the fences of Hilltop. When Ezekiel dismounted, he and Carol kissed and hugged each other tightly. He then shook hands with Rick. As soon as Paul got off his horse he found himself in a tight embrace with Daryl and Aaron.

"Welcome home." Aaron's kind of whisper was a welcome one as the three of them shared kisses.
In the bedroom Daryl noticed the blood stains on Paul`s coat realizing he had ran into some trouble. Paul yawned barely able to keep his eyes open as Daryl checked him over.

"I`m okay." Paul placed a reassuring kiss on Daryl`s lips. "Just some minor tussles."

"Sorry." Daryl would always be nervous when Paul was by himself. The memory of seeing Paul stabbed would never leave him for as long as he lived. He set the coat aside.

"Off to bed with the both of you." Aaron used the same tone he used for Gracie when it was her bedtime as he guided Paul over to the bed.

Daryl helped Paul take off his shoes. They put on their winter pajamas and as soon as they all hit pillows they fell asleep and slept for the rest of the night.

When the sun rose Aaron was the first to awaken. He leaned over and kissed Paul causing him to open his eyes slightly. "I need some stress relief. You?"

Paul nodded and they kissed, hands soon exploring. Aaron`s hand slid down into Paul`s pajama pants and he stroked Paul`s cock. Paul squirmed with delight and soon both of them were naked. While they worked themselves up with a frottage an extra set of hands massaged Aaron`s ass.

"Want some company?" Daryl was also naked and was now behind Aaron.

"Shut up and get the lube." Aaron felt Daryl work his anus at first with his fingers. Daryl straddled Aaron from behind and slid his hardening lubed cock over Aaron`s slit. Paul had taken his cock and Aaron`s in his hand and was working both of them together. Aaron then felt Daryl slowly slide into him and moving up and down banging his prostate hard.

All three just enjoyed the rapturous warmth of the early morning sex which helped them forget the troubles of the night before. Aaron was the first to come, his jizz lubricating Paul`s hand.

"Come inside me." Moments later Aaron could feel the wetness inside as Daryl came then slowly pulled out. Paul emitted one long moan and shot out his load. When they all finished they collapsed on one another fulfilled and satisfied.

"Nothing like a good round of sex to calm the nerves." Aaron glanced over at Paul and noticed he was still a bit sleepy. "Why don`t you get some more sleep. Daryl and I will take care of things today." He tenderly brushed Paul`s hair as Daryl grabbed a towel so they could clean up.

"I`d like that. Helps me not to think about things." Paul curled up wanting to push the memories of the last couple days as far from him as he could, even though he knew it wouldn`t ever be possible. Aaron cleaned him up and helped him put his pajamas back on. He wrapped him in a blanket and gave him a kiss.
"You`ll be alright." Daryl also gave Paul a kiss. "Love ya." Paul only smiled and closed his eyes.

At around seven Aaron had showered and dressed and went into Gracie`s room. "Breakfast, punkin." He tossed her robe to her then held his finger up to his lips. "Uncle Paul is very tired today so you need to be quiet."

Daryl was also up still using the shower.

"Did he bring all those people back by himself?" They entered the kitchen.

"Yes. They are all sad today. Those bad people burned down The Kingdom."

A solemn look appeared on Gracie`s face. "Why? Did King Ezekiel do something wrong?"

"No, punkin, King Ezekiel--." Aaron wasn`t sure how to explain things to her. "He is a good man and these people don`t like it. They don`t like us, either."

"Is that why they hurt Uncle Paul in that cemetery?"

"That`s right. I wish you didn`t have to hear about such things, Gracie." Aaron lifted her up and had her sit on the counter. "Toast and strawberry jelly?"

"Yeah. Are the horses okay?"

"King Ezekiel would never leave the horses behind. Or any of the animals. They are all here at Hilltop, safe, including the chickens." Aaron put two slices of toast in the toaster.

"Jack the turkey? The one who thinks he`s a dog?"

"Jack, too." Aaron laughed remembering the large male turkey that followed people around and even wanted to be petted. Dianne had told him that when the turkey hatched the first thing it had seen was the barn dog and it had followed it around all the time so it acted like one. There was the padding of footsteps on the stairs and Dog emerged into the kitchen.

"He was in my room last night."

Dog went over to the door and scratched his paw against it. Aaron hooked up the leash, then let him outside. "I know. He likes your rug. He certainly likes to chew on it. And all the other rugs around here."

"Uncle Daryl says he still has a lot of puppy in him."

"Uncle Daryl is right." There was some annoyance in Aaron`s voice.

Gracie watched him for a while, still rubbing the sleepiness from her eyes. "Daddy."

"Yes, punkin."

"Do I have to go to school today?"

Aaron took out the jar of canned strawberry jelly and some eggs from the fridge. "Yes. Don`t you want to go? I thought you liked school."

"I don`t know. Sometimes the other kids make fun of me."

Aaron looked at her with concern. "Make fun of you. How?"
"Some of them say that I’m weird because I have three dads. They call you freaks and that other bad word you told me not to say."

Aaron turned away from her because he didn’t want her to see the hurt expression on his face. "Do you think we’re freaks?" His voice was almost inaudible.

"No, Daddy. I love you and Uncle Paul and Uncle Daryl."

"That’s good to hear." He opened the cupboard to look for some oatmeal. "What do you say to them when they call us that?"

"That you aren’t freaks. Then I threaten to punch them in the nose."

Aaron looked at her somewhat sternly. "You know I’ve told you to never start a fight by hitting someone."

"I know. But you hit people when they start fights."

"That’s because they are trying to hurt us and all of our friends. That’s different."

"Are ya sure?"

Aaron wasn’t sure how to answer her. How could he justify his actions concerning those who attacked his home while at the same time telling his daughter not to get into fights when she felt threatened? "Our enemies are trying to kill us. What we do is self defense. Starting a fight doesn’t resolve the problem."

"I get so mad." Gracie angrily kicked the side of the counter with her foot.

"It’s okay to get mad, punkin. Punching someone’s nose isn’t the right way to express it. Just tell your teacher about it."

Gracie sighed. "Okay. I still think I should punch their nose. Or a karate kick like Uncle Paul shows us."

"No karate kicks, either." Aaron turned and looked at the steps when Daryl came down. "Paul still asleep?"

"Yeah. Ya seen Dog?" They exchanged an affectionate kiss.

"I let him out earlier."

"Whacha doin’ swee’ pea?" Daryl came over and lightly pinched Gracie’s nose causing her to giggle.

"Waiting for my toast and jelly."

"Sounds good. I’ll fix me some, too." Daryl and Gracie hugged.

"I need to talk to you and Paul later."

"Problem?"

"I think so." Aaron leaned over and whispered. "Trouble at school. About us."

Daryl sighed. "We knew it was gonna come up someday."
"You would think after all we do to protect this place--I guess even gratitude can`t even be acknowledged for people like us." Aaron wanted to throw the eggs he was preparing to cook across the room. However, he would not display such behavior in front of his daughter.

Daryl placed a supportive hand on his shoulder. He heard Dog scratching at the door and went to let him in.
The Best And Worst In People

Chapter Summary

Aaron argues with Maggie in her office. Afterwards he discusses the situation with Paul.

Aaron had just dropped Gracie off for school when Maggie called him into her office. Tara was already there going over a set of notes.

"How`s Jesus this morning?"

"He was still sleeping when I left. He was pretty exhausted."

"I was wondering if he could help us process the refugees from The Kingdom. Rick said he could take the majority with him. That still leaves us with quite a number to find shelter for. King Ezekiel said that he, Carol, and Henry want to stay here."

Aaron chomped at the bit slightly, somewhat not believing what Maggie had just requested. "I told you he`s exhausted. He needs a lot of rest today."

Maggie sensed his anger. Since she was the leader she had to stand her ground. "I figured since he brought them here he needs to take care of them."

"Where else was he supposed to bring them? Maybe Rick can take some more in. Three-fourths of those apartments in the brownstone are always empty."

"I don`t understand what it is you are so angry about, Aaron. All I`m asking is that Jesus help us out."

Aaron came towards her and leaned over the desk. "Is that all he is to people around here? Just some kind of tool to be used? When Gracie and I moved here, Paul felt like no one appreciated him. I trained with him in the woods for a long time and we had a lot of conversations. He wouldn`t say it out loud, however, I could get a basic understanding of what he meant when he described things to me. All he still gets is people around here seeing him and anyone he associates with as some kind of freak of nature." He pounded his fist on the desk then in a huff walked out of the office. They heard the front door slam.

Maggie and Tara looked at each other uncertain how to respond to what Aaron had just said.

"Something is certainly eating at him today." Maggie had the feeling the anger wasn`t entirely directed at her. "Jesus brought them here so he needs to take responsibility for them."

"No, Maggie. We need to take responsibility. All of us. Jesus has already carried his part of the burden." Tara stood up. "I`ll go look into what living accommodations we can make. You`ve already pushed Jesus aside, be careful that you don`t push Aaron away." She left the office hoping Maggie would let some of her words sink in.

After getting some supplies Aaron arrived back at the house and found Paul in the kitchen showered and dressed fixing a light breakfast. Aaron came over and put his arm around him and
gave him a kiss.

"Good to see that you’re up." They kissed again. "Feeling okay?"

"Ever since I was stabbed I can’t seem to bounce back as fast as I used to."

"You know what Siddiq said. Your bodily rhythms will take a long time to straighten out. You also had to fight a flu bug."

Paul noticed that Aaron looked a little bit perturbed. "Maybe I should ask you if you’re feeling okay."

"I had a tussle with Maggie earlier this morning."

Paul poured himself a mug of coffee and brought the blueberry muffin and some butter with him into the living room. He sat down on the sofa. "What about?"

Aaron was reluctant to answer. Paul’s questioning look would not go away so easily. "She wants you to help process the refugees from The Kingdom that are to stay here. Rick is taking most of them to Alexandria. I told her that you were exhausted and needed rest, and then I basically told her to stop using you as some kind of tool." Aaron paused. "I don’t know why I said that to her. I don’t even know if you feel that way or not. It sticks in my craw that people take advantage of you and don’t acknowledge it."

"That can’t be all of it." Paul’s tone was gentle, yet cautious.

"Gracie told me something this morning that upset me. She’s being teased at school about us. Kids calling us freaks and, you know, the slang word for cigarettes. You’d think after what has happened in the world that kind of thing would stop."

"If a problem isn’t solved before a major crisis happens it’s carried into the next world. I certainly don’t remember bigotry or homophobia being solved. Did she say which kids are teasing her?"

"No. She might be afraid. You know how bullies can be."

"Yeah, I do." Paul didn’t want to look at him. It hurt him to think that Gracie was being subjected to the same kind of teasing he used to get as a child.

"I’m sorry, Paul, if I spoke out of place while in Maggie’s office."

Paul reached over and clasped his hand. "That’s how you honestly saw the situation. Never be ashamed of your honest feelings, Aaron."

There was a knock on the door. Aaron got up to answer it. Tara stood outside shivering. "May I come in? Like Abraham used to say, it’s colder than the ass end of Antarctica out here."

"Sure." Aaron stepped aside and let her in.

Tara waved at Paul. "There he is after leading a bunch of people through hazardous territory, still looking as beautiful as ever."

Paul laughed. "Want some coffee?"

"You bet."

"I’ll get it." Aaron went into the kitchen.
Paul indicated for her to sit down in one of the easy chairs. "I hope Maggie isn`t running you too ragged."

"I`ve been finding shelter for the refugees while freezing my ass off. Finding the shelter is the easy part. Now I need a good woman to help me warm my ass."

Paul grinned, always loving Tara`s perspective on things. "Aaron filled me in on what happened in Maggie`s office." He glanced at Aaron slightly smirking.

Aaron handed Tara a mug of coffee. "Thanks. I told her after he left that all of us are responsible. Rick was glad to take on a few more when I asked him. I wish I knew what`s gotten into her lately."

"What do you mean?" Aaron sat down next to Paul with his own mug of coffee.

"All these bad decisions that she`s making lately, a lot that you guys don`t even know about. She`s been acting funny ever since returning from being with Georgie`s group and she never talks about them. Then she practically alienates you guys. If she alienates Daryl you guys will probably move out into the woods and disappear forever."

"It`s not easy for her in these troubling times." Paul`s mouth was full of muffin as he spoke. "I regret my earlier attitude, not so much what I said. Troubling times tend to bring out the best and worst in people. I`m certainly no exception."

"I wonder what these Whisperers will do next. It sounded so out-of-the-blue when you said they had burned down The Kingdom." Tara quickly finished her coffee. "That was good. Warmed me up just right." She got up. "Don`t worry about a thing, Jesus. It`s my job to process people, not yours."

"Thanks. You`re an angel, Tara."

"You did what you had to do. There was no other decision to make." With a nod she left.

Paul finished his muffin and shoved the plate aside. He rubbed his face trying to get the last of his sleepiness out of his head. "Where`s Daryl?"

"Checking his snares and probably hunting. Didn`t see Dog around, either."

"That`s his way of getting away from us for a while and rebelling against Maggie`s rules." Paul chuckled. "Maybe you should take some time alone, Aaron."

"Me? Are you kidding? I hate being alone. Maybe that`s something I`m afraid of, I don`t know."

Paul went over to the bookcase where the videos were stored. "Everyone needs time to process their problems without distractions from others." He picked out a DVD.

"I`m fine, Paul." Aaron observed him as he turned on the TV. "What are you watching?"

"I`m going to use this down time to good advantage by watching a genius coyote make attempts at catching a roadrunner. I need some new ideas."

Aaron laughed, which released some of the tension of the morning. "Looney Tunes. I should have known." He went over to the fireplace to build a fire, first scraping away the old ashes. Once he got the flames going he took the ash bucket to dump its contents outside. Even though it was cold there was a strange eeriness to the chill in the wind. What Tara said about wondering what the
Whisperers would do next caused him to have a feeling of being haunted by some kind of weird shadowy ghost, making him wish he could find a place to hide and never come out.
Welcome To The Shiner Club

Chapter Summary

Gracie gets into a fight. The unexpected happens.

Since Aaron was on sentry duty when school was dismissed it was Daryl who greeted Gracie when she emerged out into the foyer. He noticed she was bowing her head trying to hide her face with her hair.

"Hey, swee` pea."

Gracie didn`t respond with her usual 'hey yourself'. "Hi, Uncle Daryl." Her voice was subdued. "Where`s Daddy?"

"He`s on sentry duty. Why ain`t ya lookin` at me?"

Gracie turned her face away from him. "Don`t want to."

"Why?" Daryl squatted down so he could be closer to her in height. Gracie only shrugged. "C`mon, look at me." Daryl`s voice was gentle but firm.

Gracie slowly turned her head trying to keep her hair in her face. Daryl reached over and pulled it aside. He noticed she had a black eye.

"Can we go home now?"

"Yeah. Ya gotta tell me how ya got that." Daryl held out his hand for her to take. She took it and they left.

When they arrived at home Paul`s `80`s alternative music was playing on the CD player but he was nowhere in sight. Daryl believed it was a band called Bauhaus. He directed her to sit down at the dining table as he got her a glass of milk and made her a sandwich for her afternoon snack. He sat down at the table across from her and just stared at her. "Well?"

"I got into a fight. It was Max. He made fun of Daddy, you, and Uncle Paul. He called you a bunch of freaks."

Neither of them noticed that Paul was standing at the bottom of the stairs.

"Freaks, huh."

"Yeah. Hershel told him to shut up and said you weren`t freaks. Max was going to punch him. I stepped in front of Hershel and Max punched me instead."

"What did your teacher say?" Paul came over to her and kissed the top of her head.

"Hi, Uncle Paul."

"Hi, Gracie."
"She gave us all time outs and said we’re not to fight in school." Gracie looked from one to the other. "Are you mad?"

"Nah. We still love ya."

"That’s right." Paul sat down in one of the empty dining chairs. "Did you punch Max back?"

"No. I karate kicked him. It was kind of funny. He hit a pile of stuffed animals and they went all over the place."

Paul held his hand over his mouth to hide his slight smile. Max was also one of his students and more aggressive in his attitude. "As long as he wasn’t hurt. We’ll need to talk about when it’s good to use our skills and when it’s not."

"Does it hurt?" Daryl got up to prepare an ice pack.

"A little. Teacher put some ice on it."

"We’ve all had our share of shiners." Paul outstretched his hand for her to shake. Gracie took it and they shook. "Welcome to the shiner club."

"Will Daddy yell?" Gracie was feeling more relaxed as Daryl handed her the ice pack.

"Probably not at you. We’ll tell him what happened." Paul got up and shut off his music. "Why don’t you go up to your room and lie down for a while. Keep that ice pack on."

Gracie quickly finished her snack glad she wouldn’t be in too much trouble. She hugged each of them in turn before going upstairs.

As soon as she was gone Paul grabbed a couple books that were on a nearby table and threw them across the room. "I am so sick and tired of being looked upon as some kind of freak. Don’t people see what the world is out there now? They need to learn to live and let live."

"Don’t let it get to ya, Paul."

"Do you think Aaron’s going to take this sitting down? How many years did you have to hide because the people around you weren’t open minded enough to accept that you were different? To have to deal with this bullshit again when we’ve got so many other things to worry about."

Daryl got up and embraced Paul in a tight hug from behind. Paul melted into his embrace. "Them Whisperers is what’s really gotcha all tied up in knots."

"Daryl, at every turn they twist things. Burning down the empty buildings of The Kingdom? What the hell was that all about? You weren’t there. You didn’t see the expression on Ezekiel’s face when he realized it had all come to an end. Our last real memories will be of the fair and all its beauty. Its music. Its joy." Paul tried to choke back his sobs but was unsuccessful.

There was a frantic knock on the door. It was so loud it startled Dog out of his nap and he barked a couple times. Daryl went to answer the door only to find Eduardo standing there. "Yeah?"

"Maggie needs to see both of you in her office right away. It’s urgent."

"Do you know what it’s about?" Paul came up beside Daryl.

"Only that it concerns a message from Alexandria." He nodded to them and left.
Daryl closed the door and looked at Paul. "Ya up for this?"

"When am I not? Let’s find Bertie or Ms. Maitlin to watch Gracie."

Daryl grabbed his coat and headed out the door, Paul practically running behind him.

About five minutes later they were making their way across the yard as some light snow had started to fall. Aaron was waiting for them at the front door.

"Gracie home?"

"Yeah, Ms. Maitlin is looking after her." Paul stomped the snow from his boots onto the mat.

"I just got off of sentry duty when they told me Maggie wanted to see us." They went inside Barrington House and into Maggie’s office. Tara was already there as well as Rosita.

"Tell them what you told us." Maggie looked directly at Rosita.

"Last night when the guard went to check on Negan he found the gate open. When he checked the cell Negan wasn`t there."

"Did ya look all over for him?"

"We searched all over Alexandria and didn’t find him anywhere. Michonne tried to track him outside the fence. She couldn’t pick up any kind of trail. I rode here as fast as I could."

Moments later Rick followed by King Ezekiel and Carol entered. Rick was surprised to see Rosita. "Eduardo just found us. What’s going on? Rosita?"

"Negan`s escaped his cell." Daryl practically spat out the sentence.

A panicked look came across Rick`s face. "Escaped? How?"

"We don’t know for sure. The only thing we can figure out is that maybe the last person to bring him his meal didn’t lock the cell door properly. You know how that lock sometimes catches."

Rick had to sit down for a moment in order to gather his thoughts. "We`ll have to form search parties."

"Combing the woods is too dangerous. If the Whisperers find him let them have him." Even though Maggie was troubled by Negan`s escape his fate at the hands of the Whisperers was the least of her concerns.

"Maybe we don`t have to." Paul looked at Rick. "There`s a good bet he`s gone back to the ruins of the Sanctuary."

"Ain`t nothin` there. We stripped it of weapons, supplies, and salvaged all we could." Daryl didn’t relish the notion of going back to the Sanctuary, ruins or not.

"Could we have missed something? Maybe he had hiding places none of us would think to look." They pondered Aaron`s question in silence for a few moments.

"You know how persuasive he can be in a tough situation. If he comes across the Whisperers they could just as easily fall for his charms as anyone else." Paul knew Maggie understood exactly what he meant. "The sooner we get him back the better."
"Alright. I guess that’s the first place we’ll go." Maggie nodded to Rick and Ezekiel and they nodded back in agreement. "Jesus, organize search parties immediately. I’m putting you in charge."
She gave him a quick confident smile.

"I’m on it."

Deep inside Paul felt events were starting to ramp up into something that would change the course of everything and everyone. The fate of The Kingdom had only been the beginning of a cycle of events that could not be reversed even if everything was done right. Negan was the unexpected thread that would unravel the already frayed fabric.
Lost Contact

Chapter Summary

Daryl and Paul search for Negan at the abandoned Sanctuary. Contact is lost with some of the search parties.

HEAD’S UP: Warnings about any major or minor character deaths will be posted in the Chapter Summary at the beginning of the corresponding chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The snow was falling heavier as Daryl and Paul searched the upstairs of the edifice that used to be the main building of the Sanctuary. They were now in Negan’s old quarters, stripped of everything that was salvageable. Still there was enough left behind to indicate that a petty tyrant had once lived there and kept everything for himself.

"Hate this damn place. Every corner of it." Daryl tried to huddle in his coat against the wind that blew through the now broken windows.

"You okay?" Paul wasn’t sure how Daryl would be coming back to a place that had caused him great pain and suffering. Daryl didn’t talk about his imprisonment much. With Paul he didn’t have to.

"Yeah. We ain’t gonna be here all that long."

"He had to have come here. Even though he knew the place was a ruin and nothing was left." Paul sighed. "Someone like Negan would tend to hide weapons in places nobody would suspect just in case there was trouble. In the walls, the floor. Secret places."

"Yeah, that makes sense. For him."

"So secret only he would know. He wouldn’t even trust his closest people, like Simon, for instance."

"Would have to be someplace he could get to, easy and quick." Daryl shoved aside some debris. All he found was bare concrete floor.

"Which means we won’t find anything up here. Let’s go." Paul quickly left wanting to get out of such a depressing place. Daryl wasn’t far behind.

They found themselves in the large room where Negan used to address his people. Paul walked over and stood by the long cold furnace. He picked up the iron which still had some remnants of burnt flesh on it. Disgusted he tossed it aside. Slowly he surveyed the room until his eyes fell on an open bin not far from where the wood for the furnace had been stored. He shone his light inside and motioned for Daryl to come over.

"Take a good close look."
When Daryl peered inside he noticed that some panels in the floor had been pried up. They had been painted to look like cement but were really made out of wood. "Looks recent."

"He was here alright. Whatever weapons he hid here he`s got them now." Paul slammed the bin`s door shut. "We`re through here. Let`s get everyone and get out of here."

"Won`t argue with ya there." Daryl wanted nothing more than to leave the Sanctuary behind.

Paul and Daryl stopped just outside the old walker fence. He pressed the button on the walkie-talkie. "Alden, this is Jesus."

"Alden. Copy. Find anything?"

"Yeah. He was here. He`s armed. We`ll look for a trail. Notify the other search parties."

"Copy. Out."

Paul put the walkie away. "Let`s rendezvous with Magna and Yumiko."

They headed in the direction of some of the other buildings and found the two women looking through some piles of rubble.

Magna looked up. "Any luck?"

"Yeah. He was here. He`s armed." Paul took one last look at the edifice, glad to be leaving it behind. "Let`s go." The two women followed them out. "Where`s Kal and his group?"

"They went into the woods to follow some lead. Guess that trail will go dry." Magna hoped they would soon be heading home. She was starting to sense that something dreadful was about to happen. She didn`t know why, it just seemed that everything that had happened up to that point was heading in a direction she knew she didn`t want to go.

Paul took out his walkie. "Kal, this is Jesus. Do you copy?" There was nothing but static. "Kal, this is Jesus. Please respond." More static.

"Could they be out of range?" Yumiko took a moment to survey with her binoculars.

"These things have a range of thirty-five miles." Paul looked around making sure they were in an open enough space. "Which direction did they go?"

"That way." Yumiko pointed down an old alleyway.

"Guess we go that way then." Paul motioned for them to follow him.

The snow came down harder and covered too much of the ground to follow any kind of tracks. The wind had also picked up obscuring any hint of footprints.

Daryl had bent down to study the ground and only shook his head since he couldn`t pick up anything with his keen eye. "Think we`re in for one hell of a blizzard. Can`t do much more anyway."

Paul sighed. "We might as well head back to the rendezvous point with Alden. Maybe we can contact the others from there. This snow might be interfering with communication signals."

Wordlessly they hiked back to where Alden was keeping vigil inside a rusted old RV. He sighed with relief when he saw them arrive.
"I’ve lost contact with some of our groups."

Paul removed his hood. "We lost contact with Kal’s. What are the others?"

"Father Gabriel’s, Tara’s, King Ezekiel’s, and Aaron’s."

Paul looked out the window. The blizzard was only getting worse. "They did take winter survival gear with them. Maybe if we could get on a higher spot communication would be better. Let’s get back to Hilltop."

"This is Rick calling RVHQ." A voice crackled over Alden’s walkie-talkie. "What’s everyone’s status? Over."

"This is Alden. Jesus and his group are here. I just heard from Carol’s group before they arrived. We’ve lost contact with the others, we think due to the storm. Still no sign of Negan. Over."

"No sign of Negan here. Snow is obscuring every sign of any tracks. Request what to do. Over."

Paul took the walkie from Alden. "This is Jesus. Returning to Hilltop for better communication. Suggest all other groups do likewise. Over."

"Agree. Meet you at RVHQ in thirty minutes. Over and out." Rick’s voice went silent.

Paul handed the walkie back to Alden. "Call Carol and tell her we’re all returning to Hilltop. Don’t say anything about not hearing from Zeke." Alden nodded.

Daryl placed a hand on Paul’s sleeve. Neither of them had to say anything to know what they were thinking about not hearing from Aaron.

"He knows his stuff out there." Daryl tried to sound reassuring.

"I know." Paul opened the door and went outside, a blast of cold air and snow hitting hard against him. He raised up his walkie. "This is Jesus calling Father Gabriel, Tara, Kal, King Ezekiel and Aaron. Come in, please. Over." Static. "This is Jesus calling Father Gabriel, Tara, Kal, King Ezekiel, and Aaron. Please respond. Over." More static and silence. "Damn." He went back inside the RV. The others were looking at him and he shook his head.

Alden clicked off his walkie. "Carol’s group is on their way back."

"We’ll wait for them here." Paul sat down on a built-in bench and rested his back against the wall. Everyone knew he was extremely worried about those they couldn’t contact.

"Maybe they’ll figure out their way on their own." Yumiko’s gentle demeanor calmed Paul’s nerves somewhat.

"Can’t find Negan in this. Nothin’ to track in the snow. He’ll freeze his ass off too." That was something Daryl wouldn’t mind if it happened.

"He’s smart enough to prepare for all contingencies. He most likely stole gear in Alexandria." Paul drummed his fingers on the table.

They spoke little as they waited, shivering since the RV wasn’t insulated. It kept them out of the wind but not out of the cold. Rick and his group finally arrived along with Carol’s.

"What’s all this about not being able to contact the other groups?" Carol tried to keep her cool, hoping it rubbed off on the others.
"It`s possibly the storm. I`m not placing any bets." Paul looked at Alden. "Leave a note here in case they come back." Alden nodded and quickly scribbled the note. Paul got up and put on his backpack. All the others did so as well.

"We`ll hear from `em." Daryl wasn`t sure he believed what he was saying.

Paul didn`t want to think about the possibilities of what else could have happened.

"Let`s go."

Chapter End Notes

Today`s chapter is dedicated to Howdyep. Happy Birthday! and sorry if there wasn`t any smut. The story just wouldn`t lend itself to that today.

Thank you for being such a great supporter of my work.
Chapter Summary

Groups searching for Negan are missing and the only thing anyone can do is wait.

By the time they reached Hilltop it was complete white-out conditions. Since Daryl knew the terrain the best he was able to lead them back safely. Paul organized some volunteers to keep constantly radioing for their missing friends from the widow’s walk tower, the highest point on Hilltop, each taking half-hour intervals. After grabbing some coffee in the kitchen he headed directly to Maggie’s office. Hilltop had been basically shut down with people sheltering in place. Carol, Rick, and Daryl were already there.

"Okay, who all is missing?" Maggie looked at Carol first.

"In Zeke’s group were Dianne and Kelly."

"Tara had Luke and Scott. Kal had Tammy Rose and Carl." Maggie noticed the surprised look on Rick’s face.

"Carl went out with one of the groups? I told him to stay here."

"He’s eighteen. I asked for volunteers eighteen and up."

"Damn." Rick was silent for a long time. "Father Gabriel took Frankie and Laura with him."

"That leaves Aaron’s group." Paul glanced at his list. "Eugene, Barbara, and Jerry."

"Sixteen people." Maggie sighed. "Again we have Negan to blame for the source of some more of our troubles."

Eduardo frantically knocked on the open door and came inside. "We just heard from Jerry. They found the note in the RV and are on their way back here. Just static on everyone else."

Paul exchanged a worried glance with Daryl. "Why didn’t Aaron call in?"

"Jerry said he went to investigate a group of walkers that were close by and hadn’t returned. They’re hoping to run into him on the way back."

Paul merely nodded. "Thanks."

Carol stood by the window and just stared into the blowing whiteness. "Zeke will be back. They all will be back."

Rick came over and stood beside her, putting his arm around her shoulders. "They all took winter survival gear with them."

"We also have emergency shelters in place. Cabins, barns, safe houses--everyone was given maps of their locations." Maggie knew that was little comfort.

Carol turned away from the window and faced them. "We still can’t dismiss the fact that they may
have been captured. We all thought these Whisperers had gone to winter camps, right? They are still here. What kind of demands would they make?"

Paul sighed wishing he had an answer for her. "All we can do is wait until this storm blows over. I`m going upstairs to monitor the widow`s walk." He quickly left the office.

"Jesus still has no plan on how to fight them?" Carol was somewhat surprised. She also realized how difficult it was to figure out the motivations of the Whisperers.

"Every time we figure something out, we`re thwarted. Can`t seem to keep up. I`ll be upstairs if anyone needs me." Rick, frustrated with his own inability to also come up with a plan, quickly left the office.

Maggie placed a hand on Carol`s shoulder. "Why don`t you go lie down for a while. You seem tired."

Carol shook her head. "I won`t be able to rest. Zeke is the best thing to ever happen to me. I was so happy at The Kingdom, Maggie. I finally found a new life for myself. Is all of it going to be taken away in one fell swoop? Just like Sophia?" She wiped away some tears and headed for the door. "I`ll be in the kitchen helping Ms. Maitlin. I have to keep busy."

Maggie could only stand there alone listening to the fierceness of the wind outside. She couldn`t quell the uneasiness that had developed ever since the return of the first search parties. A blizzard couldn`t be the single cause of so many that were still missing.

Upstairs Rick sat down beside Paul on the floor opposite the stairway that led to the widow`s walk.

"Jesus, sometimes I get the feeling you`re blaming yourself for all the troubles we`re having with the Whisperers. None of it is your fault. I can`t even out-think them."

Paul smiled slightly. "I should have figured it out when we saw that group of walkers not acting like walkers. I was stuck behind the fences of this place trying to help Maggie run things. I barely went on runs. I didn`t explore like I used to. Didn`t meet up with new people. In a way I got soft."

He looked away for a moment. "Getting stabbed woke me up, Rick. Both a curse and a blessing."

Rick sighed. "I`ve done a lot of thinking about them. We`ve seen their scouts around Alexandria, not like here at Hilltop. These little skirmishes and run-ins got me worried. I think they are gearing up for war. You can`t do this by yourself, Jesus. I`m here to help."

"I could use your help, Rick."

Rick clasped Jesus` s hand in both of his. "We`re in this together. I`m still sorry for treating you the way I did."

"I`ve forgotten it already." Paul clasped both of Rick`s hands with his other one. After a moment they let go, realizing they had just sealed a more permanent friendship.

"As soon as this storm lifts we`ll lead a group out there and search for our missing people." Rick stood up. "I`ll take a turn in the tower." He headed up the stairs.

Daryl sat down beside Paul and handed him a bottle of water. "Ya feelin` okay?"

"I`m feeling great. I don`t need a nursemaid."

"I ain`t a nursemaid." Daryl growled.
Paul smirked at him. "I only said that to get a rise out of you. Are you going to take shifts in the tower?"

"Nah. I`m gonna study the map of our safe houses. Find the best routes to `em."

"I certainly hope that`s where they are." Paul lowered his voice. "I certainly hope Aaron`s at one of them."

"Yeah, me too. Ya feel like somethin` else has happened doncha."

"If our people were captured they will be subjected to the cruelest and most merciless of torture. Maybe even before they are killed. We`ve been warned, Daryl, too many times. Their patience only goes so far."

Daryl put his arm around him. "The hardest part is figurin` out who`s human and who`s a walker durin` up close fightin`. We can tell only cuz the eyes are different."

"We have to get real close and when you are fighting them you simply don`t have the time."

"Won`t argue with ya on that." Daryl gazed up at the stairway. "Anythin` happens to our missin` people it`s all on Negan. Nothin` he does will ever get him redemption."

"I don`t know how much he knows about the Whisperers. Hearing random conversations at his cell window isn`t exactly the place to hear all the facts. Now that it`s winter I imagine the storm window is up and he hears nothing." There was a biting tone in Paul`s voice. He had no more compassion to spare for such a man.

Someone went up the steps and relieved Rick early in the tower. He came over and joined them. "Nothing but static and wind."

"I`m curious about something, Rick. Who was in charge of taking care of Negan?"

"Some guy named Nathan. We found him on the road about three months ago. He was eager to help in any capacity and said he had police experience. One of the few happy to watch over him. Why?"

Paul exchanged a look with Daryl. "We had a new guy come in at about the same time. He had the same attitude. Turned out he was most likely a Whisperer spy."

Rick`s expression became one of almost shock. "You mean to tell me they`ve been sending spies into our communities? Wonder if they sent one to The Kingdom as well."

"I`d say that`s a good bet." Daryl lit up a cigarette.

"Look how easy it was to infiltrate the fair. Later we found out it was Alpha." Paul got up and paced.

"I`ve come across a lot of twisted people, before the fall, but especially after. I have to wonder just how sick and twisted the Whisperers really are. I`m sure I don`t want to find out."

The man on watch looked over the railing for a moment. "Aaron`s group is back. Aaron is not with them."

"Did they say why?" Paul kept his emotions in check when he asked the question. The man shook his head.
"Dammit. He knows better than to go off by himself." Daryl expressed the emotion Paul wanted to but couldn`t.

"Looks like I need to ask Jerry some questions." He quickly headed downstairs.

Rick looked over at Daryl and saw something he had rarely seen in all the years he had known him. A look of anguish that only came from someone whose heart was so fragile it wouldn`t take a lot to break it.
Along The Trail Of White And Red

Chapter Summary

A search party is organized to find their missing friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jerry`s report didn`t add any significant facts so it made everyone more on edge. By evening the storm was showing signs of abating and by the next day the clouds had begun to part and the sun peeked through them making the snow sparkle. A search party was immediately organized consisting of Paul, Daryl, Maggie, Rick, Carol, Rosita, Jerry, Magna, and Yumiko. Everyone would be on horseback, each carrying weapons, food, other supplies, and oats for the horses. A vote had been taken by the search party to have Paul be in charge of the search, a task he somewhat welcomed and also loathed due to the fact that he was put in a position of leadership. The residents of Hilltop gave somewhat pensive waves as they set out. The look on Gracie`s and Hershel`s faces were the saddest anyone had ever seen.

"If you think it`s bad now..." Carol started to say. "Hell, I best not say it."

Rick glanced at her, his mouth firm. "We all know the risks out here."

They rode for a while down the road before turning into the woods.

Maggie looked around in all directions. It all looked the same to her. "Maybe we should split up. Cover more ground that way."

"No." Paul`s voice was quite intense. "It is important we stay together if we are attacked."

"Where to first?" Carol didn`t know the territory that well so she felt somewhat lost.

"There are some safe houses nearby." Rick turned the map over and over to study it. "We`ll make a quick check of those first."

They turned down a small path that led to a cabin. One quick look indicated to them that no one was or had been there. There were two other structures, a barn and a small storage shed, the same results as the first. They stopped at a gas station to give the horses a bit of a break and determine the next route.

"How about them three houses on that farm?" Daryl had also taken the time for a break as he lit up.

Paul studied the map. "Yeah, that was always a good spot. The problem is it will take us right through the field with the posts. I think the Whisperers consider it one of their boundaries."

Rick looked over Paul`s shoulder. "We`re ready for them. We`re armed and on horseback." He gave Daryl a look of confidence.

"Wish I had your confidence, bro."
"Let`s get moving." Paul tucked the map back inside his coat and mounted his horse. "Daryl, you
take the lead, look for any signs."

"Alright." Daryl moved to the front of the group.

They slowly moved through the woods, having to stop every so often as Daryl dismounted and studied the ground. The fourth time seemed to reveal some information. He looked up at Paul.

Paul rode up to him. "What is it?"

"Tracks. Faint and covered with snow. They go that way." Daryl pointed to his right.

Paul took out the map and studied it. "That should take us directly to the field. Everyone be on your guard."

Rick came up beside them. "You sure they ain`t walker tracks?"

Daryl shrugged. "Don`t know. It`s the only lead we got." He mounted his horse and they slowly made their way through the trees. More and more Daryl noticed tracks still leading in the same direction. There was one thing that made him stop quite abruptly. "What the hell?" He quickly dismounted.

"What is it?" Paul was just as quickly off of his horse. Rick, Carol, and Magna did the same.

"Looks like blood." Carol bent down and swept away more snow. There was even more evidence of blood. "Lots of it."

Daryl and Rick cleared away even more snow. There was a combination of footprints and something being dragged.

Rick looked up at Paul. "How far to the field?"

"About a mile give or take."

Rick nodded. "Looks like we got a lead. I don`t like this. Something`s not feeling right."

"Only thing we can do is keep going." Paul got back up on his horse, who seemed somewhat restless. "Easy, Echo." Daryl looked up at him. "He smells the blood. Maybe something else."

Those who had dismounted got back on their horses. The longer they followed the trail the more traces of blood they could see. Most was buried beneath snowdrifts. Some of the other horses also seemed to be restless so Paul decided they should go on foot, leading each of them. They came to the edge of the woods and the hill that led to the field which stood white before them with a bloody trail going directly upwards. Paul signaled to the others with his hand, no one wanting to say what was on his or her mind. They reached the top of the hill and the field was spread out before them. There were more footprints and blood. A slight wind was blowing wisps of white snow across the treeless plain silently glistening in the sunshine.

"Be pretty under other circumstances." Maggie emitted an ironic laugh.

"I just want to see Zeke again. Dead or alive. Preferably alive." Carol could not keep down the sense of dread that had been building up ever since they first found signs of blood.

Maggie reached over and squeezed her hand. "I`m one of the few here who understands."

"What`s that sound? Walkers?" Jerry gave them a confused look, unsure about what exactly he was
Rosita covered over her eyes to see in the distance better. "Don`t see any. Sound carries more in colder weather."

"They don`t sound like very many." Magna tried to look for walkers as well and didn`t see any either.

Paul raised up his arm. "Everyone be quiet." After a long interval he nodded. "Coming from the area near the posts. Our trail heads in that direction. Be on full alert. We`re close to the boundary. Whisperers could be hiding in the clumps of trees."

"Do you think there`s a herd of walkers nearby, Jesus?" Maggie, as always, was prepared to fight walkers, however, she hoped it was none of their people.

"That I can`t quite discern. If there is, it`s a small one." Paul signaled for them to continue to follow the blood trail. The closer they got to the posts, the more blood they saw on the ground.

"Looks like a slaughter took place here. I don`t see any bodies though." Rick`s keen sheriff`s eyes weren`t quite sure what to make of the scene.

Unexpectedly the horses became more restless making everyone practically lose their grip on the reins.

Maggie knew the cause. "They don`t like the smell of all this blood. Or that sound."

"I shoulda brought Dog." Daryl was glad he wasn`t riding. The last thing he wanted was to be thrown again.

Paul noticed a small strand of trees nearby. "Let`s tie them up away from the trail. Put some oats in the feed bags. That should calm them down."

Everyone agreed and led the horses to the trees. They tied a long rope between two of the trees then tied their horses to the rope. Feed bags were draped over their noses and the horses eagerly ate their oats, seeming to calm down just as Paul had surmised. Slowly they hiked back to the trail.

"Will they be alright?" Yumiko wasn`t sure since the horses would be some distance from them.

"As long as we can see them." Rick glanced around the field. "Whatever happened here I think the Whisperers want us to find it on our own. They aren`t notorious for sticking around very long."

The walker sounds could still be heard. There was no sign of nearby walkers that could be seen from any direction.

"Something is weird about those posts." Paul took a deep breath uncertain he wanted to see what exactly that would be.

"Weird? How?" Daryl wasn`t sure what Paul meant.

"They look different somehow, as if something is on top of them." Paul closed his eyes and shook his head. "Unless I`m seeing things."

A cloud momentarily covered up the sun, dimming the brightness somewhat.

Rick suddenly stopped in his tracks. "Oh my God. They look like heads. The tips are also pointed. More like a pike than a post."
They all stopped about twenty feet from the pikes. The snow underneath them was almost completely red. Each head had been placed so the pike didn’t damage the brain, the heads now all having turned.

It was Yumiko’s scream that carried far across the snowy field that made them all take notice of the identity of who the heads belonged to.

Chapter End Notes

Big cliffhanger. I’m evil. I know. (Gleefully rubs hands together and laughs maniacally. Would twirl mustache if I had one.)
A Brief Interval Of Horrible Insanity

Chapter Summary

WARNING: THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS MULTIPLE MAJOR AND MINOR CHARACTER DEATHS

The search party comes across the wrath of the Whisperers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Magna ran over to Yumiko who had fallen onto her knees and was now on the ground sobbing and screaming in anguish.

"What is it?" Magna knelt down next to her. Yumiko pointed to one of the pikes. It was clearly Kelly’s head, growling as a walker, a pool of blood trailing down the pole staining the snow. "Kelly." Magna then ran over to the pike next to hers and put her hands over her face in disbelief. "It`s Luke."

Rick, Paul, Maggie, and Daryl ran up to them.

Rick was the first to reach them. "What is it?"

"Luke and Kelly." Magna could barely choke out the words. She and Yumiko held each other in a tight hug as they both cried.

"I`m so sorry." Maggie knelt down beside them and put her arms around them to try and comfort them.

Paul ran over to check the next pike. The first one he came to had Frankie`s head on it. The one next to it had Laura`s. "Rick."

Rick ran over to him and bowed his head as soon as he saw the heads. "They came from the Sanctuary and practically begged us to take them in. To think we failed them in this way." Rick gently plunged the knife into each of their heads. His demeanor was heavy as he went over to the next one. "Dianne."

"Carol." Paul closed his eyes and looked away.

Carol came over and stared at Dianne`s head before angrily taking out her knife and plunging it into the growling skull. Her anger quickly segued into numbness. What other horrible discoveries were there yet to make? Some of the pikes were close together, others were spread out. She knew she didn`t want to know if Ezekiel`s head was on one of them.

Maggie had gone over to two pikes which were close together. "No!" One pike had Tammy Rose`s head on it, the other had Kal`s. Rosita was immediately by her side and put her arms around her. Maggie buried her head into Rosita`s chest.

Rick noticed there was one that had a wide-brimmed hat on top of it. He ran towards the pike
fearing that it was Carl, not wanting to take a closer look, forcing himself to do so. He soon realized it was Father Gabriel. He ran over to the pike next to it and on it was the head of Scott.

No one noticed that Paul was slowly walking towards the pike on the far end. All of the pikes had been looked at except the last one. When he got close enough to see who it was his steps faltered and he fell to the ground on his knees and bent over burying his head in his hands. He let out such a scream of anguish that Daryl was immediately by his side. When he saw whose head was on the pike his face scrunched up in tears.

"Tara." Daryl fell down beside Paul whose whole body was shaking with sobs.

Maggie broke away from Rosita and ran over to them. She stared at the pike. "No-no-no-no-no-no..."

Some were weeping, most were in shock as they absorbed the scene before them. Rick had seen a lot. Even he was swallowing to keep the contents of his stomach in check.

"These Whisperers are *un monton de psicopatas. More so than the Saviors ever were." Rosita fell on her knees before the pike with Father Gabriel’s head. "He wanted to redeem himself for locking his flock out of his church. And this is his reward." She plunged the knife into his snarling head before stroking the side of his face. (*a bunch of psychos)

"Not everybody is here." Carol had gotten a hold of herself somewhat. "Where are Ezekiel, Aaron, and Carl?" A part of her was relieved not to see Ezekiel’s head on a pike. Where was he? Were the Whisperers planning something special with him?

Paul suddenly got up, one of his knives in his hand. He gently gave Tara mercy. Daryl reached over and touched his shoulder. Paul suddenly pulled back. "Leave me the hell alone." Grief flooded over him so fast all he wanted to do was run. His about-face nearly knocked Daryl over and he ran towards the trees where the horses were tied up.

Daryl started to go after him. Rick came up beside him and restrained him. "Let him go for now."

"What are we going to tell Connie?" Yumiko watched as Jerry gave Kal and Tammy Rose mercy.

"We can only tell her the truth." Magna wiped away the last of her tears.

Rick took care of the rest of the heads and all became quiet, only the muted sound of the wind ominously blowing snow across the field remained.

"Where are the bodies?" Rosita had turned her back on the scene not wanting to look at it anymore.

"Maybe they’re piled up in the woods. There’s a trail of blood that leads there." Rick pointed to the ground.

Wanting nothing more than to leave the crazy vision of the heads behind they followed the blood trail into the trees. It led to a pile of blankets. When Rick looked through them he heard a moan of pain. Carol and Maggie helped him remove more of the blankets. In the center was King Ezekiel with blood on his face and all over his clothes. They weren’t certain if it was his or someone else’s.

"You will gain nothing by killing me." Ezekiel looked up with glazed eyes when he saw Rick’s shadow, blinking at the sudden brightness.

"Ezekiel. It’s Rick."
Carol reached over and stroked the side of Ezekiel`s face. "I`m here, my love."

"Carol. It is you." The others blocked out more of the bright sunlight and Ezekiel was able to see more clearly. "It was awful. They killed them all then smeared their blood all over me. They told me to tell you that I was left here to bear witness. Yes, that was the message. To bear witness." His voice sounded far away, even to his own ears.

"Who did all of this? Was it Alpha?" Maggie`s anger at the Whisperer leader only made her want revenge, more so than she had felt when Negan had been kept alive.

"Alpha and her second-in-command. Beta. He did all of the killing. A large man to greatly fear."

Daryl helped Ezekiel to his feet. "They didn`t leave the bodies?"

"The bodies were taken to be skinned." Ezekiel lowered his head shaking with sobs. "I saw it all. Everyone pleaded for their lives. Alpha and Beta have no mercy in their hearts. They only understand cruelty." He seemed to be too much in shock to weep anymore.

"Let`s get him back to Hilltop." Maggie turned to go back out onto the field wanting to get whatever else they had to do over with.

"One more question. Where are Carl and Aaron?" Rick stared hard at Ezekiel.

"Carl was alive when they took him with them. The girl Lydia pleaded for his life to be spared. I did not see Aaron."

"What should we do with the heads?" The question came from Rosita.

"Put them in bags, take them with us. Once we get back to Hilltop we can decide what to do." Maggie hiked back over to the pikes, the others following her. She slowly removed the heads of Kal, Tammy Rose, Luke, and Kelly.

"Is Jesus not with you?" Ezekiel was surprised that Paul would not be out searching.

"He was. He`s pretty torn up right now. He most likely rode back to Hilltop to warn them." Rick glanced over at the grove of trees. It looked like one of the horses was gone. "Daryl, is one of the horses gone?"

Daryl stared at the trees. "Echo is gone." He angrily kicked up some snow. "Dammit, now Paul is out there alone."

"Let us make haste away from here. They consider this their territory and may surround us with walkers and trap us." There was some fear and anxiety in Ezekiel`s voice.

"I`m for that. Let`s get away from this insanity." Carol and Jerry helped Ezekiel walk towards the horses.

Magna and Rosita slowly collected the rest of the heads, respectfully putting them in burlap bags.

Daryl came to Tara`s head and realized he would have to tell Gracie about her surrogate grandmother and Aunt Tara and also that her father was missing. "I wanna kill `em all."

Rick came up beside him. "You`re not thinking clear right now. I had that kind of thinking with the Saviors. Nearly got everyone else killed."

Daryl took Tara`s head and gently removed it from the pike. He looked into the lifeless eyes and
let his tears flow. Then he looked in the direction Paul’s horse had gone. The hoof prints had kicked up enough snow to create a trail heading directly towards Hilltop.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted the title of this chapter to reflect the concept of madness. It was inspired by a quote from Edgar Allan Poe: "I became insane, with long intervals of horrible insanity."

Of course the comics vary with the details on the deaths in this scene and the TV show I’m sure will have its own version. It’s not so much who is on the pikes, but the reactions by the other characters, which will also be explored in the next couple of chapters.

I hope no one was too particularly disturbed. I know there were some worries about a couple of the characters. Characters remain alive as long as there is more story to tell---and there is.
Hilltop Tree House

Chapter Summary

Paul, Daryl, and Rick remember Tara.

After reaching Hilltop Maggie and Rick took on the task of informing everyone about what had happened. Since Siddiq had been sent for he and Enid took charge of examining Ezekiel. Rick had used a walkie-talkie to inform Michonne who was still at Alexandria. After being assured that things there were quiet he would be able to focus on what to do next.

"He only said that there were several deaths when he rode back here by himself." They were now in Maggie`s office and Eduardo was giving his report. "He told us to double the sentries. Then he put Echo in his stall and no one has seen him since."

"Retreating somewhat to his old habits." Maggie seemed troubled by this. "He and Tara were very close. Even though it was a rocky start to their friendship, it developed into something that helped Jesus come out from behind his wall."

"We`ll see if we can find him." Rick glanced at Daryl who gave a single nod.

"At least he didn`t run off into the woods or some shit like that." Daryl seemed relieved that Paul had made it back. There was still the question in the back of his mind about Aaron`s whereabouts.

"When you do find him tell him I want him to step in as second-in-command."

Daryl glared at Maggie. "He ain`t steppin` nowhere. Find someone else." Daryl indicated with his head for Rick to follow him out of Maggie`s office and they simply left.

Maggie sighed as she stared in the wake of their exit. "There are times I feel like I just don`t know them anymore."

"Maybe you don`t. The people of this place know they are safer with them around. Look, if you need someone to fill in the void while you look for another second-in-command, I`ll do it." Eduardo seemed eager to help.

"I don`t have much of a choice right now. Alright." Maggie stood up. "Stay here in the office until I get back. I have to inform Earl about Tammy Rose."

"Sure thing."

Paul was nowhere to be found inside Barrington House. Now that his widow`s walk hideout had been discovered he wasn`t there anymore. Rick went to check the storage sheds and truck but didn`t find him anywhere. Daryl stopped off at their house for a moment to see if maybe he had shown up there. He didn`t tell Gracie about the deaths or that Aaron was still missing. That would have to wait until later. The only thing he noticed was that one of the bottles of Scotch whiskey wasn`t in its place. He met up with Rick outside to discuss where to search next.

"He`s takin` it hard. Best bet would be to look close by outside the fence."
"He could be anyplace. And drunk on top of that if he took a whole bottle of whiskey."

Daryl stood in thought for a moment then snapped his fingers. "Think I know where he might be." He pointed to the gate that opened into the side of the fence that faced the woods. Rick eagerly followed him. Daryl studied the tracks in the snow for a moment and looked up and grinned. "I was right."

"Where is he?" Rick wished he knew Hilltop better than he wanted to admit.

"The tree house lookout in that old oak tree. It’s about a hundred feet from the fence. We built it as an advance sentry post."

They headed in the direction the tracks had gone and it led directly to the tree house. The rope ladder had been pulled down.

"He’s here alright." Rick took hold of the ladder first and expertly climbed up. The tree house was a platform surrounded by four walls with windows on all sides and a roof. There was a small wood burning stove and he could see wisps of smoke rising out of the chimney. Daryl was right behind him as they climbed onto the short porch. Rick knocked on the door.

"It’s me and Daryl, Jesus. Let us in."

There was a shuffling of footsteps. Moments later Paul opened the door. His eyes were red rimmed from crying, yet he didn’t seem drunk. He silently stepped aside and let them in. The bottle of Scotch whiskey was on the floor unopened. Paul sat down on the floor and just stared at nothing. Daryl and Rick sat down on either side of him.

"Just when I think I have used up all my tears, I start in again. " Paul’s voice was hoarse and quiet. "Seeing all of those people was bad enough. Tara..." He paused as he wiped away some tears. "I’m sorry for snapping at you, Daryl."

"Hey, man, heat of the moment." They embraced and kissed.

"Aaron and Carl weren’t on the pikes. Where could they be?"

"Ezekiel said he didn’t see Aaron. They took Carl hostage." Rick wanted to take the moment to relax. Carl’s absence was as keenly felt as Aaron’s.

Now that Daryl was in a private place with two people he trusted, he too started to cry. "Don’t get easier. Shit goes down and all ya gotta do is live with it."

"This is the worst thing I’ve ever seen anyone do. All along I thought Negan and Lucille had that honor." Rick paused as he let himself cry for a while. "We lost a lot of good people today." He stared at the bottle of whiskey. "Why did you bring the whiskey up here?"

"I thought I wanted to get drunk, then decided not to. I did bring these." Paul took three shot glasses out of one of his cargo pockets. "I had a feeling someone would find me."

Both Daryl and Rick chuckled. Daryl threw some more wood into the stove. "Let’s drink to Tara then."

Paul set the shot glasses on the floor then opened the bottle of whiskey. Once he poured out the shots they each took a glass and held it up in the air.

"To Tara Chambler." They clinked the glasses together and downed the shots in one swallow. Paul
poured out another round.

"Tara shined so much in the last few months." Rick swirled his drink around. "I think being second-in-command of this place was the biggest thrill of her life. She told me she owed it all to you, Jesus."

"She was someone who needed to shine. I could see that she was a rebel in her own special way and I admired that." Paul downed his shot and poured himself some more.

"I felt bad about Denise." Daryl drank his shot in one take. "She didn`t blame me or told me I failed her. Told me it wasn`t my fault. Still feel it was." He was glad his hair draped over his eyes covering them completely to hide the tears.

"She blamed the Saviors, Daryl. That`s why she was so angry with me when I saved Alden and those others." Paul reached over and brushed Daryl`s hair away. "Like you, she had revenge in her heart. When she saw reason, that`s when we started to develop a close friendship."

"Tara told me she would always invite Eric and Aaron over to her house for dinner. I swear she could concoct the wildest dishes out of nothing. She and Eric would always play games of marathon Monopoly at community parties, loved building houses and hotels. I`ll never forget her laugh when he landed and she collected the rent." Rick poured himself another shot.

"Bankruptcy?"

"She did it every time." Rick smiled at the memory. "Eric could never catch onto her strategy."

Paul closed his eyes and shook with sobs. "To end like that. Damn these Whisperers to Hell. Not only for Tara, for the others as well. They all died today in the most senseless way. All because we are where we don`t belong." Paul pounded his fist on the floor. "It would help if they would tell us their boundaries so we can at least try to stay where we belong."

"Still attack us cuz we dared to cross their border." Daryl kicked some firewood across the room.

Daryl gathered Paul into his chest and let the man sob. Soon Rick joined them and they just sat there downing shots and weeping in silence.

"Gotta get this out of our system. We gotta think clear. Ain`t gonna let `em do somethin` like this again."

"I`ve never had a shock like this before." Paul gulped down another shot. "I won`t relax until we find Aaron and Carl."

"We`ll be alright. We have to be." Rick wanted to assure himself of that as much as he did the other two.

"I know Maggie needs a new second-in-command. I`ll probably be hit up for it." Paul`s tone couldn`t indicate how much he wasn`t enthused about that prospect.

"Already told her ya ain`t available. Unless ya wanna be available."

Paul chuckled. "Not really."

"The Whisperers are so bold now they know our vulnerabilities and weaknesses. That fence out there may be strong, fences do come down." Out of anyone Rick was quite aware of that fact.
"What’s our next move?" Daryl now felt even more ready for it.

Before Paul could answer the warning bell from the front gate could be heard ringing. They got up and looked out the windows but could only see the trees.

"Let’s go." Rick put out the stove with some bottled water and they were soon heading back to see what other horrors the Whisperers had in store for that day.
The Whisperers show up at Hilltop’s gates and try to strike a deal.

Paul, Daryl, and Rick scrambled up the ladder to the sentry platform that was already occupied by Carol, Ezekiel, Maggie, and Jerry. They stared out into the snowy crop fields and watched as the group of walkers meandered along then suddenly stopped.

"They’re sure creepy as hell up close." Carol shivered, never comfortable whenever having to gaze at the Whisperers.

Maggie held up a walkie-talkie to her cheek. "Michonne, do you copy? Over."

"Read you loud and clear. We got a bunch a few feet from the front gate. Reports of them in the open spaces in back. Over."

"Copy that. Over." Maggie glanced at the three of them. "Glad you could join us."

"Haven´t they done enough today?" Paul was slightly drunk. He had sobered up as soon as he laid eyes on the approaching Whisperers.

"They just started wandering towards us. Same thing is happening in Alexandria."

Paul gave a hand signal to the other sentries around the fence and they confirmed that Whisperers were also surrounding on the other sides. "I think they are just trying to intimidate us some more. They don´t seem ready to attack."

"Where were you?"

"The tree house." Rick had also sobered up pretty quickly.

She could see that the eyes of the three of them were red-rimmed, especially Paul`s, and she could smell the slight odor of whiskey from them. "We’ll talk later." She gently placed her hand on Paul`s.

Two of the Whisperers stepped forward as the others hung back. They came as close to the gate as they dared.

"How did you like our little demonstration?" The voice behind the mask belonged to Alpha.

"Go to Hell." Rick aimed his Colt Python at her.

"Shoot me and we kill the hostages." Alpha signaled and a large male Whisperer securely held Carl as he stepped forward. Behind him another held Aaron.

Rick lowered his gun. "Alright. Maybe we can negotiate some kind of deal."

"No deal!" This time it was the man holding Carl. "Get out and stay out of our territory."
"And just where is that exactly?" Paul was getting fed up with their going on about their territory. "It seems like we don’t belong anywhere with you people."

"You’re the one they call Jesus." Alpha looked directly at him. "Are you the Way, the Truth, and the Life?" The sarcasm in her voice was quite heavy.

Paul burst into laughter. "Even the creepiest among us have a sense of humor." He held up his sword. "This won’t be a plowshare anytime soon if you attack us."

"If you want either of your friends back you will need to come out here and face me, Jesus." Alpha took a couple steps forward.

"If I’m to see you face to face, my weapons stay with me." Paul glanced at Daryl, who was looking at him cautiously. Maggie had a somewhat shocked look on her face. "As soon as you give us your hostages you are to withdraw from here and from Alexandria."

"Who are you to dictate terms?" The large man was obviously not the reasonable type.

"Easy, Beta." Alpha held her hand out to her side to try and calm him.

"This is where we belong, Beta." There was a sharpness in Paul’s voice.

Alpha was silent as she considered his terms. "Alright. Keep your weapons."

Paul turned to go down the ladder.

"They’ll kill you." Maggie didn’t want him to go down at all. "Can’t you see it’s you they are after?"

"Yes." Paul was cool as he continued on down the ladder and then stood in front of the gate. He nodded when he was ready for it to be opened just enough to let him through.

"I don’t think I can watch this." Yumiko buried her head in Magna’s shoulder.

Everyone who could see what was going down held their collective breath.

Paul stopped about three feet in front of Alpha. "Alright. Here I am."

"You’re much smaller than I thought you would be, yet I see no fear in your eyes. I certainly hope you learned your lesson about staying away from us."

"We had no idea of your existence until just a few months ago. You never give anyone the benefit of knowing where exactly you call your territory. That fault lies with you, not us."

"The place we burned down. That was our territory." Beta snarled at him.

"And Hilltop? Alexandria?" Paul looked Beta up and down getting an idea of the size of him and what weapons he carried.

"Communities too close for comfort." Alpha was not going to waiver from her stance.

"You do know we will fight back. There can be a peaceful solution." Paul wasn’t going to back down either.

"But you cannot win. Do you think this is all we are? Just a few who wear the masks of the dead? We are the dead and with the dead. You will understand that all too well if you do not leave your
"communities and go elsewhere."

"And if we have to cross your territory to get to this so-called 'elsewhere'? What then?"

"What if I could promise you safe passage?"

Paul shrugged. "Wouldn’t place any safe bets on that."

"You are a smart and shrewd man, Jesus. If you are as smart as I think you are, you will persuade the others to leave." Alpha turned to face Beta. "Let the one-armed man go."

"Good thing I found you in the woods and talked them into not putting you on a pike." The Whisperer holding Aaron sounded familiar to him. Then it finally hit him.

"When did you start doing me favors, Negan? Even with a mask on I can sense that shit-eating grin of yours."

Negan laughed. "This time you got lucky."

Beta motioned to Negan and the exchange took place. He walked over and menacingly stared down at Paul. Paul reached out and took Aaron from him. Aaron’s face was bloody and somewhat bruised. A Whisperer threw his prosthesis on the ground. Paul reached down and picked it up.

Aaron looked at Paul. "I’m okay." He took the prosthesis from him.

Paul showed no emotion as he stared directly at Alpha. He noticed Lydia standing behind her. "What about Carl?"

"Mommy, Carl didn’t do anything wrong. Let him go, too."

"Alpha! You call me Alpha!" Lydia was slapped hard by her mother, so much so that her cheek was bleeding from the sharpness of Alpha’s nails. Alpha looked at Paul. "The boy stays." She shoved Lydia to the ground. Carl slowly bent down and gently helped her to her feet.

Alpha then came up to Paul standing only inches from him. She was slightly shorter yet they were still face to face. Alpha then snorted and made an expression of contempt before backing away. Paul didn’t flinch or budge.

Beta then came over and stood above him. He bent down slightly. "I could crush you, little Jesus."

"Maybe you’ll get a chance to try someday." Out of the corner of his eye Paul saw one of the Whisperers pull out a knife and head in his direction. In a move so fast he whipped out one of his knives and it went directly into the Whisperer’s heart. A couple others came towards him shoving walkers at him and he made mince meat out of all of them with an easy dance of kicks and his sword. When he was finished he stared directly at Beta. "You were saying?"

Beta backed off. Other nearby Whisperers also backed away, frightened and impressed with the display they just saw.

"Enough of this. You know our terms. The boy will be returned when you comply." Alpha signaled for everyone to leave.

Paul walked over and retrieved his knife. He stuck it in the Whisperer’s head and wiped the blood off on its clothes. As he went through the gate he heard a collective sigh from everyone as they all felt they could breathe again. He noticed Rick watching the retreating group with great interest. He
could guess what the man was thinking. Paul was about to shut the gate when he noticed one Whisperer was lingering just outside the border of the cornfield. Its only weapon was a machete. He watched as it meandered around for a moment before following the rest of the group. He glanced at Aaron as he secured the gate.

Aaron rolled his eyes. "Negan."

"The day just gets better and better." Arm in arm Paul and Aaron followed the others towards Barrington House, Daryl falling into step beside them.
Paul, Daryl, and Aaron enjoy some home time after a long day.

"Good thing I had those shots of whiskey." Paul sat down on the sofa weary from all that had gone down. He watched as Aaron and Gracie greeted each other in a tight hug.

"Now we got matching black eyes, Daddy." Gracie lightly touched hers then Aaron`s.

"We most certainly do. I’d like to get cleaned up." Aaron stroked his beard. "Maybe even trim this down."

"How come?"

"For--reasons." Aaron glanced at Paul who was smirking at him. Gracie broke off the embrace and Aaron wearily headed upstairs.

"Hope Carl`s gonna be okay." Daryl handed Paul a mug of fresh coffee.

"Lydia is protecting him. I got the impression Alpha wants him alive. Rick wants to rush over and rescue him. I told him to wait. She`s up to something." Paul looked at Gracie who was listening intently. "Young lady, why don`t you put on your pajamas? It`s almost bedtime."

Gracie emitted an irritated snort. "I want to listen."

"No." Daryl`s voice was gentle but stern. "Now git."

Gracie stomped her foot once and ran upstairs. Daryl and Paul exchanged knowing grins.

"There was a time I thought the only psychos we encountered wielded barbed-wire bats."

"We can get through this. Let `em throw shit at us. We got caught with our pants down." Daryl put his arm around Paul.

"Like I said to Rick earlier in Maggie`s office, they know how to keep their walkers hidden and how to control them." Paul wearily rested his head on Daryl`s shoulder. "Perhaps it`s best to discuss this tomorrow."

"Should put today behind us. Ain`t gonna bring our friends back."

Paul buried his face in Daryl`s chest his arm clinging hard around Daryl`s torso. "I`ll be mourning them for a long time, especially Tara."

"Just need to get some sleep is all."

Paul only drank half his coffee before setting the mug down. "I just want to forget this day."

"We`re gonna make them damn Whisperers pay. And what the hell was Negan doin` with `em?"

He noticed that Paul had closed his eyes even though he wasn`t asleep so he just held him there in
his arms.

When Aaron came down he was already in his pajamas and bathrobe, his bushy beard now neatly trimmed back so much they could see the outline of his face. "Better?"

Paul opened his eyes. "Yeah." He started to laugh.

"What’s so funny?" Daryl looked from one to the other with confusion.

"Remember when we were fucking the other morning and Paul was blowing you?"

"How could I forget. I was howlin’ like Dog."

"I came in from behind him, worked and lubed his ass and prepared to fuck him, okay? He called me Grizzly Aaron the mountin’ man."

Paul burst into a fit of laughter. "It tickles when you’re blowing or rimming me. All that curly hair."

"Gracie thinks it tickles too whenever I kiss her cheek. Speaking of the devil, I better go tuck her in." Aaron headed back upstairs.

Daryl noticed that Paul could not stop yawning.

"Time to go to bed." Daryl got up and reached out a hand to help Paul stand. Together they went upstairs.

Both put on their t-shirt and sweat pants pajamas in silence. Aaron returned later and shed his bathrobe.

"I had to turn up the heat. Going to be a cold night. Of course, being in the cold all day didn’t help."

"Is Gracie okay?" Paul worried about how the happenings of the day would affect her.

"She fell asleep right away. Did you tell her much?"

"Didn’t have time." Paul crawled into the bed. "I would have hated to have to be the one to tell her if you were on one of those pikes."

"How did Negan catch ya?" Daryl reclined on his side of the bed.

"I was lured into the woods by walkers. I had put them down when I encountered the Whisperers who were using them. One aimed a gun at me while the other, who later turned out to be Negan, stripped me of my weapons. Negan must have talked Alpha into not putting me on the pike. I told her I was more valuable as a hostage. You can figure out the rest." During his speech Aaron had gotten in on his side of the bed, Paul in the middle as usual.

Daryl pulled the covers over him and Paul and put his arm around him. "I don’t know what I woulda done if I saw your head on one of them pikes."

"It didn’t happen, though. Tara would want us to fight on. You know I don’t like the senseless loss of life, but what can you do when they won’t reason with you?" Paul felt disgusted that it was a dilemma that couldn’t be resolved. "Maggie said they are out to kill me. In that case I will defend myself, kill if I have to."
Aaron turned off the lights and laid down, his arm quickly around Paul. "They’ll have to get past
us to get to you."

"Ya got that right, man." Daryl and Paul kissed, then Paul and Aaron kissed. Aaron leaned over
Paul and kissed Daryl. They both kissed Paul at the same time.

"Now cut that out. Get some sleep." Paul slightly giggled.

It was the middle of the night when Paul woke up. The arms of both of his lovers were still around
him. He had learned to slip out from underneath them without waking them up. He did that now,
first going to the bathroom to relieve himself, then going into the workout room. He flipped on the
light. Aaron’s collection of at least twelve license plates had been nailed to the wall. The first one
was the Maine lobster plate which held a place of honor above a collage of photos Aaron had of
him and Eric, him and Daryl, him and Paul, the three of them together, Gracie, Dog--anything that
he considered a family picture. The other walls were still mostly bare. Paul knew there was a
picture of them and Tara somewhere and he would add it to the collection. It would be a long time
before he would be able to get the memory out of seeing her head on the pike, if ever.

He walked over to the window and looked out. There was a full panorama of Hilltop all covered in
snow. No lights were on in Barrington House, the other trailers and animal enclosures were dark as
well. Only the hospital had a few lights on. The stars were clear and twinkling and there was no
moon that night. Paul could see the constellation of Orion the hunter and remembered going to a
planetarium show as a child and learning about the stars and planets, information he was eager to
pass on to a curious Tara...

"What’s that star called, Jesus?" Tara pointed to a reddish/purple star.

"Capella. It’s in the constellation of Auriga."

"And that one over there? The red one?"

"That’s not a star. That’s Mars."

"First walkers, now Martians. Look out!" Tara lightly punched him in the arm.

Paul grinned. "See that cluster of stars?" He pointed. "That’s the Pleiades star cluster. Scientists
theorize our sun originally drifted from that cluster."

"Really? That’s pretty far out."

"Not in astronomical terms. The universe is constantly in motion. We are never in the same place
we were, not even for a billionth of a billionth of a second."

"Wow, Jesus, that’s heavy. Billions and billions of stars." Both of them grinned at her bad imitation
of Carl Sagan. "You’re the smartest person I’ve ever known."

"You’re smart, too, Tara. Don’t ever let anyone else tell you differently."

"You think so?" Paul nodded. "Well, at least I know I won’t die stupid."...

Paul sat down heavily in a chair and wiped away a couple tears. The one image he had taken with
him from that day that stuck in his mind was Beta towering over him. He had noted his size and
the two large knives he carried. Not someone many would want to mess with. Daryl’s soft snoring
and Aaron’s breathing from their bedroom could be heard. Dog poked his head into the room and
came over to him. Paul absentely petted him for a while before getting up and shutting off the light.
As soon as he slipped back into bed he snuggled between Daryl and Aaron again. Dog curled up on his rug at the end of the bed.

It had been the longest day of Paul’s life, even longer than the day he got stabbed. It had ended between the two men that he had ever loved the most in his life. It was a sign that they were meant to see things through to the very end—together.
Breakfast In Bed

Chapter Summary

Paul gets a special treat. Aaron and Paul get into a slight argument.

Daryl was the first to awaken that next morning as Paul snuggled in his pillow now partially lying on his stomach. He reached over and stroked Paul’s hair noticing a couple strands of grey, something he had never noticed before. When he looked over at Aaron, he was also awake. Not wanting to wake up Paul, they both quietly put on robes and headed downstairs. They leaned against the counter making out until a soft knock at the front door disturbed them. Aaron answered it and it was Ms. Maitlin carrying a bed tray full of food.

"Is he up yet?"

"Paul? No." Aaron stepped aside and let her in.

"Good. Help me get this upstairs."

Aaron looked at Daryl who shrugged as he brewed some coffee.

When they got to the bedroom Paul was just stretching his arms and blinking his eyes. He noticed his visitors. "Hey, Betty, what’s up?"

"Not you, obviously. I brought you breakfast in bed. Scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and blueberry pancakes."

Paul sat up. "Breakfast in bed. I’ve never had that before." He and Aaron exchanged looks as Aaron helped adjust the pillows.

"That was an awful brave thing you did yesterday. Maggie wanted to do something special for you and this is it." Ms. Maitlin grabbed the napkin and tucked it in the collar of Paul’s t-shirt.

As Daryl entered the room Aaron placed the bed tray over Paul’s lap. Ms. Maitlin then proceeded to take the lids off the dishes. "Here’s some apple juice, made by yours truly."

"Smells and looks delicious." Paul eagerly dug into the food.

"I’ll be back later to get the dishes and tray. Enjoy." Ms. Maitlin leaned over and kissed Paul on the cheek and left.

"Is that maple syrup?" Paul’s mouth was full.

Aaron picked it up and smelled it. "Yep."

Paul slathered butter all over his pancakes then poured the syrup. "Aren’t you guys going to eat?"

"Downstairs, my lord." Daryl smirked at him.

"Knock it off." Paul aimed an annoyed look in Daryl’s direction.
"Daddy!" They heard a voice call from down the hall. 

"Ah, the Munchkin is up. See you later, my lord."

"Shut up." Paul was ready to kick a snickering and smirking Aaron as he left the room. He looked at Daryl and picked up a bit of his scrambled eggs and threw it on Daryl`s face. "There. Now you have egg on your face, prick."

"Yes, my lord. Anythin` ya say, my lord." Daryl was glad that Paul seemed to be in good spirits. He reached over to get a slice of bacon but Paul threatened to stick his fork into his hand so he had to withdraw. "Reflexes still good ain`t they."

"Always." Paul ate in silence for a bit. "What`s the name of that really big guy that Alden is always asking to lift the heavy stuff?"

"I think they call him Mammoth Mike. Why?"

"He`s about six foot five, two eighty-five, wouldn`t you say?"

"Yeah."

"I want to meet with him in the workout room in the next day or two."

"If ya want." Daryl looked at Paul with both confusion and concern. "Ya gonna hurt him?"

"Of course not, silly. He`s always asking me if he can do anything for me. I just want to take him up on his offer."

Daryl knew Paul was up to something. He just wished he knew exactly what.

Aaron had taken Gracie downstairs to fix her some breakfast. Daryl came down to check and see if the coffee was ready. Since it was he poured himself a mug.

"Paul`s up to somethin`." Daryl gave Gracie a hug.

"When is he not. What is it this time?"

"He wants to see that guy everyone calls Mammoth Mike. Won`t tell me why."

"Mammoth Mike. Hell, he`s bigger than I am."

Gracie watched the toaster intently as two slices of toast popped up. "Toast is up!"

Aaron grabbed them, buttered them, and put them on a plate next to some sausage. "All I know was I never have been so scared for Paul than I was yesterday."

"Did ya see how Beta threatened him?"

Aaron snapped his fingers. "That`s it. Mammoth Mike is Beta`s size. Christ, is he planning on taking on Beta?"

"He ain`t gonna do it by himself if I can help it."

Aaron sighed. "Dammit. You`re right." He continued to fix Gracie`s oatmeal in silence.

After showering and getting dressed Paul came down the stairs carrying the bed tray. Gracie had
already been taken to school and Daryl had taken Dog to go out hunting. Aaron was working out on some weights in the living room. He glanced up at Paul the way a father would at a son who was about to do something stupid.

"You can`t take on Beta alone."

"Oh, cluck-cluck." Paul knew his housemates would figure out what he was up to.

"Damn right I`m going to mother hen you, Paul." Aaron set the weights down. "He`s three times as big as you are."

"Yes. That`s why I need to train. Good God, do you actually think I`m going into this unprepared?"

"I`ve only seen you unprepared once in my life. It was in a cemetery, there was a mist..."

"Alright, I get your point. Someone`s got to take Beta down at some point. Alpha, too."

Aaron sighed. "I know we won`t be able to talk you out of it. I guess the best thing Daryl and I can do is have your back."

"Good. I`m glad you`re seeing things clearly."

Aaron was uncomfortable with Paul`s attitude. "Are you seeing things clearly? I hope you`re not getting cocky again just because you faced all of those Whisperers by yourself yesterday."

"Getting cocky." Paul`s voice became more intense. "Hardly. If I recall correctly if I hadn`t gone out there you wouldn`t be sitting here lifting weights. Does anyone else in this God forsaken colony know what needs to be done? It`s always Jesus that has to decide on the best solution." He sat down and quickly put on his boots. "Does anyone ever think that maybe I get tired, too?"

"You of all people know that some things never stop, there`s never a break." Aaron wasn`t sure why he was raising his voice.

"You think so? The Whisperers certainly never give us one. The Saviors never did. How many more lives will have to be sacrificed before it ends? We`re on our own, Aaron. We screw up, that`s it. And it will most likely be my fault."

"No one`s blaming you, Paul. I`m not. Daryl`s not. You are blaming yourself." Aaron set the last weight down and decided to catch his breath. The last thing he wanted was to fight with Paul.

Paul got up and put on his coat. "I`ll be in Maggie`s office if anyone needs me." He swiftly went out the door, slamming it behind him causing the walls to shake slightly.

Aaron knew Paul would be working through his grief for quite some time and hoped that`s all it was. Paul could be quite moody at times and grief brought that out more than ever. Aaron only wanted to help. Maybe Paul would eventually realize it and accept it.
Paul, Rick, Maggie, and some of the others discuss strategy in the wake of the latest move from the Whisperers.

Even though Carol sat beside Ezekiel trying to comfort him she knew in her heart it would not be possible, most likely not for a very long time. Rick, Maggie, Magna, and Paul had been listening to his narrative, hardly a word of his in the language they were used to hearing him speak.

"If only I could get the screams out of my head. One by one they were brought in, each one pleading for their lives. Two Whisperers held my head up, Alpha saying I was to bear witness to the justice for the crimes of those who violated their boundaries. The large one called Beta performed the deeds, first slashing their throats then beheading each one cleanly so as not to damage the brain. I cannot forget the sound of his laughter, especially when the heads began to turn." Ezekiel buried his face in his hands.

"I can`t imagine what you went through." Rick placed a hand on Ezekiel`s shoulder. "This world manages to find ways to reinvent just how horrible it can be. I`ve seen a lot, nothing like this."

"When Alpha said the bodies were to be made into skin suits, my grief and horror knew no bounds. They made me watch as each head was placed on the pike. I was too shocked to weep."

Paul turned around not facing them, not wanting to hear anymore. He felt he had to for those who were gone. For Tara. He wondered if there was any redemption for any of the Whisperers or did they all deserve to die.

"I`ll have to make some kind of funeral arrangements." Maggie looked at Magna. "You don`t know how sorry I am about your friends, Magna."

Magna tried to hold back tears. "We want to be useful. I guess none of us realized how bad it is."

"If you want to leave I won`t stop you."

Magna shook her head. "No. We`ll stay and we`ll fight. We owe it to Luke and Kelly."

Maggie nodded and looked over at Paul who still had his back turned towards them. "Jesus, you`ve hardly said a word."

Paul turned to face them wiping away a couple tears. "What else is there to say? Anything we do or say won`t bring them back."

"We need to form a strategy of attack. I have to find a way to get Carl back, Jesus. I`m going to need your help with this."

"Ambushing any of their camps is completely out of the question. Do we really want to antagonize them any further? They have the ability to unleash herds of walkers on us as well as integrate within those herds. You said it yourself about how fences do come down. We don`t know how many of them there really are or how many walkers they have."
"Maybe we should concentrate on taking out Alpha. Even Beta." Carol now had everyone’s attention. "And if there’s a Gamma and a Delta, them too. Cut off the head of the snake and it becomes useless."

"Perhaps what we need to do is use their own ways against them." Paul paced emphasizing each point. "One of the things they like to do is sneak up on us whether we’re in here or somewhere out in the woods. Yesterday, Alpha and Beta didn’t have that many with them. There weren’t any walkers, all Whisperers. They think just showing up and being creepy and menacing is enough to scare us."

Rick grinned. "And it ain’t. We set up people outside the fence and in the nearby woods. Hide them in duck blinds."

"We can keep them there long term. Provide food, water, heat, walkie-talkies--so all they have to do is hunker down and wait." Maggie looked enthused about the idea. "We’ll have the element of surprise for a change."

"I know Daryl will have some ideas on how to set up the blinds." Paul knew Daryl would be invaluable to their plan.

"Where is he? I wanted to talk to him this morning." Rick often wished Daryl was back in Alexandria. Now that Daryl had found a life for himself at Hilltop, he knew that was next to impossible.

"He said something about going hunting." Paul sighed. "I wanted to stop him from going out by himself. You know how stubborn and determined he can be."

Rick chuckled. "He works better by himself. This could be his way of processing what’s happened."

"That doesn’t reassure me. You’re not in love with him, either." Paul looked at Maggie. "I’m going to inspect for any weaknesses in the fence. The snow has been knocking down some of the older logs." He grabbed his coat and left.

Maggie looked at Ezekiel. "Get some rest. Take all the time you need. You are welcome to stay here indefinitely. All of your people as well."

"I am grateful. To you both."

"There’s plenty of room at Alexandria. Michonne assures me the Kingdom refugees that are there are well taken care of."

Maggie looked at Rick. "Will you be going back to Alexandria?"

"I was thinking sometime tomorrow. Eugene, Barbara, and Rosita are ready to go home. We’ll take the heads of Frankie, Laura, Scott, and Father Gabriel for burial." Rick looked pensive for a long time. "Lydia has made some kind of connection with Carl. I hope she can keep him alive. I want to go after him in the worst way."

"I’m with Jesus on this. He said we need to wait." Maggie knew it would be difficult for Rick to do just that. "Maybe just a couple more days."

"I’ll try. I don’t know what good it will do."

"I’d like to go upstairs to my room now. Sleep has been elusive for me. Perhaps it will not be so
this time." Ezekiel’s demeanor was one of shock and exhaustion.

Carol gently held onto him as he stood, whispering soft reassurances as they left the office.

"I need to see how Connie is doing. She’s taking Kelly’s and Luke’s deaths hard." Magna left.

Maggie and Rick just stared at each other in silence for a long time.

"What a fucked up situation." That statement from Rick basically summed up what everyone was feeling.

"I guess we abandon the search for Negan. I couldn’t believe it when Aaron said he had been captured by him in the woods. Hard to believe he’s actually joined up with them."

"He can stay for all I care and not want to come back. I’m not gonna get my hopes up about it."

Maggie chuckled. "Who knows? Maybe the Whisperers will catch on to him and give him the business."

"In that case we won’t let them know the favor they’ve done us." Rick left the office giving her a slight wave as he did so.

Now alone with her thoughts Maggie missed Tara’s presence more than ever, especially in moments of crisis. They had become close as sisters, especially after the loss of Beth. She had wept all night for those who died. She jumped slightly when there was a knock on her office door.

"Sorry." Eduardo came in carrying a clipboard with him. "I did the canned goods inventory like you asked." He set the clipboard on the desk. "I hope I did it right."

Maggie looked it over. "As long as I can understand what it means it should be fine."

"I’m not good at this kind of thing, not like Tara was. She could always make heads or tails out of things. Me? I’m better doing sentry duty or runs. I promise I’ll do my best, Maggie. My way of honoring her. I sure do miss her."

"I’m hoping you’ll be interested in taking the spot permanently. You’ve been here a long time, Eduardo, you know how this place runs. I’m not going to force it on you. In fact, I may have something of interest for you since you are in charge of the runners now."

Eduardo’s expression became enthusiastic. "In charge of the runners? Oh yeah?"

"What do you know about acquiring and setting up duck blinds?"

"Duck blinds? Like what deer hunters use?" Maggie nodded. "I’ve seen them in sporting goods stores. Warehouses. They’re stacked on top of each other most of the time. Never had any need for them so we left them alone."

"Your task is to get as many as you can. Once you bring them back here we’ll tell you what we are going to do with them. Daryl knows how to set them up properly."

Eduardo bounced up and down on his toes. "Alright. Speaking of Daryl, he was acting real strange when he left this morning to go hunting."

"He was greatly affected by what happened. He likes to be alone to process his grief."

Eduardo shook his head. "Maybe. He wasn’t in his usual hunting mood. He left Dog behind to stay
in the stables. He always takes him out hunting with him."

Maggie wrinkled her forehead. "That is unusual. I`m the last person in the world to understand Daryl Dixon."
Chapter Summary

Daryl infiltrates the Whisperer camp and gets an earful.

Sneaking up on the unsuspecting Whisperer was easy. Getting off his mask and skin suit was also without difficulty. The hard part was leaving his crossbow behind, hidden in a small dark cavity near the frozen river. Daryl also had to hide the outer clothing he was wearing in favor of the ragged walker clothing that still smelled of the dead. Of course, he wanted that as well in case he encountered any walkers. The other odd thing was he wanted walkers to show up since it was all part of his plan to infiltrate Alpha`s camp. Killing would draw too much attention and right now it was best to make the Whisperers think they had triumphed.

His crossbow and clothes buried, Daryl began to search the woods for walkers. His only weapons were his knives and he would only use them if any walkers turned on him. He was in luck when a small group came up close to the river. He banged one of his knives against a rock to get their attention as well as to make sure they were all walkers. When they turned as a group and he could see the opaque glaze of their eyes, he was satisfied. They came closer and walked right by him and he joined them, imitating their gait as best as he could. The growl was a little more difficult, but maybe he wouldn`t need it. He had already traced the trail to Alpha`s camp so he steered them in that direction.

Once at the camp he wandered around in hopes of finding Carl. When he saw Alpha go into the animal skin tent he slowly made his way towards it and grabbed some animal skins and sat down just outside of it, pretending to work on the hides to be used as blankets. He could see Alpha pacing back and forth. There was no sign of Carl or Lydia. She was alone for a long time until another Whisperer, carrying a machete, came into her tent. She stopped pacing and stared at the newcomer.

"You certainly like to sneak around and go into places where you`re not welcome. What do you want now?" Alpha stood there with her arms folded acting like she wished that whomever was standing there was not there at all.

"I simply came to gaze upon your beautiful face. Remove some of that fucking dirt and you`d be the next Miss America."

Daryl momentarily stopped what he was doing. That voice...

Alpha actually laughed. "Take off your mask." She quickly disarmed him of his machete. "Don`t bring that in here."

Daryl moved so he could get a better view of the inside of the tent. He was right when he thought the voice was familiar.

The Whisperer removed the mask, the shit-eating grin unmistakable. "I thought you liked to see ole Negan at his best. I`ve been watching you for quite some time and believe I have lost my heart to you."

Alpha scoffed, withdrawing her knife and coming up to hold it at Negan`s throat. "This may be a
Told you I want to join up. You can make me my own special skin suit, not this one I had to steal. A beautiful woman like you can appreciate a loyal follower like me. I’ve noticed what the men do around here. I could give you the same courtesy." Negan didn’t even flinch concerning the knife at his throat.

"Seriously?" Alpha held the knife in place a moment longer then removed it from his throat. "Give me more information. Do you belong to any of those communities?"

"You mean Hilltop or Alexandria? Yes. Alexandria. Their leader Rick Grimes and I were once the best of buddies. We’ve sort of had a falling out. That’s why I came to you." Negan sat down completely at ease.

Daryl shook his head in disbelief as he snorted. It didn’t take long for Negan to start in on his lies. At least he could admire Alpha for seeing through the man’s bullshit.

Alpha slapped Negan’s hand away when he reached over to stroke her cheek. "You want to help us is that it? Alright, tell me more about Rick Grimes."

"Not much to tell. He was some kind of sheriff down in Georgia. Leadership for him is an ego trip. Surprised he has gotten this far." Negan leaned towards her. "Are you sure you don’t want to get together with me, honey? We would make a sweet couple."

Alpha snorted. "You are extremely annoying, Negan. I should kill you right here and now."

Outside Daryl noticed Beta approaching at a rather rapid pace. He went inside the tent and pointed directly at Negan. "There he is. The liar."

"Liar?" Alpha looked from Beta to Negan.

"He is no ally to Alexandria or Hilltop. He is their escaped prisoner. We need to kill him." Beta approached Negan, his knife raised.

Alpha quickly intervened by stepping in front of Negan. "Wait." She turned to face him. "Tell me, are you afraid to die?"

"Yes and no."

"Can’t ever get a direct answer from you can I. Why have you come to us?"

"Because I have a hell of a lot to offer you and the Whisperers. I proved it by capturing one of their spies. You’re the ones at fault for exchanging him as a hostage."

Beta took a step forward, the knife still raised. "He does not understand our ways. He comes from them with their ideas. If you accept him you will be breaking our rules."

Alpha quickly walked up to Beta not taking her eyes from him. "Are you challenging me, Beta? Do you question my judgment? Negan is interested in joining us, learning our ways. He is willing to be indoctrinated. I am interested in what he has to offer. If he betrays us, I will kill him myself."

Beta flinched slightly and withdrew his knife, immediately falling to one knee and bowing his head. "Forgive me. I do not mean to challenge your authority."

"You are forgiven. Now leave."
Beta slowly got up and left. She didn’t see Negan emit a sigh of relief. When she turned around she noticed him getting down on one knee, even though she knew he was mocking her and the other Whisperers. "You simply can’t help yourself with your bullshit can you."

Negan laughed. "I am offering you my services to be part of the Whisperers. Keep your dog off me and I’ll be more cooperative. I know things about your enemy. Certainly that’s something of value to you."

"I’ll give you that much."

"Then you’ll make me my own skin suit? I had to kill one of your own to get this one and that breaks my heart as I’m sure it does yours." He winked at her.

"Take it off. You will get one when you earn one. Capturing one of them does not prove anything. You have yet to show yourself worthy."

"I was once a leader of a great place and everybody loved me. Soon you will, too. I can feel it in my gut."

Alpha stood there and just stared at him, obviously unimpressed by him. "Get out of here."

Frowning, Negan stood up and glared at her as he left the tent.

Outside Daryl turned his face away just in case Negan might recognize him. He decided he had taken enough of a chance as well as seeing and hearing enough. It would take too much time and drawing attention to himself if he looked for Carl. Slowly he stood up, making sure the animal skin hid him from Alpha’s view. He went in the direction of the animal pens. As soon as he knew he was clear he made his escape. Once he found the place where his crossbow and clothes were hidden, he shed the mask and skin suit and quickly headed back to Hilltop.

Paul had been waiting for him and now stood on the platform of the sentry post. As soon as Daryl was let in, he climbed down and came over to him.

"I know you didn’t go hunting. Dog got tired of the stables and scratched at the door to our house." He leaned over and sniffed Daryl. "You infiltrated Alpha’s camp didn’t you? Disguised yourself as one of them."

Daryl knew he could get nothing past Paul. "I was lookin` for Carl. Heard a conversation between Alpha and Negan instead."

"Negan." Paul snorted, hating the name as much as the man. "That must have been enlightening." Paul’s sarcasm was unmistakable. "What did he have to say?"

"Tried to charm her and offered his services. Beta wanted him killed. Alpha stopped him. At least she can see through his bullshit."

Paul chuckled. "That doesn’t take very much. Rick and the others are leaving tonight. He’ll want to know everything. Wish you could have found Carl even if you couldn’t bring him back here."

"I’ll get cleaned up first." Daryl started to walk away.

"You took an awful chance." Paul’s tone was somewhat angry. "Somewhat stupid and reckless wouldn’t you say?"

Daryl turned around and looked at him. "Not any more so than you, Paul."
Paul lowered his head. "I took the grand prize in stupidity. Lost several lives because of it." He headed towards Barrington House.

Daryl watched him until he went inside. He knew that all the deaths on the pikes were eating at Paul and not just Tara`s. Did he feel guilty for them? This troubled Daryl. He would have to talk to Aaron about it. For now, as used to being dirty as he was, he wanted to get the scent of walkers off of him.
Rick and the others had returned to Alexandria safely. They buried the heads of their pike victims and wrote down their names on the memorial wall.

"We`ll have to appoint a new Council chairman." Michonne and Rick slowly walked back home after the service.

"Maybe you could fill in until we can hold an election. We also need to fill in the void left by Laura." Rick knew no matter how bad things were getting, they would have to move on.

"She came to us as a Savior, then surrendered and became a valuable member of the community. Laura told me once how grateful she was for a second chance." Michonne linked her arm with his.

"Then there was Frankie, one of Negan`s `wives`." Rick chuckled. "I always loved how she sometimes spit into his food when it was her turn to prepare it."

"Scott was here before we arrived." Michonne broke down in tears. "Father Gabriel. We learned to trust him and once he earned that trust we never regretted it. He found his courage and did his best to atone for all of his wrongdoing."

"This place will not be the same without them. We`ll have to move on as we always have." They turned up the walk to their home and went inside, enjoying the warmth from the fireplace. "How`s our little one?" Rick placed his hand on her belly.

"Growing. Siddiq says the heartbeat is strong. I`ll be getting a sonogram tomorrow." They sat down together on the sofa. "Are you planning on getting Carl back?"

"I`ll have to. Jesus said to wait, let things cool down for a bit. I don`t think I can. I also think Alpha is lying when she pretends she doesn`t care about Lydia. She listens to her, especially concerning Carl." Rick`s voice sounded more like the old Rick, the one before there was a Ruling Council and he was the sole leader.

"I understand and agree you should go get him. Carl is attracted to Lydia. If you go after him, he won`t leave the camp without her." Michonne wanted to restrain him and knew that was out of the question.

"I may be alone in this if I`m not careful. He`ll insist on taking her with him." Rick sighed and closed his eyes. "Funerals just seem to drain so much out of a person don`t they. It was hard this afternoon. I hope Carl wasn`t forced to watch any of the killings or even listen to them being done." Rick couldn`t remain seated. He got up and grabbed his coat. "I`m going to look around outside the fence. Since what they`ve done is an act of war I need to make sure our defenses are up to speed."

"Be careful out there. They are always watching."
"I know." Rick checked his Colt Python to make sure it was loaded. He leaned down and they kissed and he was on his way out.

As Rick headed for the gate he realized he was angry not only about the deaths, also how they were using his son for some purpose. He would renew his determination on the idea that all he did would be for Carl, just like it had been on the road. For some reason he had put it in the back of his mind as all the days ran into each other and Carl grew up, now eighteen and considered an adult. Carl would always be his son and they had gone through too much together. As soon as he was out the front gate he walked over to the empty railroad tracks that were about two hundred yards from Alexandria’s fence. After kneeling on the ground and studying the markings in the snow, he followed the tracks until he came to a set of abandoned buildings. A great place for hiding, either Whisperers or armed Alexandrians. There was the sound of footsteps and he ducked into one. At first he thought they were walkers then he realized they were Whisperers, only they weren’t saying anything to each other. They were too close to Alexandria so in his mind he knew he would have to extend their security.

"Come quietly with us." It came from a voice behind him and he felt the cold tip of a gun at the back of his neck. "If you want to see your son alive again. No tricks."

Rick raised his arms and nodded. His gun was quickly confiscated. He turned around to see two Whisperers and Beta.

"Alpha has something she wants to show you, Rick Grimes." Beta got in his face. Rick winced at how bad Beta’s breath was.

"You mean she hasn’t shown me enough?" Rick knew better than to show any fear.

"Not enough." Beta knocked Rick out with his fist and nodded to the other two Whisperers to carry him. He tossed Rick`s gun aside as well as a mask.

Three hours had gone by and Michonne paced nervously awaiting for Rick`s return. When there was no sign of him she headed out and went up to the front gate. She looked up at the sentry on duty. "Any sign of Rick?"

"No. He was last seen heading in the direction of the railroad tracks."

"He should have been back by now." Michonne went back to the house and found Barbara to keep an eye on Judith. Katana at the ready she went outside the gate and hiked over to the railroad tracks and headed in the direction of the abandoned buildings. She entered the nearest one cautiously looking around until her eyes saw a reflection. Upon investigation it was Rick`s Colt Python and a Whisperer mask. Quickly picking up both items she made her way back inside the fence and immediately headed over to the infirmary where Siddiq was reading an old medical journal.

Michonne tossed Rick`s gun and the mask down on the desk. "Looks like the Whisperers have already made their next move."

Siddiq looked up. "How’s that?"

"Rick went outside the fence to check our defenses and didn’t return for quite some time. If he went looking for Carl he would have told me. Looks like they found him first. Capturing Rick is a pretty bold move on their part."

"Do you want to go after him? Maybe they don’t want us to."

"They have my husband and son. I want you to come with me to Hilltop. We can get the help we
Siddiq sighed. "If you feel up to riding a horse."

"We`ll take a wagon. I promise to rest once we reach Hilltop."

"Alright. Let me get some gear."

Moments later they were on their way out of Alexandria.

"It may not be wise to go after them." Siddiq pulled on the reigns to avoid a large pothole.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Michonne sat comfortably on some cushions as she held Rick`s gun in her lap.

"What if the Whisperers kill them? Put them on pikes like the others?"

"This is something new for them. First holding Carl, now capturing Rick. Alpha doesn`t plan on killing either of them. She has some other purpose in mind."

Siddiq shrugged. "I don`t understand anything this Alpha does. She seems to have this great need to maintain her power."

"To the point where she doesn`t care about her daughter at all? I`m a mother and a mother-to-be. Even someone as cold and cruel as Alpha has some feeling left. It`s too difficult to completely drive those kind of feelings away." Michonne sighed. "These people may have a lot of strange notions. I doubt most of them have any kind of humanity left, especially the ones who had nothing before the walkers. Alpha still had her daughter." Michonne adjusted her position to be more comfortable, wishing she could be out there chasing them down. However, she would not take any unnecessary risks in her condition.

One of her concerns was also for Lydia. Surely Alpha knew about her daughter`s feelings for Carl. Could that be something in play as well? Better to be used as pawns to play some kind of macabre game than death.

"We may have another problem if Carl insists the girl comes with him." Siddiq wasn`t sure he liked the idea of a Whisperer being part of any of the communities. "People in Alexandria may not be comfortable with a Whisperer as our prisoner. They`re already frightened enough as it is."

"And if she were not our prisoner? What then? I don`t think Carl would be too pleased if we kept her locked up in the cell."

"Then he would have to learn that his personal wishes are not above the will of the citizens of Alexandria."

"That would drive him away from his father, all of us. He`s been away from us too much as it is." Michonne stared into the snowy distance. "He certainly has grown up a lot, more than I expected staying at Hilltop. I`m very proud of him."

Siddiq nodded. "Jesus trained him well."

"None of it will count if Rick is unable to bring him back."

"Maybe Rick is the one who can finally reason with Alpha. He knows when to let his gun speak and when to keep it silent."
Michonne held up Rick`s Colt. "One problem."

"What`s that?"

"It won`t matter. Not this time. Rick has no gun at all on him right now." Michonne grew silent as they continued down the road.
Chapter Summary

Paul helps Ezekiel find a new purpose.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I`m not certain if I am of value anymore, Paul." Ezekiel and Paul stood together in the upstairs hallway of Barrington House. "I belong nowhere now. I am a fallen king with nothing of value on the horizon before me."

"Zeke, you`re just down on your luck right now. Maybe if things slow down a little we`ll find you and your people some place to start a new community."

Carol emerged from the room she and Ezekiel had been staying, having overheard what Paul had just said. "Jesus is right. Haven`t you always said a community is people, not a place?"

"Yes, I have said such a thing. You were not there, Carol, when those good people were slaughtered." Ezekiel sat down hard on a chair. "I will forever be haunted by their screams for mercy."

"We have all seen the worst of what there is to see and we have picked ourselves up and moved on." Paul knelt down in front of him. "The grief I feel at Tara`s death will be with me for a long time. It is for her and the others I keep on fighting. So you must do as well."

"What shall I do in the meantime, Paul? I have nothing in which to occupy my mind."

Paul smiled. "Actually, I`ve thought of something. You`re good with children and with the influx of The Kingdom`s children our teacher is a bit overwhelmed. She could use some help, especially in the storytelling department. You`re the best storyteller I`ve ever met."

Carol`s eyes brightened. "You see, Zeke? This can help you to recover, find yourself again. After the funeral services the children will need to get their minds off of something so sad. Be the inspiration you have always been."

Ezekiel sat there in silence looking down at the floor for a moment, then looking up. "Alright. Storytelling."

"We have a whole library of books for you to look through, a lot of children`s stories. Then there`s my personal library that drives my boyfriends crazy for taking up so much room." Paul made a sour face then became serious. "Do this for me, Zeke. Please."

Ezekiel reached over and took Paul`s hand. "You have never steered me wrong, Paul." He stood up. "Carol, my queen, I now have a new purpose for my life. I shall concentrate on the future and bring to those who are the future what the past has given us. Onward to the library."

Both Paul and Carol laughed as they watched him head for the stairs.
Carol gave Paul a hug. "Thank you. He has been so despondent. I can’t figure out how to get him to move forward."

"It’s a start. I think when you will be able to start up in a new place, his vigor and enthusiasm will return." Paul sighed. "I have to go take care of my sad task right now."

"The funerals."

"The services will be short. Nobody wants to keep the images of heads on pikes in their mind or think of the horror of their bodies being cut up for skin suits." Paul angrily kicked the chair Ezekiel had been sitting in. "I try not to hate, Carol, because I know it doesn’t lead anywhere. These Whisperers? I don’t know. They are testing me to my limits and I’m not sure I can hold on much longer. It’s my fault I got them killed."

"How is it your fault?"

"I’m the one who sent them out there."

Carol cupped his face in her hands. "No. It’s something that just happened. Negan escaped. What else could you do? You hear me?"

Paul nodded. "I guess you’re right."

"Jesus, you’ve held on for all of us for so long. Stop doing things alone or thinking you are by yourself in needing to develop a strategy to defeat the Whisperers. Rick wants to help. Zeke and I do. There’s Aaron, Daryl, and Maggie. I was talking to Magna yesterday. She’s got a good head for figuring things out. She was out there a long time."

"You’re right. I am being a bit on the arrogant side aren’t I? And selfish. I’ve done things by myself in order to survive. It’s how I got through the foster care system. Families that were emotionally and physically abusive, who shouldn’t have been foster parents in the first place. I always had to fight them and the other kids, sometimes just for a place at the table. Labeled unadoptable because I tended to start fights. I was never allowed to go out of the house as punishment." His soft round blue/green eyes looked directly into Carol’s. "Those things tend to be with you as an adult."

Carol embraced him again, the way a mother would a hurting child. "You’ve never known a mother’s love have you?"

"My parents died when I was three. I barely remember them. Since I wasn’t the biological child--." Paul broke down in tears again, burying his head in Carol’s sweater. "I’m sorry."

She gently rubbed his back and let him cry. "There is so much to grieve today. Let yourself feel your grief, Jesus. Let it out for all it’s worth."

After a while, Paul looked up. "Thank you, Carol. Now I understand why Zeke loves you so much. Daryl too." He wiped at his eyes.

"Daryl and I haven’t had much time to talk. We all need to get past today and get into Scarlett O’Hara mode."

"Scarlett O’Hara?" Paul looked at her with a confused and curious expression.

"You know, ‘tomorrow is another day’."
Both Carol and Paul laughed and hugged again. Paul then went downstairs to prepare for the
funerals.

The services were brief that afternoon. Nobody wanted to linger in the biting chill of an arctic wind
at the dreariness of the graves which were small because they didn’t need to be the size for a full
body. Paul bent down and placed a package of licorice on top of Tara’s.

"They all look so bare and lonely." Maggie came up beside him.

"That’s because there are no flowers. When spring comes we should plant flowers everywhere
back here."

"You okay, Paul?" Aaron placed his hand on Paul’s shoulder.

"Yeah. I just wish there were flowers. The dead always deserve flowers." Paul seemed distant.
Aaron and Daryl hugged him tightly to them.

"Let’s get inside." Maggie rubbed her arms trying to get warm. "Feels like it’s going to snow
again."

Everyone dispersed preferring to keep any more of their thoughts private.

The children were moved towards Barrington House where warmth and Ms. Maitlin’s sugar
cookies awaited them. There was no school that day, it had been preempted for mourning. Tables
and chairs had been set aside in the library so the children could sit on the floor. A comfortable
wing-backed chair had been placed at the front. After the children had settled down, Ezekiel came
and sat down in it. Mrs. Collins, the teacher, came up and stood beside him. Any adults that wished
to linger now stood in the back of the room. Aaron, Daryl, and Paul stood together to show their
support for Ezekiel.

Mrs. Collins clapped her hands a couple times and the children settled down. "I know today has
been a sad day for all of us even though some of you were pretty happy there was no school." Some
of the children giggled. "There is one thing I don’t like to miss and that is story time. I’d like to
introduce to you our new storyteller. I promise he will do a much better job than I can ever do. All
of you know him as King Ezekiel. He wants you to call him Zeke. Today he has picked out a
special story." She stepped aside and turned it over to him.

"Thank you, Mrs. Collins. I hope you will be welcoming our adult guests today." Ezekiel indicated
those at the back of the room. "Just for today, right?"

There was a chorus of ‘right’ from the children.

"They don’t need to hear our stories anyway." As expected, Gracie always had her say on the
matter.

Aaron hid his face in his hand and shook his head from side to side as Paul and Daryl snickered.

"That’s right, Gracie. Adults have their own stories." Ezekiel opened a book he had been carrying
with him. "Today I have an old story from a long time ago. It is about a boy who when he grows up
will someday become a great king. You know how I love stories about kings." He saw Carol roll
her eyes. "However, in this story he is still a boy. A long way from becoming a king."

"What’s his name?" Hershel always loved story time.

"His name is David. And David will come across one of the greatest challenges of his life. A great
giant named Goliath." Ezekiel then began to tell the story to his captive audience.

Chapter End Notes

This is perhaps one of my favorite chapters to write. I hope you find it enjoyable as well.
Long Walk Down A Deserted Road

Chapter Summary

Alpha shows Rick the real reason they are a threat and that he should accept their demands.

When Rick returned to consciousness his vision was blurry for a moment. After he was finally able to focus, he realized he was in a makeshift tent of some kind. 'Tent' was hardly the word for it, more like some animal skins draped over poles to block out the wind. A masked Whisperer came into view and stared down at him almost touching his face.

"Get back." He heard a woman’s voice and immediately recognized it as Alpha’s. The Whisperer stepped back and she came into view, her mask off. "You certainly took long enough."

Rick sat up and rubbed his head. "Maybe Beta shouldn’t hit so hard next time."

"You know, I’ve recently heard a lot about you. You aren’t all that impressive."

"Neither are you. First you capture my son and keep him for no real reason other than to possibly lure me here. And I don’t appreciate being held captive for your amusement. Let me leave with Carl."

"In time. I really don’t like holding you captive." Alpha held up a blood-stained machete. "We almost lost you bringing you here. Sometimes the dead ones just do their own thing and we lose control of them. I saved you just in time."

"Forgive me if I don’t show my gratitude." Rick slowly stood up. "You hurt Carl I won’t hesitate to kill you."

"No back talk!" The Whisperer guarding him struck Rick across the chin.

Rick staggered back wiping blood away from his face. "I certainly won’t forget this."

Alpha went over to the Whisperer and handed him the machete. "Clean this." She then turned to Rick. "Seems to me you aren’t in any position to make threats. Perhaps you need to be broken of the habit."

Rick laughed slightly. "Oh. I think I finally figured out where you’ve been getting your information. Negan’s not to be trusted."

"Never said I trusted him. Besides, I understand his kind. He has yet to prove himself worthy just like anyone else."

"The way I see it he’s no longer my problem, but yours. You’re welcome to him." Rick paused and glared at her.

Alpha shrugged, still not impressed with his comportment. "You and I are going for a little walk."

"I’m not gonna walk anywhere with you. There is nothing more you can show me that you haven’t
already."

"Oh, you really believe that? If you do not come with me I will be forced to kill your son. You already know I won`t hesitate to do anything that is necessary to insure your cooperation." Her tone was cold and menacing and Rick had no doubt in his mind that she was capable of carrying out her threats.

Rick took a deep breath. "Alright."

"Good." Alpha pulled out a gun and aimed it at him. "I`m very good with this. One wrong move on your part and your son will be without a father. If you have any other children, they will be fatherless as well. Keep that in mind. Then I will come back and kill Carl and send his and your heads back to Alexandria."

Rick held out his arms, his palms open. "Lead on then."

After leaving the camp they walked some distance before coming to a gas station that was completely overgrown. It sat by a two-lane highway that seemed to stretch far into the snowy distance.

"What a waste." Alpha kicked at a decaying pump handle.

"The station or the road?"

"Both. The world ends and all that`s left of humanity is its trashing of the planet."

"I don`t think that`s much of a concern anymore." They walked down the highway for a bit. "You know, you should just kill me right here and now. Save both of us a lot of time."

"Who said I wouldn`t be willing if the situation demanded it?"

Rick shrugged. "I don`t see much of a situation here. We`re just walking down the road, you`re pointing a gun at me for the fun of it. Seems to me there`s no real purpose here."

"There`s a purpose. Be patient." They came to another road and turned down it. "I may be willing to kill you. I haven`t the desire to do so. How does that strike you?"

"Strikes me as somewhat hilarious. Maybe you`re not as scary as you make yourself out to be. It`s all for show. That`s the problem with being on top. You always have to stay on top." Rick felt her stick the gun in his back as she shoved him along.

"You should know from experience."

In the distance they could see a four-story building with a small water tower on top.

Rick had never seen it before. "What`s that?"

"You`ll find out. Now you must stop talking and if you do need to say anything, keep your voice down."

"Where are you taking me?"

Alpha pointed to the building. "It`s clear." She now spoke in her usual whisper. Silently they walked over to the building and climbed the stairs to the roof which overlooked a vast canyon below them. "Go to the edge and look down. I want you to see that I have the advantage over you and the other communities. I can destroy all that you have built in this world. Everyone you love
will be gone." She heard Rick chuckle. "You don’t believe me? This is not an empty threat. Now, take a look."

Rick cautiously walked over to the edge and stopped, looking down into the canyon. Below him was a herd of walkers so massive it disappeared from one end of the horizon to the other. His mouth gaped open at its expanse. There were too many to estimate. He knew he had never seen that many in one place before. Not finding the words to say anything, he nodded and they left, too stunned with the vision of seeing such a massive herd to say anything as they journeyed back to the camp. He knew then that Alpha’s threats were not empty.

Rick leaned hard for a moment against a pole when they reached the shelter. He knew that he was powerless to change the situation to his advantage. He looked up at her and spread out his arms. "What is it you want from me?"

"You have nothing of value to offer me. Your life and the lives of your people are the fake way of life. You play the game of pretend like children. Your world is nothing more than a shrine to a world long dead. We are the ones that are truly alive for we live a life of freedom."

"How are you free? You are considered a leader, you call yourself Alpha which means people look up to you. True freedom is leaderless. Your people are the definition of hypocrisy. You sleep in the cold and wear the skins of the dead. If you were free you would not need to hide yourselves. Tell me again, how does that make you free?" Rick looked directly at her his gaze unavering.

Alpha was silent uncertain how to answer his question. Moments later Carl and Lydia were brought in. She went right up to Rick. "You may take your son and leave in peace."

Carl quickly went over to his father. "I won’t leave without her, Dad. The Whisperers rape her." He pointed at Alpha. "Her own mother allows it to happen."

Rick was shocked at this revelation. "Is what he said true?"

"Rape is the power of the natural world and excusable."

"Mommy, please don’t make me stay." Before Lydia could say more Alpha struck her.

"You disgust me, girl. You are weak." Alpha stared long and hard at her daughter. "One has to be strong to survive, one has to--." Unexpectedly Alpha could say no more. Rick moved to separate them. Alpha suddenly grabbed his arm and pulled him down towards her. "Take her to safety." She said this in a low whisper. Then aloud to Lydia. "Go with Rick and Carl. You do not belong here with us." She turned to face Rick. "I have marked the border that separates us from your people. Do not cross it for any reason or the horde will be upon you and the rest of the communities."

Rick nodded, completely understanding. "Come on." He, Carl, and Lydia exited the shelter.

Alpha watched them leave, an expression of complete regret on her face.
Chapter Summary

Rick returns to Hilltop and informs everyone of Alpha`s ultimatum.

After listening to Ezekiel`s story Daryl, Paul, and Aaron were on their way to talk to Maggie when Bertie came through the door a look of concern on her face.

Paul was the first to speak. "What is it?"

"Michonne and Siddiq just rode through the gate."

Maggie had overheard Bertie from the doorway of her office. A few moments later Michonne and Siddiq entered Barrington House.

"The Whisperers captured Rick." Michonne was almost out of breath she had ran from the stables so fast. "We`re on our way to get him back. Maybe rescue Carl, too."

"Nah, I`ll go." Daryl headed for the door.

"You`ll do no such thing." Maggie grabbed his arm and stopped him.

Daryl glared at her. "What do ya mean by that?"

"Let`s discuss this in my office." Maggie saw Carol and Ezekiel come out of the library and motioned for them to come in as well. All of them went inside, Paul closing the door behind them. "No one goes out until there is a plan and no one should go out alone."

"This is Rick we`re talkin` about. And Carl, too. I ain`t gonna abandon them to a fate like them pikes."

"We don`t know that." Paul looked hard at him. "Maggie is right. Haven`t you already taken enough of a chance by sneaking in and spying on them without telling anyone?"

"As if you`re the one to talk." Daryl came over and stood directly in front of Paul, staring him down.

Paul didn`t back up or flinch under the stare. "What I do is my business and I think before I act. I don`t go off half-cocked and half-angry at the world running right in and not caring if I live or die. I wish you`d stop that shit every time there`s a crisis."

"Dammit, Paul, I ain`t gonna see Rick or Carl killed." There were tears running down Daryl`s face. "We can`t stand here and do nothin`."

"I know, Daryl." Paul reached over and placed his hand on Daryl`s shoulder. "We have to keep our heads. I don`t think they took Rick to kill him. They probably used Carl to insure he agreed to some kind of deal."

Aaron stepped between them to ease down the tension between the two of them. He looked at Paul.
"What kind of deal?"

Daryl backed away from Paul and sat down heavily in a chair.

Paul began to pace. "Everything they do has a purpose. They do nothing for revenge or just outright hostility. The thing they want most is to be left alone. They wanted Rick to know something."

"What?" Michonne wondered what Paul was exactly getting at if they didn’t intend to kill Rick.

"We’ll have to wait until Rick returns to find that out." Paul rubbed his temple feeling a slight headache coming on.

There was a knock on the door. Eduardo came in with Rick, Carl, and Lydia behind him. There was a collective sigh of relief in the room. Daryl looked at Paul in a way that he was sorry that he had doubted him. He reached over and they squeezed hands.

"Looks like we didn’t have to wait long." Maggie and Rick embraced.

After hugs all around and Rick was given some coffee he sat down. Carl and Lydia stood off to one side.

"What’d they want?" Daryl had now calmed down by a lot.

"Not sure where to begin." Rick quietly sipped some coffee.

"Is she planning on killing us all?" Michonne would never trust the word of Alpha.

"Only if we cross their boundaries." Rick’s voice was quiet and even. "We talked for a while. Alpha told me she didn’t want to kill me, but would be willing to. I suppose she would have if someone forced her hand. That’s not why she wanted me there."

"So what are their boundaries?" Paul was getting tired of asking that particular question.

"The pikes. When we were walking back we noticed more had been put into place. No heads on them this time. They wouldn’t hesitate to do it again. I take it no hunting, no scavenging, no runs, not even to negotiate any deals." Rick closed his eyes trying to get the vision of the giant herd of walkers from his mind.

"What reassurances do they give us?" Carol looked from one person to the other, the disbelief apparent on her face. "I never thought they were the type that would want to sue for peace."

Rick shook his head. "They aren’t ones for reassurances. Bottom line we don’t cross into their territory, they’ll leave us alone. I have no reason to disbelieve Alpha."

"I’m not willing to give her any reassurances if she won’t give us any." Maggie grew angry not liking Alpha’s attitude of dictating a policy that didn’t seem to have any solid backing of being honored. "They’ve threatened us, harassed us, murdered us—all in cold blood and to their advantage. What’s going to prevent us from attacking them in the future if we feel they’ve violated our right to survive?"

Rick sighed and shook his head. "How about twenty-five to thirty thousand walkers." He looked Maggie directly in the eye.

"Twenty-five to thirty thousand walkers? Is that what she told you?" Carol scoffed, not wanting to
believe that there could be a herd of that size without them noticing.

"She didn`t tell me. She showed me." Rick was now looking at Carol the same way he had been looking at Maggie. "We walked down this road I`d never seen before. There was this building at the end and we went up onto the roof. It overlooked this canyon. I looked down and couldn`t believe what I was looking at. But there they were. Altogether. From one horizon to the next. Tens of thousands of walkers. I`m just guessing, but twenty-five to thirty thousand seems pretty close to the mark."

"What is she gonna do with`em?"

"Overrun us if we cross their boundaries. They want to be left alone. Period. To be honest, I don`t think this is something we can win."

There was dead silence in the room as everyone contemplated what Rick had just said. Not one of them was used to the idea that they could not win whenever someone had crossed them. They were all fighters and to think that there was something they could not fight was beyond comprehension.

"And Lydia. What about her?" Aaron took a couple steps towards where she and Carl were standing.

"Something threw me off a bit. Alpha asked me to take her away. Keep her safe. It seems rape is a way of life for them. Somewhere inside Alpha is still a mother."

"I want to stay." Lydia`s voice was a whisper, reminding them of where she had come from. "Please don`t send me back. Please."

"We won`t." Paul came over to her and looked hard into her eyes. He then stepped back certain of her sincerity.

"She can come live with us in Alexandria for a while, Dad. Then when she gets to know us better, decide which community she wants to live."

"I know you got some feelings for her, son." Rick smiled at Lydia. "You`re welcome to stay as long as you like. We won`t tie you up or put you in a cell."

"You`ll stay with us." Michonne came over to her. "I can teach you how to cook, take care of a house. Teach you how to fight."

"I`d like that." Lydia looked at Paul. "Jesus was so kind to me when I was first here. I`m sorry if I hurt you by something I said."

Paul looked away for a moment. "Don`t worry about it. It wasn`t anything specific about you so there is nothing to forgive."

There was another concern, especially for Maggie. "What about Negan? Did you see him? Is he still with them?"

"I didn`t see him. Alpha said he was. I told her she was welcome to him." Rick stood up. "Now if you don`t mind I want to clean up and get something to eat. Rest for a bit."

"The guest room is open. Stay for the night if you like." Maggie sat down behind her desk.

"I`d like that." Rick looked at Michonne. "You didn`t have to come after me."
"Yes, I did. I’m just glad I didn’t have to go any further than Hilltop. You were stupid to go outside the fence alone, you know."

Rick chuckled. "Yeah, I know. I didn’t think they were that close. Maybe they were just waiting for the opportunity so Alpha could show me what she did." He looked at Carl. "And I would have come after you eventually."

"I’m glad to be out of there." He looked at Lydia. "I’m glad you’re with me." He leaned over and kissed her cheek, causing her to blush slightly.

Everyone else exchanged knowing glances.

"It shall be an uneasy peace all the same. At least I have experience with that." Ezekiel would never forget the enslavement he and the rest of The Kingdom had suffered under the iron hand of the Saviors.

They all got up and dispersed out of the office.

Out in the foyer Daryl placed his hand on Paul’s arm. "I guess you’re right. I shouldn’t go off half-cocked."

Paul leaned over, his mouth close to Daryl’s ear. "You don’t have half a cock." He playfully licked the lobe.

"You’re one dirty minded little shit ya know that?"

"Yes. Let’s go home. Fix something to eat." Paul headed for the door a knowing smirk on his face. Aaron wasn’t far behind.

Carol had been close enough to overhear what they had said and was snickering. "Better get going, Pookie. Get what’s coming to ya." She winked at him.

Daryl just glared at her and hurried after Paul and Aaron.
Paul and Daryl discuss the meeting. Rick and Michonne stop by.

Paul had been silent since the meeting in Maggie`s office. Once they had gotten home, Aaron took Gracie to her room for a nap and being tired himself went to their bedroom and took one himself. Daryl sat in the living room cleaning and sharpening his bolts, every so often petting Dog, who was content to sit on his rug near the fireplace. Paul had taken a cookbook from the bookcase and stood in the kitchen ready to prepare something to eat but only stood next to the counter the cookbook open and not reading any particular recipe.

"So, it was all for naught." Paul seemingly just stared at nothing, a blank expression on his face.

Daryl looked up. "Huh?"

"We simply stay in our own place and they leave us alone. Just like that after all they have done." Paul snapped the cookbook shut and tossed it aside. "Everyone is getting sandwiches tonight." He went into the living room and sat down on the sofa, his earlier playful mood now gone as the headache had increased its intensity.

"There must be somethin` to it if Rick believed her."

"Daryl, you aren`t as foolish as that." Paul reclined on the pillows putting his hands behind his head and stretching out his legs. "You know as well as I do that nothing is that simple. All they do is attack, threaten, and kill us, then all of a sudden declare a peace proposition as long as we stay in our place?"

"Ya ain`t buyin` it?"

"Not for one second." Being able to lie down on a soft pillow helped the throbbing in his head to subside. "Have you ever heard of chaos theory?"

"Like Jeff Goldblum in *Jurassic Park*?"

Paul chuckled. "Yeah, like that. This world is too changeable for things to remain in a steady state for very long. Those thirty thousand walkers can`t totally be controlled or contained. It`s not possible, even from experts like the Whisperers."

Daryl had finished with his bolts and started on the crossbow, intending to take it completely apart, clean and oil it, and even putting a new string on it. "I can`t figure out how they do it. Smellin` like `em only goes so far."

"Or looking like them or walking like them. Wish I could get a look at the canyon myself. According to Rick he couldn`t pinpoint the exact location."

"Ya ain`t goin` out there to look for it, Paul. I`ll lock ya in a cell and throw away the key."

Paul looked at Daryl, the amusement in his eyes. "I`d figure out a way to escape." He slyly looked
at Daryl. "Don`t worry. I`m not planning anything that drastic. There`s no point."

There was a knock at the door. Paul got up and answered it. Rick nodded to him, Michonne was right behind him. Paul motioned for them to come in.

"Getting colder. That wind is wicked." Michonne rubbed her arms.

"Make yourselves at home. Want some coffee?"

"Yeah, thanks." Rick sat down.

Michonne nodded. She looked around the room. "This is cozy."

"That`s right." Paul headed into the kitchen to prepare some coffee. "This is your first visit. It`s just me and Daryl right now. Aaron and Gracie are upstairs napping."

"We just wanted to stop by and see how things are going." Michonne stood by the fireplace to warm herself.

"Doin` great." Daryl smirked. "We were discussin` chaos theory."

"Like Jeff Goldblum in Jurassic Park?" Rick looked at Daryl, then at Paul.

Paul burst into laughter. "Now I know you and Daryl have known each other too long." He found some Aspirin and took a couple pills in hopes it would help his headache.

"I asked him the same thin`." Daryl`s tone was somewhat conspiratorial.

"I must admit I`ve heard about it and it`s somewhat over my head." Michonne exchanged an unsure shrug with Rick.

"The butterfly effect. A butterfly in Japan flaps its wings and there`s a hurricane in Florida." Paul`s voice sounded less stressed as the pain in his head began to subside. "It has something to do with the movement of molecules. Then there`s the factor of unpredictability. Complex systems may follow certain laws but future states remain unpredictable. Do you want milk, cream, or sugar?"

"I predict milk." Michonne couldn`t stop laughing.

"My prediction. Cream." Rick laughed along with her.

"Black for me." Daryl just looked at Paul even more confused.

"Now that is predictable." Paul pointed a finger at Daryl.

"Must mean I ain`t into chaos." Daryl smirked at Paul hoping to bring back his boyfriend`s earlier playful mood.

Paul just shook his head. "Basically all I`m saying is that something will upset the balance and set the Whisperers off no matter Alpha`s good intentions. She may be sincere on her part. The others may feel she is strong and honor her lead. There are always malcontents. I don`t think we can afford to rest easy." He set the coffeemaker to brewing and took out four mugs.

"I took a real hard look at that canyon. It`s deep and closed in by steep rocky walls all the way around. For that many walkers to remain in one place for so long must mean it`s fairly secure. Only the Whisperers know the secret of releasing them." Rick wasn`t sure if he wanted to know that particular secret or not.
"Which means Alpha is not the only one privy to that information." Paul sighed. "Something could happen to her. Then what?"

Rick shrugged. "We still stay away. They have this weird philosophy of only wanting to keep to themselves. Why would they jeopardize that?"

Paul set the mugs down on the coffee table in front of the sofa. "Maybe you’re right. They probably wouldn’t. I am a great believer in chaos theory. This world has taught me that it’s more true than not."

"Sometimes ya overthink too much, Paul." Daryl twirled his finger around one of his ears causing Rick and Michonne to snicker.

"I know. Somebody around here has to." Paul went back into the kitchen. "So, how long do you intend on staying at Hilltop?"

"We were planning to stay tonight. If it gets colder, probably longer. At least until the wind dies down." Rick became more comfortable in the chair he was sitting in feeling a sense of sleepiness come over him.

"Siddiq is the most nervous about staying here. One of his patients is due to give birth at any moment." Now finally warm Michonne sat down on the sofa.

"Which reminds me, when are you due?"

"Late spring. We aren’t sure of the exact date. Maybe chaos theory had something to do with it." Michonne winked knowingly at Daryl, who shook with snickers.

Paul found some cookies in the freezer that Ms. Maitlin had baked so he set them out on a plate. "Very funny. I’m glad I’m fodder for you bunch of chuckle-heads."

"Judith is pretty excited. Now that Negan is no longer in Alexandria she’d sure like to see her Uncle Daryl more often." Rick glanced at Daryl.

"I’ll be there. Someday." Daryl set the pieces of his crossbow aside. "This is my home now."

"Admit it, being under a roof is better than the woods." Rick couldn’t help teasing him.

"Yeah. Don’t get wet when it rains. Don’t have to chase off snakes and skunks."

Behind him Paul rolled his eyes causing Michonne to almost double over in laughter.

"He just has to chase me and Aaron off now. We’re the chaos theory of his life."

Daryl looked at Paul and dismissed him with a short hiss. "Just serve the damn coffee."

The coffee was finished so Paul brought out the pot and plate of cookies. After pouring the mugs he went back to get the cream, then sat down. "You know what all of us are missing in this whole thing?"

"What’s that?" Rick sniffed the coffee enjoying its aroma.

"How Negan is going to factor into all of this. I simply can’t picture him as a Whisperer. Can you?"

"Not really. What else is he gonna do?"
"I don’t think we want to know the answer to that." Michonne poured cream into her coffee. She took a sip. "Mm, this is good."
The Traitor

Chapter Summary

Negan changes the course of things to come.

Negan stretched out his hand and caught several snowflakes as he wandered through the Whisperer camp noticing that groups of Whisperers huddled together beneath animal skin shelters. All wore layers of tattered clothing in an effort to keep warm. The wind had died down and even he wished for spring since he was tired of being cold. Much to his surprise a hand roughly grabbed his shoulder and turned him around and he found himself face to face with Beta.

"Whew!" Negan grinned hoping to defuse Beta if he was in one of his bad moods. "When was the last time you brushed your fucking teeth? You have the breath of a fish that`s been dead in the sun for too long."

"Aren`t you afraid of me, Negan?" Beta drew out the syllables of Negan`s name when he pronounced it.

"Why would I want to be afraid of someone I want to be my best buddy?"

Beta let him go, roughly shoving him aside in the process. He pointed to him. "I`ve got my eye on you. One wrong move and you`ll be my personal bodyguard, dead bodyguard. I don`t care if there are those who think you should be Alpha."

"Dead and possibly loving it?" Negan burst into laughter and leaned back. "Dial it down a notch, Beta. I`m on your side. Have you seen Alpha? I`m looking for her."

"She`s not here. I suggest you find someone else to snuggle with to keep warm." Beta menacingly growled at him and walked away.

As soon as Beta was gone, Negan frowned. "Someone`s gonna kick your ass someday, Beta. I`d sure like to know who that will be."

Negan walked around some more and was attracted by sounds of screaming coming from a nearby shelter. He put his hand on the handle of his machete until he saw that it was a woman who was obviously in trouble. He ran towards the source and saw a male Whisperer on his knees chasing after a woman, who was crying. Her pants had been torn off so she was bare from the waist down. The male`s dick was hanging out and semi-erect.

"I don`t want to." The woman backed away from the male.

"You`ll do as I say!" The male was aggressive and would not give the woman a break.

The woman screamed again when the man grabbed her and pinned her to the ground. What Negan witnessed next was something that turned his stomach and he actually had to turn away. When he was able to look at them again he took several steps forward.

"You are not to interfere." A masked Whisperer grabbed him and held him back.
"What`s that supposed to mean?" Negan`s temper was starting to rise.

"Just exactly that. It is our way. If you wish to become Alpha, learn our ways. Find your own woman. Do what you will with her." The Whisperer walked away.

Negan didn`t want to turn away. There were too many Whisperers around him, all of them watching him. The frown deepening on his face he quickly moved off until he could no longer hear the woman`s screams. The fury he felt within him was something he knew wouldn`t go away anytime soon. He knew he would need to find Alpha more than ever and discuss the situation. Getting away from the Whisperer camp and taking a walk in the woods was the best solution at trying to get his thoughts around the idea that the Whisperers were rapists of the first degree. It was something he never allowed in the Sanctuary, finding the act of rape disgusting.

The snow came down heavier as Negan found a well-worn path and followed it for quite some time. He stopped when he heard the sounds of sobbing. It was coming from a woman. Had one of the Whisperer men gone too far? He carefully moved in the direction the sobbing was coming from and much to his surprise he found Alpha leaning against a tree. The sobbing was coming from her. For the moment he had to suppress the anger that had built up inside of him. It was causing him to have second thoughts about his decision to join the Whisperers. His arm brushed against a tree branch knocking down some snow.

"Who`s there?" Alpha looked up an expression of dread on her face at the thought of being discovered in her condition.

Negan emerged from the trees. "Negan. I`ve been looking for you."

Alpha wiped her eyes. "Why?"

"Just wanted to ask you some more questions." He came over and stood next to her. "I didn`t think the leader of the notorious Whisperers was one for crying for no reason."

Alpha turned away from him. "There is a reason."

"Care to tell ole Negan about it?" He sat down on a nearby boulder, again his hand resting on the handle of the machete. After what he had witnessed in the camp his usual jovial demeanor had diminished.

"Not really." Alpha turned to face him. "I had to send my daughter away. For good. I sent her away with Rick Grimes."

"With Rick?" Negan was taken aback by the revelation, an unexpected twist to events. "That`s certainly something I wouldn`t expect someone like you to do."

"It`s to keep her safe."

"Safe." Negan leaned back and stretched as he contemplated the meaning. "I can pretty much guess from what." He hesitated wondering if this was the right moment to speak out. "While searching for you I came across something that has made me question your leadership. Do you know there are those who want me to become Alpha?"

Alpha had now regained her composure. "I`m certain since there are many things you do not understand about us, you would have reason to question that. Those who want you to become Alpha are malcontents who will soon be dealt with. You still have much to learn before you can become one of us, Negan."
"I understand enough." Negan could no longer hide his disgust. "You’re animals. All of you. Your own self included." He spat to show his distaste.

Alpha burst into laughter. "Of course I am. It is the way of nature and it makes us stronger."

"So you are telling me that rape makes your people stronger, am I correct?" Negan stood up and paced.

"It is the only way we become stronger. You do not agree?"

Negan shrugged. "I don’t think it really matters to you whether I agree or not." He paused, wanting to phrase his questions carefully. "You cry because you sent away your daughter?"

"No. I cry because I allowed her to be raped. Repeatedly. That does not make me strong."

"You’re right. I suppose that wouldn’t be seen that way in the eyes of the others. Beta in particular." He stopped pacing and simply stared at her. "Don’t you get it, Alpha?"

"Get what?" Alpha was sure Negan was going to start in on his posturing again.

Negan grinned, not his usual shit-eating grin, but one that had an air of menace behind it. "That it’s all a game. You don’t feel strong because you know that you aren’t winning."

"You seem to like games, Negan. Games of superiority. Games of torture." Alpha opened up her arms. "Isn’t that what we are all about? Isn’t that why you find us so appealing?"

"So it would seem."

"Then you do belong with us." Alpha stepped up to him when he stopped pacing. "And since I deem that you belong we can grant you your wish of getting you your own personal skin suit."

"You may be right." In one swift movement Negan removed his machete and without hesitation slit Alpha’s throat before cutting off her head completely. It flew off and bounced a few feet away. "But you’re not. I’ve decided I don’t want to be with you." He wiped the blood on his machete off on the clothes of her lifeless body and sat back down on the boulder to wait until her head started to move, the mouth snapping up and down. He then took one of her shirts off her body and with a stick rolled the head into it, tying it to make a sack. Noiselessly he walked into the woods away from the Whisperer camp.

Moments later Beta appeared, having traced Negan’s tracks in the snow and following him down the path. He stopped when he saw blood stains and Alpha’s headless corpse. Behind him were a couple other Whisperers.

"We can’t find Alpha. We wanted to tell her that Negan is the new Alpha."

Beta pointed to the corpse. He knelt down beside it and bowed his head in mourning. "Alpha is dead."

"Then you must become Alpha."

"No. I have no desire to claim the title for myself. There is to be no Alpha. Negan will not be Alpha. We must now be guided by the words she gave us." Beta stood up. "Those that have crossed our boundaries. Negan was once one of them and most likely a spy. They must now all die. Become one with the valley of death." He paused and stared into the distant horizon. "We will go to the valley of the dead. Go to the camp and get some of the others. It will take us three days to
The Whisperers bowed and immediately headed down the trail. Beta carefully picked up the headless corpse. Tearfully he carried it as he followed his comrades.

Negan had taken all day to hike through the woods towards Hilltop. By the time he arrived it was night and snow was coming down in light flurries. He could see the dim torches flickering in the distance. Grinning to himself he checked his cargo and could still hear the growls coming from Alpha’s head. Slowly he walked towards the front gate.
Tidings Of Great Joy

Chapter Summary

Hilltop prepares for what is to come after Negan`s surprise.

After Aaron and Gracie had awakened from their naps Rick and Michonne were invited to stay for dinner. Carl had come looking for them and was asked to stay as well.

"Is Lydia alright?" Michonne got up to help out.

"She wanted to be alone for a while so Maggie gave her a room in Barrington House." Carl looked at Gracie and then at the cards in his hand. "Got any lemons?"

"Go fish." Gracie giggled as Carl drew a card, a sour look on his face.

"Watch out. She`s a shark." Aaron couldn`t help laughing at his daughter`s card playing.

"At `Go Fish`?" Carl had a somewhat shocked look on his face.

"Someday she`ll move on to poker." Paul stirred a pot of thick stew. "And blackjack."

"I was always good at gambling." Aaron set out a fresh loaf of bread. "I`ll teach her all of my tricks."

"Do you ever hear anything more from Georgie?" Rick was on his second beer, Alexandria`s home brew that he had become quite fond of.

"Not as often as we used to. What`s funny is that Maggie has hardly talked about the time she was with them." Paul set a stack of plates and napkins on the dining table. "Tara would ask, I would. She gave us vague answers that neither of us never understood. Then she stopped talking about her altogether. We haven`t heard from the twins in quite a while."

"Maybe we`ll ask her." Michonne distributed the plates and utensils on the dining table.

"You`re welcome to try."

There was frantic knocking on the door and Daryl rushed over to answer it. Eduardo stood on the short porch panting, his breath coming out as thick steam. He obviously had been running. "All of you need to come to the front gate. Right now."

Paul, Rick, and Michonne quickly joined Daryl.

"What is it?" Paul wished emergencies would simply just wait. Sometimes all he wanted was a peaceful evening to enjoy his friends.

"Just come." Eduardo then left.

"I`ll take care of her and watch the cooking." Carl got up and headed for the kitchen.

"Thanks." Aaron gave him a nod.
They all grabbed their coats and headed out at a run towards the front gate. Maggie, Ezekiel, and Carol were already on the sentry platforms. All of them quickly climbed up the ladders.

"What the hell?" Rick nearly leaped over the top of the fence when he saw Negan standing out there. More of the gate’s torches had been lit and the flames flickered ominously across Negan’s face.

"Well, Rick. Long time no see." Negan flashed him one of his grins. "Glad you could join the party. Had no idea you’d be here."

Rick took out his Colt and aimed it directly at Negan. "Alpha send you?"

"In a sense."

"There’s nothing more she can say to us. We agreed to stay out of their territory." Maggie aimed her gun at him.

Negan looked at Maggie, the grin still on his face. "You’re right about her having nothing more to say to you. To any of you." He opened up the shirt. There was the click of Rick’s gun. "Now hold on there, Tex. You could at least wait until you see what it is I have to show you." He set the open shirt on the ground and placed his hands on each side of the head, making sure to keep his fingers away from the mouth. "Behold." He held Alpha’s walker head high above his own. "I bring you tidings of great joy."

There was a gasp from some of the onlookers.

Michonne leaned over towards Paul. "What was that you said about chaos theory again?" This time she was serious.

"So, is this my meal ticket into your good graces?" Negan could only stand there holding the head aloft as he waited for an answer.

Maggie glanced over at Rick, then back at Ezekiel. She then deferred to Paul.

"Bring him in. Under guard." Paul nodded to Eduardo and a couple others who scrambled to get outside the gate, their spears at the ready as they escorted Negan inside.

"My arms are kind of getting tired of holding this." In truth Negan wanted nothing more to do with Alpha’s growling head. "Sure would hate to have some kind of accident happen."

Paul, Daryl, and Aaron quickly climbed down and joined the guards. Paul took a spear from one of the guards and with the sharp end removed the head from Negan’s grasp. It snapped and growled at him. As soon as Paul got it to the ground he speared it into silence, and then returned the spear back to the guard.

"Put him in the cell." Paul didn’t hesitate in giving the order.

"Now is that any way to treat someone who’s just done you a favor?" Negan’s grin had disappeared.

"Ain’t no favor." Daryl got into Negan’s face. He motioned for the guards to haul him away.

Rick, Michonne, Maggie, Ezekiel, and Carol soon joined them.

"This certainly changes things." Carol stared down at Alpha’s head. "I doubt the Whisperers will
be willing to keep the peace now."

"Knowing Beta he is the type to take revenge for something like this." The headache Paul had been experiencing was threatening to return.

"So what are we to do?" Michonne lightly kicked the head a couple times.

"Let’s discuss this in my office where it’s warm." Maggie indicated for everyone to follow her.

After assembling in her office they were all mostly silent, unsure of what to do next.

"How long before we can expect Beta and the others to show up?" Carol was hoping there wouldn’t be a repeat of what happened with The Kingdom. Places for them to evacuate to were getting fewer and fewer.

"It will take a few days to get the herd organized. That canyon’s pretty big." Rick shook his head in disbelief. "Damn him."

"There is no way the fence will hold with an onslaught like that. The Great Wall of China, maybe, but not our log fence, nor Alexandria’s. The best I can do is barricade it with the large trucks and spare trailers. Those won’t hold, though." Paul’s expression indicated his disgust at the sudden change in the situation.

"Evacuate?" Ezekiel suggested.

"To where?" Maggie sat down hard in her desk chair. "Beta doesn’t even need to use all thirty thousand. Or half. Or even a quarter."

"Is there the slightest chance of negotiating with him? Making a deal?" Carol didn’t think so. She at least had to ask.

"No." Rick shook his head. "I got the impression that Beta is pretty unreasonable. He was devoted to Alpha. He will see this as an affront to all of the Whisperers."

"What if we hand Negan over to him? He’s the one that murdered Alpha." Daryl could feel himself become more and more angry at Negan. He knew that confronting him would be useless. Turning him over to the Whisperers would be justice for all that Negan had done to them.

"Won’t be enough." Rick was finding it hard to admit possible defeat. "I never thought I’d hear myself say this. This time I think this is it. The only thing we can do is go down fighting."

"Then we need to bring the fighting to one place. Save as many as we can." Deep inside even Paul felt that this could mean the end of things as they knew it.

"How?" Michonne admired Paul for his intelligence and deviousness. Would it be enough this time?

"We need to decide whether we want to bring the fight to Alexandria or to Hilltop. We combine our forces into some sort of militia."

"Those of us from The Kingdom will do our part." Ezekiel stepped forward ready to keep on fighting to the very end.

"So which is it?" Maggie looked from Paul to Rick. "Hilltop or Alexandria?"

Michonne stepped towards Maggie. "We can hide people in the underground tunnels in
"Alexandria."

"That would at least keep one place intact." Rick didn’t like the idea of losing either community.

"That means we bring the battle to Hilltop." Maggie wasn’t enthused about the prospect. She knew it had to be done.

"Evacuate the children, the elderly, and anyone else who can’t fight. Hide all of them in Alexandria’s tunnels. Make it seem like Alexandria has been abandoned in place." Paul looked directly at Rick. "Since it’s not in their territory like The Kingdom, they won’t have any incentive to set it ablaze."

Rick thought for a moment then nodded. "Agreed. They won’t attack or burn any place that looks empty that’s outside of their boundary. Why waste the resources? I’ll need someone to come with me to Alexandria and get this started. I’ll send all of our fighters here."

Daryl raised his hand slightly. "I’ll go. When do we start?"

"Tonight." Rick and Michonne embraced tightly.

"Hurry back." Michonne gave Rick a kiss. "I’ll get the evacuees here ready."

Rick only nodded. Daryl hugged Aaron tightly then they kissed on the lips.

"Don’t worry about me." Daryl embraced and kissed Paul.

"We will." Paul and Aaron watched him and Rick hurry out of the office. Paul then turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Aaron hoped Paul wasn’t planning on doing something foolish.

"To look for Mammoth Mike." Paul’s expression was grave as he left the office.
Mammoth Mike

Chapter Summary

Paul begins a new kind of training. Gracie and Hershel evacuate Hilltop.

Mammoth Mike was perhaps the biggest man anyone had ever seen. The huge African-American was made mostly of muscle with some fat thrown in just to even out the rough spots. He was mostly called upon to do the heavy lifting for construction projects and his strong back could carry several large poles at the same time. In his free time he worked the flower gardens, especially cultivating the roses when spring came around. He now stood in the workout room curious as to why Paul kept circling around him and looking him over.

"Did I do something wrong, Jesus?" For his size he was a gentle man, popular with the children for piggyback rides, and always lending a hand to anyone in need.

"No, not at all." Paul smiled at him hoping to reassure the man. "By the way, thank you for coming by so late."

"Card game didn`t mean much after Negan showed up anyway." Mammoth Mike was also a fighter, even though he didn`t consider himself one of the best. Sometimes all he had to do was show up, like bringing in a big dog just to scare the burglars away, without actually attacking.

Paul stood there studying him for a moment. "I want you to lift me up over your shoulder."

Mammoth Mike looked at Paul with a perplexed expression on his face. "You want me to what?"

"Lift me up over your shoulder. Like you would a sack of potatoes."

"I don`t want to hurt you, Jesus."

"You won`t. Just do it."

Mammoth Mike shrugged and reluctantly did as Paul asked. "Alright." He easily hoisted Paul over his left shoulder draping Paul`s stomach across his back. "Like this?"

"Yeah. Now I want you to flip me over."

"Jesus--."

"Do it."

Mammoth Mike was uncertain about the request but did as Paul asked. Paul rolled when he hit the floor and was quickly back on his feet. "I would have preferred it a little more forcefully. Don`t worry about it." Paul then stood toe to toe with the bigger man. Mammoth Mike was almost a foot taller than he was. "I`m going to shove you as hard as I can. I want you to resist as much as you can."

Mammoth Mike sighed. He held out his arms to his sides and hardened his chest. Paul shoved as hard as he could for several times before backing off. "That okay?"
"You`re fine." Paul tapped Mike`s chest and arms in several places.

"I hope you`re not figuring on fighting with me, Jesus. I could hurt you real bad and I wouldn`t do that for the world."

"Not fighting. I`m just trying to figure some things out and you`re the perfect size."

Down the end of the hallway they could hear Gracie crying.

"I don`t want to go, Daddy."

"Gracie, you must. It won`t be safe here for a while." Aaron carefully packed some clothes in a suitcase. "You need to pick only two toys to take with you."

"Aren`t you coming with me?"

"No, punkin, I have to stay here. There`s going to be a big fight and they need me here."

Gracie stood there and looked at him, then looked down. "Are you going to die?"

Aaron stopped what he was doing for a moment. "I don`t know." He was unable to look at her. "I don`t plan on it."

"How about Uncle Daryl and Uncle Paul? Do they have to fight, too?"

"Yes, punkin."

"I hate those Whisperers." Gracie picked up a toy car and threw it across her room.

Aaron closed his eyes and sighed. "I do, too." He put a few more clothes in and looked at Gracie, waiting for her to pick out toys. She put a rag doll and a stuffed bear in the suitcase. Aaron closed the case and latched it. He gathered Gracie in his arms and held her for the longest time, kissing her in her hair. "I want you to do everything they tell you to do, especially if they tell you to be quiet." He heard a soft footfall and glanced at Paul standing in the doorway.

"I`m scared, Daddy." Gracie`s voice was soft and subdued, not the usual cheerful volume they always heard from her.

"I know you are. We all are." Aaron brushed her hair back and wiped the tears from her eyes. "I`ve always told you there would be times that were scary."

"I know. Hi, Uncle Paul."

"Hello, Gracie." She broke away from Aaron and ran over to Paul and gave him a tight hug.

"Is Uncle Daryl here?"

Paul knelt down to her level. "No. You`ll see him for a bit in Alexandria. He has to come back here."

"He has to fight doesn`t he?"

"Yes. Remember how in class I tell you that you have to be brave and strong?" Gracie nodded. "This is one of those times. Your dad, Uncle Daryl, and me--this is our time to be brave and strong."
"Okay."

"We better get to the wagon, punkin. Hershel will be there and some of the other kids from school."

Gracie gave Paul another hug. "You`re my daddy, too." Paul kissed her as tears ran down his face. Aaron nodded and the two of them left.

Mammoth Mike had watched the whole thing from the doorway of the workout room. Paul walked back over to him.

"I`m scared for all those people being in the tunnels. What if they burn down Alexandria like they did The Kingdom?"

"The underground tunnels are beneath the planting fields. There are no structures above them or nearby at all. It was deliberately kept that way after the Saviors burned most of the houses. There`s also a contingency plan in place if the Whisperers head in Alexandria`s direction."

"I`m especially scared for all the little kids."

"You help me with what I need to do, maybe we can win this thing."

"You really think so, Jesus?"

"I have to believe it." He indicated for them to go back into the workout room. "What I might ask may be a bit strange. This is something I`ve never trained myself for. We only have a day or two before the shit hits the fan so it will be a crash course in training for me."

"I wish I paid more attention in your classes. I`m just not good at fighting, I guess."

"Some people aren`t and that`s no fault of yours. You do well enough and we`ll need all the help we can get."

"Okay." Mammoth Mike stood steadfast. "Anything you want."

Paul smiled. "Good. Now what I want you to do is just stand there and I`m going to run up from behind you and jump up on your back. You don`t need to do anything."

"Gotcha."

Outside Maggie watched as the children were loaded on a wagon driven by Michonne. She wiped away tears as Hershel and Gracie sat huddled together. "Do as they say, Hershel."

"I will, Mama. I promise."

Aaron came and stood beside her. The wagon was full so Michonne prepared to pull out. "I`ll be back as soon as I can."

"Our duck blind watchers report no Whisperer activity in or around Alexandria. Doing this at night should provide enough cover." Aaron reached over and buttoned the top button on Gracie`s coat.

"Are you sure you feel up to fighting?" Maggie knew that after a certain amount of months of a baby in her belly she couldn`t afford to take any chances. She didn`t want Michonne to take any, either.

"Yeah, I`m up for it." Michonne clicked her tongue and the horses went into motion pulling the
wagon through the gate. Both Aaron and Maggie waved, Hershel and Gracie waving back. As soon as the gate was closed Michonne had the horses go faster. She knew there wasn’t much time.

The children mostly whispered to themselves as they headed down the long road before them. Michonne had no idea how much time had passed or how far they had gotten. The journey seemed like it was taking forever.

It was Gracie who was looking up and saw some blinking lights. "Aunt Michonne, what are those lights?"

"What lights, honey?" Michonne turned around to see what Gracie was pointing at. She watched the lights coming closer then she swore she could hear the sound of propellers. "Helicopters?"

Hershel had as much of a perplexed look on his face as Michonne. "What’s a helicopter?"
Chapter Summary

- It’s the eve of battle. Rick asks Negan why he killed Alpha. Maggie is acting mysterious.

Rick, Daryl, and Michonne had returned to Hilltop by mid-afternoon the next day reporting that all those who needed hiding were in the tunnels. Over the years they had expanded the space beneath the garden and crop area of Alexandria just for such an emergency, having learned their lesson from the attacks by the Saviors. A thaw had started to set in. There was still enough snow covering roofs and on the ground that reminded them that it was still winter.

"All of Alexandria looks abandoned. Any Whisperers taking a peek inside won’t find a single person or animal." Rick helped unhitch the horses from the wagon. He unloaded some guns from the back.

"It’s the best we can do." Maggie watched the occupants of Hilltop as they frantically fortified the fence. "Now we need to focus on making preparations here."

"We brought a lot of the weapons and ammo. There are mostly guns, knives, a couple bows and arrows, extra crossbow bolts..." Michonne handed Maggie a list.

"We’ve got spears, knives, bows and arrows...my sword." Paul smirked. "And a lot of attitude."

"The lookouts are posted and watching every possible road in every direction." Aaron doubled checked to make sure he had the attachment he needed for his prosthesis.

"I’m not sure there’s much more we can do. Except wait." Rick turned in the direction of Hilltop’s cells. "I’m going to talk to Negan."

When Rick reached the cellar he found Negan just sitting on the cot staring into space. They simply stared at each other, neither wanting to be the first one to say anything.

Negan got up and came over to the bars. "I can hear what’s going on to get ready for the battle. You really think you can defeat a horde of Whisperers and walkers?"

Rick shrugged. "Honestly? Not really." He paused and just stared at Negan. "Why did you do it? We were prepared to accept Alpha’s terms and leave the Whisperers alone if it would keep people alive."

"She was more than an animal. She was a monster."

Rick emitted an ironic laugh. "This coming from someone who’s a monster himself. I doubt you’re in a position to judge--."

"She allowed the women to be raped!" This time Negan was shouting. "Said it was the natural order of things. Nothing disgusts me more than rape, Rick. I can murder a thousand men in one night, but one rape of a woman? No. Not acceptable." Negan paused and looked away from him. "Would you?"
"No. As a sheriff I dealt with a rapist from time to time. On that we can agree." Rick pointed to Negan`s attire. "I see you found another black leather jacket."

"I know where the good shopping is, even by today`s standards. I was even willing to trade it in for a skin suit. In fact, there were some Whisperers that wanted to make me Alpha. Beta wouldn`t have it, of course."

"Of course." Rick came up to the bars and looked directly in Negan`s face. "You wanted to see us take a fall. You wanted to be here when it happened. Congratulations. You got your wish. My only consolation is if and when we fall, you will fall as well. You will die of starvation or maybe if you`re lucky you`ll get killed by a curious Whisperer. One of those possibilities means you will rise from the dead with no one around to give you mercy."

"There`s one other choice, Rick."

"What makes you think I`m interested in hearing it?"

"Don`t care whether you are or not. You could let me out and I could help you fight."

Rick burst into laughter. "You never miss a trick do you?"

"I want to live just as much as the next person. I created the Saviors in order to save people, to save myself. I still hold to that philosophy. You need every good fighter you can spare, including me." Negan paused letting what he just said soak in. "So what will it be, Rick?"

"You already thought you were doing us a favor by bringing Alpha`s head to us and couldn`t have been more wrong." Rick practically spat in Negan`s face. "I still don`t take chances. You stay down here." With nothing more to say Rick ran up the steps and slammed the cellar door shut.

Daryl, who was now wearing his armor, was waiting on the ground above smoking a cigarette. "He have anythin` to say?"

Rick shook his head. "He wanted me to let him out so he could help us fight."

"Ain`t happenin`."

Rick pounded the heel of his boot in the slushy snow. "He is a good fighter. I wish I could trust him."

"Still ain`t happenin`." Daryl walked off to take a post at the fence.

Rick sighed and decided to look for Michonne. He found her talking to Maggie in front of Barrington House.

"I know what I heard and saw." Michonne`s voice was insistent. "Two helicopters. They came from the same direction we usually see Georgie`s group come from." She stared long and hard at Maggie. "Jesus said you never talk about when you were helping her group, even when asked specific questions."

Maggie turned her face away. "If you must know I was sworn to secrecy about a lot of things. About what I saw, what I heard."

"Why?" Rick was now intrigued by the mention of helicopters.

"I can`t tell you that, either. Now excuse me. I need to check to make sure the hospital is ready."
Maggie quickly moved away from them.

Rick shook his head. "Helicopters. For a long time I thought I was imagining them."

"You’ve seen them, too?"

"Once long ago right after I woke from my coma, when I was in Atlanta. That was years ago and far from here. Then I saw one during the war with the Saviors. Sometimes I thought I was hearing them in the distance. I never could see them."

"Why didn’t you ever mention them?"

"I thought I was seeing and hearing things due to stress," Rick shrugged. "You know I’ve hallucinated in the past. Now I’m not sure what to think."

"They were helicopters, Rick. I’m not prone to imagining things. I think Maggie knows where they are coming from, wherever this Georgie comes from."

"Hopefully we’ll still be alive to solve the mystery. I’m going to get some coffee." Rick turned in the direction of the back door, which was closest to the kitchen. Michonne decided to wander around to make a last minute check of things.

On the sentry post next to the gate Paul, Aaron, and Daryl, all three in their armor, stood together keeping vigil of the distant horizon. Enid came up to them carrying a tray of sandwiches and bottled water.

"You’re an angel." Aaron took a couple. Paul and Daryl also took some.

"Have to keep our best warriors in top shape."

"Hospital ready?" Paul wondered if this was going to be his last meal.

"We’re ready for any casualties. Hopefully not a lot."

Magna and Yumiko stood beside them and Enid gave them the rest of the sandwiches and water.

"Never thought when we joined this community things would get this interesting so fast." Magna switched between sharpening one of her knives and eating.

"A part of me wishes they would just show up." Paul rubbed his head, the headache never seeming to completely go away. "It’s always the wait before a battle when people go nuts."

"Then on the other hand you don’t want it to ever get started." Aaron gently massaged Paul’s shoulders above the armor.

Daryl peered through the scope of his crossbow. "Ain’t got time to go nuts now. Here they come."

Everyone who had binoculars peered through them. Rick and Michonne came up the ladder and stood behind them. They could see the large group of dark figures moving their way, slogging through melting snow. There were so many walkers, the growls could be heard from such a great distance.

"Never ends." Enid went over to the ladder to climb down. "I’ll go tell Maggie."

"My guess is five miles away. They’re moving pretty slow." Paul took two Aspirin out of his pocket and swallowed them with a couple sips of water.
"Can`t be easy to control that many walkers." Aaron made sure the straps of his armor were tight, the pike on his prosthesis securely connected.

"Gotta demoralize `em. Our one goal is to take out Beta." Daryl knew that was going to be up to the three of them to accomplish.
The Whisperers are at the gate. Maggie has something up her sleeve.

No one said a word as they watched the slow progression of the Whisperer/walker horde approaching Hilltop. There were even some emerging out of the woods.

"How many?" Michonne’s voice had an ominous undertone that even surprised her.

"At least it ain`t the full thirty thousand." Rick paused. "I estimate five to eight thousand."

"What the ratio is to walker/Whisperer is anybody`s guess." Paul made sure his armor was on securely and indicated for Aaron and Daryl to check theirs, as well as checking their weapons for what seemed like the millionth time. Some of the people that were members of the former Kingdom were also wearing armor including Jerry, Carol, and King Ezekiel, even though theirs wasn`t as elaborate.

"'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. For he today that sheds his blood for me, shall be my brother, be ne`er so vile'. Henry V." King Ezekiel hoped everyone had heard him.

"And sisters, too." Carol slightly smiled which she exchanged with Ezekiel. They reached out and clutched hands.

"Beta`s at the head surrounded by both Whisperers and walkers." Eduardo gazed through his binoculars. "Their weapons are bows and arrows. Knives. Can`t tell if there are any guns." He paused for a moment. "Holy shit."

"What is it?" Maggie didn`t like his tone.

"They have torches. Some of their arrows have fire tips."

"They intend to burn Hilltop down the way they did The Kingdom. Except the people are still here." Rick shook his head, wondering if this truly was to be the end.

Paul turned around and addressed those on the ground. "Prepare buckets of dirt, water, anything to put out a fire. Check around for fire extinguishers." People quickly went into action.

"Is our hospital prepared to take care of burns?" Aaron hated fire more than any other destructive force. He had encountered it too often in his life.

"Minor ones." Maggie glanced at the roof of Barrington House and the other houses grateful that the snow hadn`t all melted. "The snow will help on some of the buildings." She quickly climbed down the ladder.

"Where are you going?" Michonne hoped Maggie hadn`t decided to abandon them.

"There`s something important I need to take care of."
"I hope it doesn’t take long. We need you up here." Rick was somewhat agitated at the fact that Maggie seemed a bit preoccupied with something other than the battle.

"It won’t." Maggie ran towards Barrington House.

"Be right back." Paul abruptly climbed down the ladder and discreetly followed Maggie. Aaron and Daryl exchanged mystified looks, sighed, and shrugged.

First Maggie went into her office and opened her safe, taking out a black metal box. She then ran out of the office and up the stairs, clear to the top of the widow’s walk tower. She opened up the box and took out a short wave radio. "CW, this is Maggie Rhee of Hilltop. Georgie, do you read? Over." There was nothing but static. "CW, this is Maggie Rhee of Hilltop. We need help. Do you read? Over." Maggie didn’t see Paul standing below and listening.

"Hilltop, this is CW." A voice crackled over the radio. "How can we help? Over."

"The Whisperers are attacking in great numbers. Chances of survival are low. Over."

"How long can you hold them off? How many are the dead? Over."

"Uncertain. We estimate five maybe eight thousand. Over."

"Give us half-an-hour. We can take care of the dead. The Whisperers are up to you. Over and out." The radio went silent. Paul quickly ducked back and headed downstairs before she could see him. Maggie put the radio back in the box and ran down the steps returning the box to the safe and hurried back outside.

Paul was looking at her, his gaze unwavering when he came up to her. "I knew you were up to something. I won’t ask what exactly it is right now."

Maggie didn’t want to look at him. It had always been difficult to lie to Paul 'Jesus' Rovia. "I had to keep it a secret. I’m sorry."

Paul sighed. "I have a feeling certain things won’t be secret anymore."

"I never could fool you, Jesus." Maggie chuckled nervously, then looked at him. "You were listening the whole time weren’t you?"

"Yes. I have work to do." Paul ran back towards the fence and climbed up the ladder. He looked at Aaron and Daryl. "Time for us to disappear." The other two nodded and headed over to the ladder.

"Where are you three going?" Rick was astounded that the three of them would abandon their post at such a crucial moment.

Aaron looked at him and grinned. "Checking the seeds for spring planting."

All three quickly climbed down the ladder and went towards a spot along the fence. Daryl opened a small door and the three of them went through it. Rick glanced over the fence and all he could see was one of the duck blinds that corresponded to the door they had gone through.

"One of our secret duck blinds." Maggie had rejoined them and assured him with a nod.

"Why are they hiding in there?"

Maggie shrugged. "It was Jesus’s idea."
Inside the duck blind the three of them huddled together. The first thing they did was exchange quick kisses.

"For luck, right?" Aaron would see it that way anyway.

"What was Maggie up to? Why she keepin` secrets?"

"I have a theory that Maggie has been sworn to secrecy about Georgie`s group because they have a lot of things at their disposal that didn`t perish with the rest of the world." Paul paused. "That they still have in their possession a lot of the technology that was in place and are using it."

"Like helicopters. Medicines." Aaron glanced out the peephole.

"Where do they get the gas for the helicopters?" Now Daryl had a lot of questions. "It`s crazy."

"That`s what`s crazy." Paul pointed to the oncoming group of Whisperers and walkers. They watched as the horde grew closer.

"Ya sure we can pull this off?" Daryl`s voice was rarely tense as he thought about the task ahead.

"We get Beta off his game." Paul gripped his sword. "The other Whisperers see him as invincible and invulnerable. Psychologically if they see him go down, they`ll get scared."

"He`s heavily guarded." Peering through the peephole Aaron was able to get a better look at Beta now that he was closer.

"When has something like that ever been a problem for the three of us?"

"The walkers and other Whisperers are easy. Beta ain`t." Daryl came up behind Aaron to take a look for himself.

"Do you think he can fight off the three of us at the same time? He`s almost seven feet tall and bigger than Barrington House." Aaron even wondered if his pike was able to do the trick.

"Guess we don`t know until we try." Daryl didn`t sound very confident.

They watched in silence until the horde stopped about fifty yards away from the front gate. Beta and his guards of walkers and Whisperers separated themselves from the rest of the group and stepped forward.

"You have defied us for the last time! Today you die!" Beta`s voice was loud and booming conveying fear to some of the citizens of Hilltop, but not to the seasoned fighters and leaders.

"We will honor Alpha`s agreement!" Rick could sound just as menacing. "You have no right to be here."

"Before we kill all of you we have a request. Give us Negan`s head." Beta stood firm and immovable.

"No deal. Negan is ours to punish." Maggie wouldn`t have minded getting Negan`s head herself. This wasn`t the right time for it.

"That`s right, keep stalling, Maggie." Paul knew Maggie had to do just that until the helicopters showed up.

"We also want Alpha`s head." Beta did not seem to back down.
Michonne leaned over to Maggie. "Do we still have it?"

"It’s in Ms. Maitlin’s freezer." Maggie then returned her attention to Beta. "Give us a minute. We’ll go get it." She nodded to Bertie who was on the ground to go to the house to get it.

"We don’t have to do this." Rick was going to attempt to negotiate no matter what Beta had in mind. He knew there was at least a small chance and he wasn’t going to waste it. "You stay in your territory, we stay in ours. Surely you want to honor Alpha’s wishes."

"We honor her words, not her wishes." Beta took a couple steps forward. "There is no way out of this."

"I wouldn’t be so sure of that." Only the few beside Maggie had heard her and wondered if she had something in mind that she was keeping to herself.
What Happens In A No-Win Situation

Chapter Summary

The battle of Hilltop vs. the Whisperers commences.

Maggie tossed the burlap sack that contained Alpha`s head over the fence where it landed at Beta`s feet. He picked it up and opened it. After taking a look inside, he handed it to another Whisperer. "Now we want Negan."

Maggie and Rick conferred in low voices for a few moments. Rick then indicated that Negan be let out of his cell and brought up to the front gate.

"Come on. We`re giving you what you want. Be reasonable. No one has to get killed on either side." Rick was uncertain if reasoning with Beta would work. He had to at least try.

"Too late, Rick Grimes. Alpha has already been killed. We seek to avenge her death." Beta was too impatient to listen to reason.

"We`ll hand Negan over to you. He has done us wrong in the past. We`re on your side in this." Maggie looked up at the sky, but couldn`t yet see the help she was expecting.

Moments later a tied up Negan was brought out. Mammoth Mike and Eduardo held him fast.

"Having some trouble?" Negan couldn`t help flashing a sarcastic smirk in Rick`s direction.

"Shut up." Rick looked at Beta. "So, what is it to be?" He noticed Beta turn around ready to signal to the others. "You attack all deals are off."

Beta turned around to face them again. "There haven`t been any deals. Fire!"

The first barrage of arrows flew over the top of the fence. Everyone ducked or stepped out of the way. One of the arrows was a flaming arrow that landed on some hay near the stables. People rushed to quickly put it out.

"Good thinking, Jesus." Maggie praised him in her mind for thinking quickly for putting in place the things they needed for extinguishing the fires as soon as they were lit.

"What would we do without him?" Carol flashed her a quick smile.

Rick took aim with his Colt and shot out a couple walkers guarding Beta. The noise seemed to agitate other nearby walkers making them a bit hard to control by their Whisperer handlers.

"There`s our advantage." Michonne`s voice was loud enough so everyone along the fence could hear. "Distract the walkers enough so they can`t control them."

Rick signaled for more guns to be fired. While taking out walkers and Whisperers at the same time more walkers became distracted, a couple of them even attacking nearby Whisperers. They screamed when they were bitten.
Another barrage of arrows was aimed towards the Hilltoppers. Only two were aflame. One landed in a pile of snow, the other on top of the chicken coop. Snow on the roof and some quick thinking with some buckets of dirt extinguished it.

"I like fried chicken but not that way." Rick’s remark caused those nearby to chuckle. A couple arrows shot by Yumiko took out a Whisperer and a walker guarding Beta. "Negan’s right here if you change your mind."

Beta growled and then let out a loud scream. A bunch of Whisperers started to charge towards the gate only to be gunned down by bullets or taken out by spears. He motioned with his arms and several walkers were released.

"We’re going to have to take this on the ground." Rick moved to climb down the ladder.

"I’ll keep watch on things from up here." Michonne and Rick kissed for luck then he climbed down the ladder, Maggie not far behind.

"My offer is still good." Maggie gave him a hateful look. "If he survives."

"So is ours to Beta." Negan was hoping they would change their minds.

A few more gunshots took out the remaining walkers and Whisperers guarding Beta. He was now wide open. He roared and flexed his arms noticing someone aiming a gun at him, stepping out of the way at the last second before the bullet could strike him. He turned his back towards the gate and looked to see if he could surround himself with more walkers and Whisperers. The walkers were all distracted and out of control due to the noises from the guns and the other Whisperers were trying but failing to control them. When he turned around to face the gate again his view was blocked.

In front of Beta stood three men wearing armor.

Beta pointed at them and laughed. "I’ve beaten the odds against more than you."

"Really?" Paul raised an eyebrow.

Daryl took a couple steps towards him. "They ain’t us."

Aaron was the first to move in, the pike attached to his prosthesis raised, when Beta charged forward. Aaron readied it and Beta leaned right into it. The pike encountered some resistance and Aaron realized that Beta wore some chest armor when he thrust the pike forward. The aim of the pike was also slightly off and slid across Beta’s chest since he was fast for such a large man and only produced a gash along his upper shoulder. It didn’t seem to faze Beta and he grabbed Aaron’s prosthesis and tore it away off of Aaron’s stump. Aaron felt a slight pain. He wasn’t finished when he landed a well-placed karate kick to trip Beta up. Beta fell to the ground. Aaron didn’t see the Whisperer coming up from behind him and when Paul and Daryl warned him it was too late. The Whisperer stabbed Aaron on the side of his thigh where the armor didn’t protect him, causing him to fall to the ground screaming in pain.

While Beta was still on the ground Daryl took off at a run and threw himself on top of Beta. The two men wrestled on the ground, grunting, their muscles tense and both equal in strength since one could not gain the advantage over the other. Daryl managed to get up and Beta charged him, slamming him against the fence, knocking Daryl back down to the ground. Daryl was instantly back up on his feet and withdrew both of his knives. Beta also withdrew his knives, which were slightly longer than Daryl’s. They feinted at each other, circling, never taking their eyes off one
another. Beta charged at Daryl and knocked him off balance causing the hunter to fall to the ground. Beta then pinned him and slashed at the left side of Daryl’s face with his dagger, barely missing taking out Daryl’s eye. Daryl ignored the blood, trying to keep his wits about him. Several Whisperers took advantage and charged forward and grabbed Daryl, dragging him from underneath Beta. Daryl fought like a trapped wild animal, growling and shouting. He could not slip away since his foes were too numerous. Beta then got to his feet.

Paul stood there and stared down his opponent, immovable.

Beta pointed at him and laughed. "Little man, you dare to take me down?"

A Whisperer wielding a dagger came up from behind Paul, who sensed the movement, and whirled on him before he could stab the knife that was aiming almost directly towards the spot in which he had suffered his first stabbing. Instead, Paul`s knife went directly into the Whisperer`s chest right into his heart.

Paul then turned to face Beta again. He screamed and ran towards him his arms outstretched and with such a force that Beta did not expect from such a small man. Paul used a series of expertly aimed karate kicks until he finally knocked him to the ground. Paul then straddled him, his knife aimed towards Beta`s head. Beta easily reached up and knocked the knife from Paul`s grasp. He flipped Paul off of him and stood on his feet. Paul just as quickly got up.

"I could crush you." Beta pointed at Paul again.

Paul was so focused he did not reply and took out his sword instead. Wielding it he aimed for Beta`s head again. Beta ducked and rushed towards Paul, forcefully knocking his sword from his hand with ease and grabbing Paul around the waist. With great effort Paul put all of his strength into his back and with force he was able to throw Beta off of him. He felt the pain of his effort and could feel that his ribs were probably bruised. At least his back was not thrown out.

"I will crush you and then kill you." Beta taunted him by flapping his tongue in and out like a large anaconda.

All Daryl and Aaron could do was helplessly watch as the much smaller Paul squared against Beta. They could tell that Paul was tiring. Paul then tried to circle behind Beta who tracked his every move. Aaron tore off the sleeve of his shirt and bound his wound. If only he could find a way to distract Beta. He kicked a nearby Whisperer who fell into a couple walkers. The Whisperer screamed when the walkers bit into him and it was enough to cause Beta to look over at him.

Paul took advantage of Aaron`s distraction and moved behind Beta and leaped onto his back. Beta was large and clumsy, which slowed him down compared to his much smaller and quicker opponent. Paul wrapped his legs around Beta`s chest, his arms around Beta`s head and neck. Beta pulled and tugged at Paul`s arms and legs. Paul let go with one arm and reached for the small dagger that was in his ankle sheath. He slipped it out and plunged it hard into Beta`s head, thrusting and twisting it to make sure his blow would be fatal. Beta let out one last scream and fell to the ground as blood gushed from the wound. Paul was off of him in a flash and landed on his feet as Beta hit the ground with a thud--dead.

The Whisperers holding Daryl loosened their grip and he was able to slip out from underneath them. Walkers started to converge on them and the other Whisperers now seemed frightened by the fact that Beta had been defeated. Paul and Daryl helped Aaron to his feet. Paul quickly grabbed his sword and Aaron`s prosthesis then they moved towards the gate that was opened for them to get inside. All who could fight rushed out. Negan had loosened his ropes and grabbed a machete that was on the ground. He joined in on the fray killing walkers and Whisperers with exhilarating
Everyone looked up at the sound of helicopters. Three of them were in the sky and soldiers with guns were leaning out and shooting frantically at the walkers. Whisperers ran for cover while the walkers turned away from Hilltop due to the sound from the choppers and guns. Slowly the choppers lured the majority of the walkers away from Hilltop. All of the rest of Hilltop’s fighters easily took care of the walkers and Whisperers that remained.

Inside the fence Aaron was put on a stretcher and rushed to the infirmary. Everyone was too enthralled watching the retreating walkers and helicopters to celebrate the fact that the Whisperers had been soundly defeated.

Ezekiel came up to Paul grinning from ear to ear. "He struck the Philistine down and killed him. He did it without even using a sword."

Paul burst into laughter as he sheathed his sword then hugged Ezekiel, cringing in pain at his bruised body.

When all was taken care of and the rest of the walkers were diverted and the remaining Whisperers on the run, everyone came back inside. Paul and Rick went over to Negan.

"The machete," Rick held out his hand. Negan held onto it for a moment. He glanced at Paul who was giving him a look of warning his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. He sighed and handed the machete over to Rick.

Paul motioned to Mammoth Mike and Eduardo. "Put him back in the cell."

"Come on, Jesus, not even a 'fuck you Negan for one thousand, Alex'?" Negan was grabbed and held strong by his two guards.

Paul covered his mouth trying to hide his laugh as he and Rick watched Negan get hauled back to his cell. They shared a fist bump, then Paul headed towards the infirmary rubbing his sore ribs and hoping he hadn’t broken any.
Aaron recovers. Paul is uncertain about his future at Hilltop.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Aaron had been given some painkillers while his wound was stitched up and bandaged. Daryl’s face had also been stitched up and he knew he would have a scar when it finally healed. Gracie sat next to her father’s bed merely watching and holding her father’s hand, her presence a comfort for all three of them. Since Paul’s injury wasn’t as bad as others he was one of the last to be treated and now sat on a gurney as a nurse bound his ribcage. An x-ray had revealed that two of his ribs were cracked and he was to take it easy for the rest of the week.

"Are you going to stay with me all night, punkin?" Aaron was glad she had not been around to see the battle. Such things still frightened her. She was, however, fascinated about the helicopters and how they chased the walkers away. He was glad to see that her curiosity had not been dampened by events.

"Yeah." Gracie jutted out her chin in determination.

"How are you going to go to bed? They won’t let you stay here unless you are sick or hurt."

"I’ll move you to the hospital."

"Me, sleeping in the stables. Right." Aaron reached over and brushed her hair. "You’ll have to put up with a hurt Uncle Daryl and Uncle Paul for the next couple of days."

Gracie looked at the two of them. "That’s alright. I’ll tell them what not to do."

Aaron hid his mouth to suppress a laugh. "You need to go with Bertie now. I want to talk to them alone. I’ll see you in the morning."

"Okay, Daddy." Gracie leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek, then she and Bertie left.

Aaron sighed. "What a crazy day. We actually won."

"We didn’t do it on our own." Paul grimaced as he put on his shirt. "Not that I’m ungrateful. I’m awful curious about Georgie’s people. Maggie says they call themselves the Commonwealth."

"Is Georgie the leader?" Daryl wasn’t certain he liked this new group.

"No, I think she’s more of an ambassador of some sort." Paul shook his head. "I don’t understand it all myself. Not sure if I want to."

"Maggie said she can’t talk about a lot of things about them just yet. I’m not going to worry about it. I just want to get healed up." Aaron looked at Paul and noticed the somewhat melancholy expression on his face. "What’s wrong?"
"Nothing."

"Dammit, Paul, this is me and Aaron. Ya better talk to us." Daryl glared at him not wanting to allow Paul to regress to his old ways of keeping things to himself and bottling up his emotions.

"When I saw that Whisperer stab you in the leg my heart skipped a few beats, that`s all." Paul looked directly at Aaron.

Both Aaron and Daryl knew there was more to it. They also knew it wasn`t the time to press the issue. "I can understand that. I didn`t lose a whole lot of blood and it was mostly muscle tissue that was damaged. I`ll heal just fine." Aaron fought off a wave of sleepiness.

"We better all get some rest." Daryl grasped Aaron`s hand. "Anythin` we need to do for the squirt?"

"Read her a bedtime story and be sure to tuck her in with her bear."

Aaron was in the infirmary for two days and then released as long as he got enough rest. Within a week`s time he was walking around with a limp and already doing some physical therapy. He considered the wound a bit light compared to when he had lost his arm.

During that time Paul had been digging out maps helping King Ezekiel and Carol search for a suitable place to re-establish The Kingdom. They now studied a map that was spread out on the dining table at their house.

"Here." Paul tapped his finger on the map. "It`s near Georgetown University, maybe even part of the campus. It has barracks, an auditorium, and a lot of other buildings that could be converted into whatever you may need. Not a lot of spaces to fence in. All you might need to do is clean out the walkers, check the plumbing and power. We could send Alden and his construction crew and you`ll soon have a new home."

"Looks like it`s worth checking out." Carol felt hopeful for the first time in a long time.

With some work the place turned out to be ideal and by the time spring rolled around the refugees from The Kingdom had established The New Kingdom. Both Hilltop and Alexandria aided in helping it get into shape. Aaron healed up completely during that time and had recovered to the point that it seemed like he never had been injured at all. Both he and Daryl did notice that Paul became more and more morose as time went on. This worried them since he tended to become more uncommunicative.

Paul barely listened during Maggie`s daily meetings. Eduardo had proved eager to be Hilltop`s second-in-command and now had the job permanently. With no new trouble on the horizon Paul found himself with very little to do. The rest of the Whisperers had disappeared into parts unknown and the remainder of their huge walker herd had been taken care of by gasoline and fire drops from the Commonwealth`s helicopters. Since the canyon was isolated, not much of the fire spread to the nearby forests. Negan had been returned to the cell in Alexandria and put under much heavier guard.

"It may take a while before we establish former relations with the Commonwealth. Georgie thinks it`s a more plausible idea now that we`ve proven we can be on our own if we have to." Maggie glanced over at Paul who was staring out the window from his spot leaning against the bookcase. His gaze was faraway and sad. "I think that`s all for today. Keep a check on how planting is progressing."
"Sure thing." Eduardo left the office.

Maggie got up and slowly walked over to him. "Why do I get the feeling you hardly pay attention to these meetings anymore, Jesus."

"I was listening." Paul turned to look at her. "Since the risk of danger is low there isn`t much to say concerning security."

"I won`t deny that." Maggie decided to change the subject. "How are your classes coming along?"

"Fine. There`s not much more I can teach the older kids and adults, in fact some of the adults are taking over the classes for the younger children. Frees me up to do more important things I suppose."

Maggie reached over and touched his cheek, seeing some sort of hidden pain in his wide ocean blue/green eyes. "Jesus, I learned my lesson about putting you in a position of leadership. I can tell when you are not happy. When was the last time you were outside the fence?"

"When I accompanied King Ezekiel to look over the location for The New Kingdom. I`ve cleared walkers in the woods every now and then. I met those representatives from the Commonwealth on the road like you asked. They didn`t seem very interested in talking to me. They wore suits. I wore -cargo pants casual." Paul remembered how awkward he felt at that meeting. How they seemed to look down on him somewhat. It had brought up emotions he had often felt growing up in group homes, emotions he had yet to deal with in a significant way.

"It`s looking more and more like they want to establish trade agreements with us, make us a part of their adjunct communities, which means we would be under their protection." Maggie leaned her back against one of the arm chairs. "They still have technology at their disposal that was available before the fall. They have some industry, mining, an oil well and refinery, renewable energy, and a military force that`s quite strong."

"Is this something that you want, Maggie?"

"I want Hilltop to be a place of production, especially food production. They`re even interested in opening up negotiations with Alexandria and Rick seems keen on the idea."

"And what exactly is my part to be in all of this?" There was a tinge of bitterness in Paul`s voice.

"I`m sure we can find something for you. For Daryl and Aaron, too."

"I can`t speak for them. I don`t know if they`d be thrilled or not. I know they aren`t all that impressed."

"Gracie would get a topnotch education. That`s every parent`s dream."

"Yeah, I suppose so." Paul rubbed his arms. "I got things to do at home." He left the office, Maggie only staring after him with a look of concern and confusion. She didn`t like the fact that he was unhappy and seemed to be regressing to some of his old ways of thinking.

There was a knock on the frame of her office door and Bertie peered in. "They`re ready for you to look over the cornfield."

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot. We put in that new watering system didn`t we? I`ll be there in five minutes."
"Okay. Maybe Jesus would want to see how it works. Should I go get him?"

"No. He said he had things to do at home."

Bertie nodded and left. Maggie stood there for a long time lost in thought. No matter how much she thought about it, she couldn’t think of anything for Jesus to do. She quickly put aside those thoughts and hurried out of the office.

Chapter End Notes

Just one more chapter to go!
Spirits Having Flown

Chapter Summary

I’m not going to put a summary up for this chapter. I want it to speak for itself. This chapter is longer than the others. Enjoy! (No warnings apply.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

___________________________________________________________________________________________

'And the wild cry out. It cries out loud in me’. ~from the lyrics to 'The Wild Cry' by Clannad

A completely naked Daryl reclined against the pillows holding a tumbler of whiskey in one hand and a joint in the other. His legs were spread apart, his already erect cock ready for whatever was to come next. Aaron reached over and took the tumbler from him, took a sip, then handed it back to him. He was also naked.

"Ya sure Gracie is stayin’ with Ms. Maitlin?"

"If she wasn’t we wouldn’t be doing this." Aaron leaned over and gave him a lustful kiss. When they parted Daryl took a pull on the joint. When he finished another hand took it from him.

"Share." Paul was lying naked on his stomach beside him. He slowly took his own pull on the joint and set it aside. Then he reached over and stroked Daryl’s hardening cock. "Umm, that’s a nice boy." He raised himself up and climbed in between Daryl’s legs, placing his mouth on its tip, his tongue soon playing with it up and down the shaft.

Aaron had moved over to the other side and his hand reached underneath Paul, balancing himself on Paul’s back with the stump of his left arm, his right hand manipulating Paul’s hardening cock. He rubbed his own up and down Paul’s lubricated crack.

Daryl set the tumbler of whiskey on the bed stand, then ran his fingers through the long soft strands of Paul’s hair. He moaned with desire as Paul expertly blew his balls and shaft.

Aaron moaned. "This is the fucking life."

Daryl snickered then let out a long groan of pleasure. "Ya got the tongue of a demon, Paul."

"You’ll be a fallen angel by the time I’m finished." Paul took Daryl’s shaft into his mouth, already tasting pre-cum. Paul jerked up and down as Aaron’s hand continued to orchestrate his way to an orgasm, the motion causing Aaron to howl in ecstasy as his cock moved faster in Paul’s crack. He had already prepared Paul so he easily entered him, causing Paul to emit cries of pleasure as he banged against his prostate.
The walkers could be heard all around him in the mists, echoing against the gravestones of the dark cemetery. Sword at the ready, Paul watched as they emerged from the wisps. Some of them didn’t seem to be walkers. Some of them--. His sword stabbed and swung in the air as he whirled in slow motion like a dervish spinning first one way then the other, kicks flying, taking out the walkers one by one. He swung his sword and one of the walkers ducked.

“You are where you don’t belong.” The knife plunged deeply into his back. He got a glance at his assailant who tore off the mask that looked like the dead. Paul screamed in agonizing pain. He kept on screaming and screaming--.

--and screaming until he sat up in bed, the sweat pouring down his entire body. Daryl and Aaron woke up with a start and sat up.

"Another nightmare?” Daryl placed his arm across Paul’s shoulders. They were all still naked from their earlier sexual activities.

"I was in the cemetery.” Paul quickly crawled out of the bed, grabbed his bathrobe, and hurried to the bathroom where he splashed some cold water on his face.

"This is the fifth time in the past two weeks.” Aaron exchanged a worried look with Daryl. They heard Paul leave the bathroom and go downstairs. Both of them got out of the bed, put on their robes, and followed him. They found him in the kitchen getting a drink of water.

Paul looked up at them. "That Whisperer was right. I don’t belong.” He hurried out into the living room, turned on a small lamp, and sat down on the sofa, wrapping his robe tightly around him. "At first I never felt I belonged here at Hilltop. Then I deluded myself into believing I did. That’s all it was.” Paul buried his head in his hands brushing his fingers through his hair.

Daryl sat down in the easy chair. "Ya ain’t the only one who feels that way.”

"I guess all three of us have been feeling it.” Aaron came up beside him.

Paul looked at them. "It’s why the nightmares have returned. I’m not needed here anymore.”

"I must admit I never welcomed the thought of this Commonwealth becoming involved with us.” Aaron sat down on the arm of the sofa. "There’s no excitement with them. They remind me too much of how the world was before.”

"When we were nothin’.” Daryl lowered his head not wanting to remember many parts of his life before the walkers. The parts where he was isolated, obscured by the shadow of his brother Merle.

They were silent for the longest time.

Paul stared at his cases of books, remembering how often he had read just to escape the harshness of the judgments made by Gregory or other residents that didn’t accept him for who he was. "I don’t want to live here anymore. Hilltop does not feel like it used to be. I don’t know if that’s better or not. The more involved we get with the Commonwealth, the more I feel like we may be going in the wrong direction.”

"When we were fightin’ them Whisperers we had a purpose. The Saviors, too.” Daryl had liked the feeling of belonging. Two people in his life gave him the intimacy he had always longed for and he
wanted to keep it, not ever wanting to let it go.

"So this is what it feels like to be obsolete." Aaron sighed and closed his eyes, not liking what he had just said.

Paul looked from one to the other. "If I leave will you two come with me?"

"That’s a big decision to make. I have Gracie to consider. Then again the three of us never could stay behind a fence for long."

"She ain’t happy here. All they do at school is harass and bully her cuz of us." The last thing Daryl wanted was to see another child teased and bullied for being different, considering his own struggles with his sexuality during his youth that ultimately forced him to hide it for so many years.

"I mentioned it to Maggie. All she could talk about is how the Commonwealth school might be better. That kind of thing would be worse at a bigger school." Aaron knew it was his job to protect Gracie in all the ways that he possibly could. From the walkers and from anything else he deemed a threat to her well being.

"It wouldn`t teach her how to survive, either. A lot of the world is still a rough place out there." Paul understood that better than anyone, having grown up in a series of group homes.

Aaron leaned back and sighed. "So where would we go if we do decide to leave?"

"Remember during our training sessions when we explored around the Occoquan Lake and found that little complex with a huge cabin, a barn, and all of those other buildings for animals?"

Aaron smiled. "Yeah. I couldn’t get over the charm of it. The cabin had a loft and a screened-in porch. I think I counted five bedrooms. It even had a bar. All of the buildings were well taken care of and there was a wraparound deck overlooking the lake, along with a patio. It had its own sewer pond and a windmill for generating power." He paused and closed his eyes, letting the images of the memories of their exploration take over. "And nothing but wilderness all around it. No sign of civilization anywhere. We even dreamed of living there, a simple life with no distractions, no heavy worries. We could just live."

"Is that where we`d go?" Daryl would actually welcome a chance to be in the wilderness again. It wouldn`t be full-time as it was before he came back to Hilltop. Of course, things had changed so drastically in his life. He no longer had the desire to be a hermit.

Paul nodded. "I`ve daydreamed about that place a lot." He looked from one to the other. "We still have a lot of things to iron out in our relationship. We’re starting to fray at the edges. We were distracted by the war with the Whisperers. Now that’s over and the issues we had to set aside are starting to come back into our lives. I don’t want to lose either of you. I love you both so much."

"I love ya, too, Paul. It’s as simple as that." Daryl looked at Aaron. "I’m in love with two men. Ain’t that somethin`?"

Aaron and Paul chuckled.

"I have finally been able to put Eric in the past. It was because of the two of you that I found love again. I go where you go, Paul."

"With ya in this together."
"Then it’s settled. We are leaving Hilltop." Paul felt a sense of relief that the decision had been made.

"We can begin packing in the morning. Gracie may have to leave some toys behind. Most are broken anyway."

That next morning when they came to Maggie with their decision she wasn’t all that surprised. "I suspected you would be leaving us."

"We need to heal, Maggie. I’m not talking about our physical wounds, either." Aaron rubbed his leg where he had been stabbed by the Whisperer.

"If becoming part of the Commonwealth is what you want, Maggie, just be certain it is what you want." Paul looked at her earnestly. "I see no part in it for me." He looked at Daryl and Aaron, who both affirmed that they felt the same way with nods.

"I hate the thought of all of us going our separate ways. You saved us. All three of you." Maggie didn’t want to allow them to leave. Deep inside she knew it was best.

Aaron looked directly at her. "If you ever need us all you need to do is tie a red bandana around the signpost marking the intersection of the Occoquan Reservoir, North Shore, Jardine’s Cove. We’ll be here as soon as we can."

"Thank you. I’ll give you the big covered wagon, a small supply wagon, and your horses. I’ll also send some seed, livestock, and other provisions with you so you can get started."

Paul looked at her with a bright expression. "Who knows? We may drop in from time to time."

By afternoon they were already packing up the wagons. They were surprised when Magna and Yumiko came over to them.

"We want to talk to you." Magna didn’t hold back as she approached the three of them who stopped what they were doing for a moment.

"We hoped we would have a chance to say goodbye to you." Paul stood directly in front of them.

"No goodbyes." Yumiko didn’t back away from him. "We want to come with you."

The three of them exchanged looks as if they knew what the other was thinking.

"Are you sure?" Aaron had liked the two women from the start.

"This place is stifling to us." Magna snorted, not liking the fact she was behind a fence. A feeling she knew the three men understood quite well. "It was great when we first came here. We had Luke and Kelly--now all we have are bad memories. Connie has decided to move to Alexandria. She feels welcome there now."

"That cabin is pretty large." Paul threw a pack on the wagon. "There’s plenty of room."

"I don’t know what this cabin is. It sounds nice." Magna placed her hand on Paul’s arm. "Please."

Aaron looked at the other two who nodded. "Better get packing. We have another stop to make and want to get there before dark."

Many sad farewells were said as they prepared to leave. Maggie gave them a cow, a couple pigs, some chickens, and other fowl along with the horses, seeds, and other supplies. She made sure they
were well stocked with food until they could grow their own.

After leaving Hilltop they made a brief stop at Alexandria to let Rick know what they had decided to do. They met Rick and Michonne’s new little boy, R.J., as well as saying goodbye to Judith. Rick was given a map of where the cabin complex and lake were located.

Carl ran over to them, Lydia right behind him. "We want to come with you, Lydia and me."

"Carl--."

"No, Dad. You know we can’t stay here. Everyone hates Lydia because of what she was."

Michonne put her hand on Rick’s arm. "He’s right, Rick." She turned him around to face her. "We knew this day would come. When we would have to let him go."

"No one’s agreed to take him anywhere yet, Michonne."

Daryl, Paul, and Aaron exchanged looks with Magna and Yumiko. They all nodded. Daryl stepped forward. "If Gracie agrees the answer is yes." Everyone turned to look at Gracie.

"Go for it!" Gracie pumped her arm up and down.

"I guess that means you’re in." Paul and Gracie exchanged a fist bump.

"We’ll be ready in ten minutes." Carl and Lydia ran back towards their house.

Rick sighed and shook his head. "I never could keep him in one place." He looked at them somewhat harshly. "Take care of him. He may be ready to leave. He’s still my son."

"Ya know we will. Ain’t ever gonna let nothin’ happen to him, bro."

Rick nodded. "Good enough for me. I’ll give you another horse, some more provisions, bottles of our home brew, and some more of that great booze from the liquor store raid."

The journey to the cabin complex took the rest of the afternoon and by early evening while there was still some light they had reached the area. Out of everyone Gracie and Dog were perhaps the most excited. With eight of them to unpack the wagon and stow the animals they were ready for their first night. The cabin was well furnished and only needed cleaning, most which would be done later. The one item that the three men insisted on bringing was the king-sized bed, which they installed instead of the full-sized bed in their bedroom. The other bedrooms were furnished as well. Gracie and Lydia shared one in the loft with Carl across from them. That arrangement would most likely soon change as Carl and Lydia grew closer.

Weary of their journey and work, they enjoyed a meal on the deck before going to bed. The next day was spent cleaning and stowing away the rest of the items. That night they watched the sun set over the lake, its dark orange light shimmering across the ripples in a surreal peacefulness that all of them absorbed from the nightly sounds of nature. Magna and Yumiko were content to sit on a rusty glider with their arms around each other. Carl and Lydia lounged in a couple deck chairs, holding hands.

"This is gonna make us whole again." Daryl lit up a cigarette.

"Even though I never really felt it, there were times we were becoming disconnected from each other. It has a lot to do with our pasts." Aaron looked down at Gracie who sat in a lawn chair beside him and brushed some stray hairs out of her face.
"There are still walkers out there." Paul cocked an eyebrow at Aaron as he lazily swayed back and forth on a hammock that had been hung between two posts.

"And you`ll love putting your sword through each and every one of them." Magna winked at him knowingly.

Paul grinned. "You think so, huh?" Magna nodded. "You`re right."

"It`s our souls that need healin`. We should name this place."

Carl looked oddly at Daryl. "Never knew you to be so philosophical. Going off the deep end, Daryl?"

"Why not? It`s a big lake, kid."

"I`m not a kid anymore."

"I`m a kid. It`s a bigger lake than you`ll ever know."

"Gracie." Aaron lightly thumped her leg. "That wasn`t nice to say to Carl."

Carl looked directly at her. "We`ll find out and I`ll catch the biggest fish you`ve ever seen. Try that shark trick in 'Go Fish', squirt. That caused Gracie to giggle.

"Why do you need to catch a fish when you`ve caught me?" Lydia squeezed his hand.

"We need to eat. That`s why. Don`t you care?"

"Yes, there is always food around. We need not have to care since it is so abundant." There would always be a part of her that was with the Whisperers, hopefully the good part of how to survive in the wilderness that most of the world had now become. It was in that moment she felt that she could be a valuable asset to the assembled group.

The sun dipped below the horizon as twilight set upon the scene, the stars beginning to peek out from behind thinning clouds.

Paul laughed at their conversation. "'The right mixture of caring and not caring. I suppose that`s what love is'."

"Who said that?" Daryl took a deep breath and coughed slightly as he took a generous puff.

"James Hilton. Lost Horizon. You`re right. We should give this place a name. We can call it Shangri-La."

"I like that." Daryl reclined back in his chair, feeling a sense of calm descend over him. Everyone else seemed to like the name as well.

Gracie let out a big yawn. Aaron started to get up. "Time for bed, punkin."

"No. I want to see the moon first. You said it would be full."

Aaron sighed. "I did, didn`t I? Okay, as long as you keep your eyes open."

Daryl noticed the contemplative untroubled expression on Paul`s face. "What ya thinkin`?"

Paul closed his eyes only wanting to feel the air as it gently moved in and out of his lungs, filling
him with a sense of harmony that he hoped would last for a very long time. In the distance, a coyote howled greeting the rising full moon. "Out here where I finally belong, I am alive again."

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Chapter End Notes

It has been a special privilege to be able to post something that started out as a one-off. I wasn`t certain how many chapters it would take to complete the story, I certainly never anticipated 112. I want to thank those who have stuck it out to the very end and certainly hope it was an enjoyable read. I especially like to thank those who left kudos and comments, they not only encouraged me to continue, but helped improve the quality of the story where loopholes existed.

Tom Payne`s portrayal of the character of Paul 'Jesus' Rovia was a great inspiration. The other actors who portrayed the other characters (most notably Norman Reedus as Daryl Dixon, Ross Marquand as Aaron Raleigh, and Chandler Riggs as Carl Grimes) were also inspirational. I wanted to correct mistakes in what is considered canon. As one author of many who wrote 'fix-it' stories, changing the fate of Paul was therapy. I still mourn what happened in what I refer to as 'the episode of doom'. I always will. Bad writing, lazy writing, and burned-out-writers writing is tiresome. When I fall into that pit, and all writers do, I move on. I don`t milk it for every last ounce where quality suffers and the worth of the brand is all that counts.

Let`s face it. They blew it. That`s why the 'fix-it' stories had to be written. I`m not sure if there will be another story or not, a sequel to this one. If I have a good story that serves the characters well then there is a great possibility that there will be one written. I`m going to take a break for a while, work on another project unrelated to 'The Walking Dead'. Maybe that will clear my head. Who knows?

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